

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Mark 4:21-34

Key Verses: 4:31-32

“It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

Last week, we learned that there are four kinds of heart soil or four kinds of people who hear the word of God. People hear the same word of God, but the results are quite different depending on their attitude toward the word. The path-like heart soil, rocky soil and thorny heart do not produce fruit. Only the good heart soil, those who hear the word of God, accept and obey it, can produce fruit in their lives.

In today’s passage, Jesus tells more parables to teach us the secret of the kingdom of God. They are the parable of the lamp on a stand, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. May God help us to have ears to hear!

I. A LAMP ON A STAND (21-25)

Look at verse 21. *He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”* No sensible person would light a lamp and put it in a place where it will be hidden. A lamp is put on its stand so that it lights the room. Of course, this parable has a deeper meaning. What does the lamp represent? The Bible often compares the word of God to lamp. The lamp represents the truth of God’s word. Psalm 119:105 says: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” Before God saved us, we had been lost in the darkness of this sinful world. We had struggled to go somewhere with our life, but only groped in darkness. But now we have a light that shines to our path. God’s word is the truth that gives us a clear direction. We know where we are going. This is very important to recognize as we live in what is called an “information age.” Everyday we are deluged by information. We are fed through more than 100 channels of TV, websites, magazines, billboards, Facebook and Twitter, and so on. However, most of the things we hear or read does not give us a guiding light to shine our path. Instead, they tend to cause us to get lost in sin and temptation. Only the word of God is the lamp of truth.

We thank God for giving us the word of truth in this dark world. But God’s light is not for our personal consumption only. When God’s light shines our life, we must also share it with others. Jesus says in Matthew 5:14-16: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Jesus encourages us in this parable that we should put the lamp on a stand so that everyone may see the light. We must not hide it under a bowl or a bed. To

hide the lamp is to suppress the truth of God. How do we Christians hide the truth of God? We do so when we fail to share it with others still in darkness. We do so when we live a life that fails to reflect on the word of God.

In Jesus' time, a "bowl" was used to measure dry goods for wages. When a person hides a lamp under a bowl, he neglects the word of God for the sake of his career and employment. Some people may suppress the truth of God because of their laziness. They hide a lamp under a bed. Obeying the truth of God requires efforts and sacrifice. To reflect the truth of God, we must overcome our laziness. Other people may suppress the truth because of fear. Yes, truth can be painful to hear and talk about. So we may be tempted to suppress the truth. But truth cannot be hidden permanently. Look at verse 22. *"For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open."* Nothing can be hidden before the eyes of God. Jesus says in verse 23. *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."* Jesus' parable is much more than a nice story. It requires our full attention to understand and obey the truth. May God help us to have ears to hear!

Look at verses 24-25. *"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you--and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."* These verses teach us a spiritual principle. If we listen carefully what we hear and humbly learn from the word of God, God blesses us with more spiritual insight. On the other hand, if we become proud, thinking that we know enough, we will lose even what we have. The Pharisees thought that they had enough knowledge. They were proud and self-righteous. They had no learning mind. So even what they had was taken from them. Therefore, we should not be proud before the word of God.

Spiritual insight is like our muscles. If we use them, we get even stronger muscles. If we don't use them, they degenerate. Likewise, if we listen the word of God carefully and obey it, we come to know the heart of God and can see what he is doing. But if we are indifferent to the word of God, and never look beyond the surface, we may not only not get the true meaning of it, but also our spiritual insight may be lost.

Look at verse 25 again. *"Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."* Some people may say that this is not fair. But fairness is not the issue. If fairness were the standard, no one could expect anything from God except judgment. The point here is that God, in his mercy, rewards those who are faithful. The one who is faithful will be given more blessings, though God's blessings are often intangible. The more closely a person lives his life in line with God's purpose, the greater the benefits—in this life as well as in the kingdom of God.

There are many ways to live a life in this world. But there is only one true way to life. It is to have a right attitude toward the word of God, retain it, and preserve it to the end. We must press on to the kingdom of God, by holding on to the promises of God.

II. THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED (26-29)

This parable teaches us about the character of the kingdom of God. Look at verses 26-27. *He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."* This parable is unique to the gospel of Mark. It tells us how the kingdom of God grows. When a seed is scattered on the ground, it sprouts and grows, though the farmer does not know how. So it is with the kingdom of God. When the word of God is sown in a person's heart, the kingdom of God grows in him or her. The seed or the word of God has the power of life in it. The power of life is amazing. A tree can split concrete pavement by the power of life. The life of a weak plant can push its green head through an asphalt path. The word of God has the power of life in it. It keeps on growing in the person who accepts it.

Look at verses 28-29. *"All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."* It is not the farmer that makes the seed grow. It is God. But notice that the word of God grows in stages. First the stalk, then the head, and then the full kernel in the head. Finally the grain is ripe for harvest. This means that the farmer has to be patient. He cannot plant the seed one day and then expect the harvest the next day. When we help our sheep with the word of God, we must learn to nurture them patiently.

I am thankful to God for helping Chris to grow in faith, step by step. When he first came to us, he was a young man with no clear direction in life. He had no clear purpose in life. He just wanted to work hard all week and enjoy fun things on weekends, like drinking and chasing cute girls. In a word, he was a typical young man in this sinful world. But he has changed a lot since then. Recently, he is trying really hard to root out the remaining bad habits from his past fun-loving life in order to grow spiritually. God is indeed helping him to grow through the word of God. God is harvesting fruit in his life.

We are like a kernel of wheat. If a kernel of wheat remains a single seed, it will be alone forever; there is no fruit, no harvest for the selfish kernel of wheat. But if a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it bears much fruit. To us, making money to support the family is important. To become a man of accomplishments is also important. But from God's point of view, harvesting a soul is most important.

III. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED (30-34)

Look at verses 30-32. *Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?" It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."* The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. The mustard seed is very small. The mustard seed is proverbially the smallest of all seeds. But the seed, when

planted, grows into such a large tree that the birds of the air can come and perch in its shade. The seed is tiny, but it has great potential because there is life in it.

Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God has small beginnings but grows and produces great results. When we review God's redemptive history we realize this truth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a poor young couple of Mary and Joseph. He was laid in a manger. The tiny baby was a great contrast to Caesar Augustus who had ordered a census to be taken in the entire Roman world. The tiny baby Jesus was like a mustard seed. The word of life he brought to this world grew very large over time, while Caesar left only the ruins of his marble buildings and statues.

Similarly, the beginning of the early Christian church was very humble. It began in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension when some ordinary men and women accepted Jesus' world mission command and joined together in prayer. They didn't have a church building and had to meet at someone's house. They were helpless men and women. But when they depended on the Holy Spirit, God used them greatly in his redemptive work. Through their prayer and preaching, the gospel of Jesus spread out to Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor and even to Rome.

This mustard seed principle applies to our personal growth in faith. When the gospel seed is planted in a person's heart, it grows up to make his or her life a source of blessing to many people. When one man of faith is raised in a campus or a region, God can use him to transform its culture. So we should not ignore our faith just because it seems so small and insignificant. Even if our faith is the smallest among all people, if it is genuine, we can become very influential men and women of God, like a great tree with abundant branches so that many birds can come to rest in its shade.

This parable reminds us of God's promise to Abraham, "You will be a blessing and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Ge 12:2-3). How could a seventy-five year old man whose wife was barren be a blessing to all peoples on earth? But when Abraham had a mustard seed faith and obeyed God's word, he indeed became a source of blessing to all peoples of the world. Most of us are not Jewish, but we call ourselves descendants of Abraham because of his faith. Of course, there were many ups and downs in Abraham's life of faith. But finally his mustard seed faith grew until he loved God more than anything or anyone including his one and only son Isaac. God asked Abraham to offer his Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham did not argue with God. Early the next morning he started for Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son there. But when he was about to cut Isaac with a knife, the angel of the Lord said to him, "Abraham, Abraham. Now I know that you love me more than your son." In this way, Abraham showed us that an old man with a small seed of faith could grow to be a spiritual giant.

Why does God want us to have the kingdom of God? It is because God does not want us to perish in our sins. He wants us to have eternal life in the kingdom of God. But it is not all about something that will happen later when we die. It is also about how we live our life in this world. When we have the hope of the kingdom of God, we can have a

clear direction in life. When we have the kingdom of God, we can be a source of blessing to others. When God created us in his own image, he blessed us to be a source of blessing. God is not pleased when we become burdensome to others like a paralytic. God is not pleased when we become selfish like a tax collector. God does not want us to remain like a seventy-five year old man with a wife who is barren. He wants us to be a source of blessing so that many helpless people may come to us and hear the gospel of Jesus.

In conclusion, all of us have great potential in God if we have mustard seed faith in him. We should not ignore small faith in a person or a small ministry. A seemingly small ministry can grow and become influential when there are some people with small but genuine faith in God. May God help us to have small but genuine mustard seed faith! May God bless us to be influential men and women of faith! Let us read 4:31-32 together. *"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."*