

MATTHEW 13 – PART D

The kingdom of God is probably one of those biblical concepts that seem a little difficult to fully understand. The simple reason for this is because it is not visible, not something we can see. We can easily understand earthly kingdoms because they can be explained geographically. They have boundaries and governments. Students often study ancient kingdoms like Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt as part of their education. These kingdoms had boundaries and governments and mighty armies. However, the kingdom of God is much, much different. To the contrary, it has no boundaries geographically or spatially. It has no ruling government. All earthly kingdoms come and go, but God's kingdom exists with past, present, and future dimensions. Even when God's kingdom appears to be obscured, it still remains forceful, mighty, and unmoved by the kingdoms of this world. In fact, the more the kingdoms of the world try and undermine God's kingdom, the more it grows. The greater the persecution, the greater the growth.

However, it is at just this point that we may join the disciples in running into trouble grasping the kingdom of God. It is so different – and different in every single aspect of what we understand a kingdom to be. Ancient kingdoms regularly displayed their might through dazzling parades, magnificent buildings, extravagant celebrations, huge amphitheaters, and grand armies. They would construct new roads and buildings to accommodate one solitary visit from the emperor or king. People measured kingdoms by how large of an impact they could make in any given setting. So, when Jesus announced the arrival of His kingdom, the first century mind expected parades, armies, construction projects, and pomp and display. It should be easy to assess that right from the start there was a disconnect that existed between the disciple's concept of what an earthly kingdom was and what Jesus' kingdom was.

Now, so far in this study in [Matthew 13](#) we have looked at the Parable of the Soils and the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Today we will be looking at the Parable of the Mustard Seed in [Matthew 13:31-32](#),

Mt 13:31 (NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

Once again, I want us to appreciate that normally a parable only has one primary meaning unless Jesus gives it more definition. The more meaning that we may arbitrarily give to it, the more likely we drift from and obscure its true purpose and simple meaning. There is a great deal of difference of interpretation of this parable and the following parable regarding leaven. The major differences for this first parable relate to the "future" aspect of the kingdom, and some commentators seem to think that you cannot give it a futuristic application. They would say that the kingdom started insignificantly, but it is still the kingdom of God. I.e., they do not recognize anything here relative to the growth of the kingdom. They would say that the aspect of the future growth of the kingdom can certainly be found elsewhere in Scripture, but not in this parable. It would be as if Jesus were telling His disciples to not be discouraged by the smallness of the kingdom's beginning – just 12 of them, just 120 on the day of Pentecost. It was as if He did not want the apparent "insignificance" and very small size of the start of the kingdom to

discourage them in any way. Personally, I find more in the parable, but I at least wanted to identify that there are those who see no “kingdom growth” in this parable.

Then there are others who read into the parable ideas that are not the purpose of the parable. For instance, Dwight Pentecost writing on this parable identifies it with “inward corruption” within the kingdom. He sees the “**birds**” as evil because they appeared to have a negative connotation in the first parable. So, his perspective is that the “**birds**” are evil and they find a place to nest and bring their evil influence into the kingdom. However, in the first parable Jesus did not identify the “**birds**” as evil. The “**birds**” were just doing what all birds do – they were looking for food to eat and when they found some on the wayside they ate it. We have a bird feeder in our yard that we put seeds into, and the birds have found it and eat from it every day. Some of the seeds fall on the ground below and they find those seeds and eat them as well. This is just what birds do – look anywhere for food. So, Pentecost says that in order to be consistent to the images of the two previous parables that you have to see the birds in a negative sense. I completely disagree with Dr. Pentecost, but I only mention this to highlight how varied the interpretations can become if you try and give a meaning to every feature mentioned in a parable. It is very critical to handling a parable correctly that we do not do what Dr. Pentecost has done. There is nothing in the first parable that says that the “**birds**” are evil. Jesus did not say they were evil, and so we simply cannot spiritualize them and say they are. Does everyone see that?

Now, up to this point, we have seen that when we preach the gospel that there will always be a variety of responses. Some will respond, but most will not – and we have to accept that or we will become very frustrated very quickly. When some do respond, we have seen that their response will not always be real or lasting. Secondly, we have seen that the kingdom of God will have a side-by-side development of good and evil. Whenever the truth is proclaimed, the enemy will come along side and proclaim that which is false, and unfortunately many people will believe that which is false much more quickly than that which is true. If I can state it this way, we will always be experiencing some level of conflict with the world, with false believers, with false professions. It is to be expected. There is this kind of built-in antagonism to the things of God, and it should be fully anticipated. I am never surprised when I share the gospel with someone and they reject it. That is exactly what Jesus said would be the norm.

It appears that Christ gives His disciples these next two parables of the mustard seed and the leaven to actually encourage them. I think it is interesting that once again Christ uses the imagery of a farmer, of someone planting seeds in a field. The planting of the mustard seed was a very common crop during this time in Israel, and even is today. They used it for oil, for flavoring, and even for medicinal reasons. There have always been those skeptics who say that the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, and they would be correct in that because it is not the smallest of seeds. It is actually smaller than the head of a pin, and about the size of a dot that you make with a pencil. So, theologically Jesus’ statement about it being the smallest of the seeds is an area where men accuse the Bible of being in error. They state that Jesus said something that was not true, and therefore He cannot be trusted. Honestly, I am amazed at the degree that men will go to in order to discredit God and His Word. The evidence for God is so overwhelming that it defies any argument against it.

Now, I want you to remember one of our hermeneutical rules for interpreting Scripture. We always interpret the text in its cultural context. I.e., what did it mean to the people to whom it was written? How did they understand it? What did the words mean to them? [V32](#) gives us the understanding that

we need relative to Jesus' statement about the mustard seed being the smallest of all of the seeds. Was Jesus correct in what He said? Well, I certainly think that He was. In [v32](#), He says this,

Mt 13:32 (NKJV) which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

He uses the word “**herbs**”. It is the Greek word “*lachanon*” and refers specifically to garden vegetables that are grown to be eaten. It is a specific word that refers to a garden crop, and these people were so agrarian. They were all farmers because it was a simple necessity of survival. So, this word refers specifically to that which is planted as a crop to be eaten, and in opposition to wild plants that may have been growing out in the woods somewhere. This word for “**herbs**” refers specifically to seeds that were sown for agricultural purposes – and everyone listening to what Jesus was saying fully understood that the mustard seed was indeed the smallest of all of the agricultural seeds that they planted. I might add as a caveat to this, that the mustard seed is still the smallest agricultural seed planted as a crop in the Middle East today. In fact, the only smaller seed that is used as a crop is the tobacco seed, and it was only introduced to the Middle East in the 16th century. It should be obvious that the seeds that Jesus is clearly referring to are those seeds sown agriculturally to produce edible crops. So, contextually Jesus was exactly correct in what He said – and everybody understood what He was saying. To the Jew, the mustard seed **was** the smallest seed that they ever planted, and in the vernacular of that day, it was the smallest of all seeds. Jesus was right on.

Do you remember what Jesus said in [Matthew 17:20](#)? He was talking to His disciples about why they could not cast out some demons and this is what He told them,

Mt 17:20 (NKJV) So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

He was referring to that which in their culture represented the smallest seed to them. So, using the image of a mustard seed was a proverbial thing to the Jew that they fully understood. I.e., they symbolize that which is small, and which seems, at first glance, to be utterly insignificant.

So, what happens when the mustard seed is sown? Well, it grows into a kind of bush, or what we might call a shrub. If you have ever seen a blueberry bush, it is a kind of shrub. I.e., it is not like a tomato plant or a squash plant or a bell pepper plant. It is much more of a bush, and normally grows to 7 or 8 feet in height, and sometimes to as high as 15 feet and it has the properties of a small tree. You have a tiny seed, but the final result is something much larger than its beginning. The birds can actually live in it and make nests in it. They cannot do that with a tomato plant or squash plant – but they can with a mustard plant.

So what does the parable mean? Well, **first it means that the kingdom of God is going to start very small**. Although seemingly “least” at its planting, the kingdom of God will grow, and eventually it will become the greatest of all kingdoms. If you had been one of the 12 disciples and Jesus had given His final instructions to you like He did to them, do you think that you and the 11 other guys could have turned the world upside down? I am sure that what Jesus was proposing to these men was as scary as it gets – 12 men? “*That’s it, that’s all that we have?*” In a very short time their leader was going to be

murdered and they were going to be scattered. They were already being oppressed and it is not hard to imagine how very frightened they must have been. They had left everything to follow Christ – their families, their businesses, their homes, and now, Jesus is telling them not to worry, and that even though they may be very small, in the end everything will work out and their “worldwide” influence will be great. *“Sure Jesus, sure! That sounds really great.”* Please appreciate that at this point in the narrative that these men did not even have a clue as to what the actual kingdom was. In fact, that was the very purpose of these seven parables and [Matthew 13](#) – to reveal to them its very nature and purpose and how it would be perceived.

We know that the work of Christ's kingdom continues to have small beginnings in so many places. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses shook an empire and began the Reformation. George Whitefield and John Wesley preaching the necessity of the new birth awakened both sides of the Atlantic. William Wilberforce's application of God's kingdom principles shattered the slave trade in the British Empire. William Carey's humble work revolutionized the education and morals of the entire nation of India. Small beginnings are no problem when the work belongs to the King.

Jesus is teaching us, then, that His kingdom on this earth is like that tiny mustard seed. It was small in its beginning. There did not seem to be much about it that would have impressed anyone that it would come to much of anything. It began with a humble Teacher who organized no army or assumed no political office. He had no money and no support. He simply gathered a small group of twelve men around Himself. One of them would betray Him, one of them would deny Him, and all of them would eventually desert Him. He Himself would be rejected by the people and they would crucify Him as a despised criminal and bury Him in a borrowed tomb. So, from these humble, “mustard seed” beginnings, who would have expected anything great?

Now, I want you to look at [Acts 1:4-6](#) and I want you to notice the question that the disciples asked Jesus after His resurrection, and how they were still confused.

Ac 1:4 (NKJV) And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," *He said*, "you have heard from Me; ⁵ for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They were still so confused that they thought that the kingdom that Jesus had taught them about was going to be restored to Israel! They still did not get it. They could understand them having an influence in Israel. That was their home turf, but that was as far as their thinking took them. Look at [Luke 17:20-21](#) and this conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisees,

Lk 17:20 (NKJV) Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; ²¹ nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

This is kind of what Jesus said here. He said, *“When the kingdom of God comes, it will not be something that you can really observe or recognize. It will just be so unclear to you. It really is just a small thing, a small band of people starting to preach the gospel. You will not even notice it. It will just be a nuisance*

to you. It is right here within you, right here in your midst – but it is just a very small thing to begin with and because of that you will miss it. It is sort of like a mustard seed being planted in the ground, and you just cannot see it.” That is what Jesus told them.

Just think about the leader of this whole thing – born in a smelly stable with some goats and donkeys and sheep, living in an obscure village out in the middle of nowhere, no education, just total obscurity, and in a short while He will be crucified. It was just this tiny seed being planted. John MacArthur wrote this about the disciples,

“All of them put together wouldn't add up to a mustard seed. They were so small, so inadequate, so inconsequential, so unqualified, so fearful, so faithless, so weak.”

That was the kingdom that was planted – a bunch of absolute nobodies! In the world, we are all nobodies. No one even knows who we are – just a bunch of nobodies. [1 Corinthians 1:26-29](#) aptly describes this,

1Co 1:26 (NKJV) For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence.

The second truth in this parable is very simple. First, it started very small, but **eventually it will become very large**. One day it will be a great kingdom and have an overwhelming influence. When Jesus returns at His Second Coming and establishes His kingdom on the earth, it will encompass and control the entire world. Every single thing in this world will be ruled and governed exclusively by Christ. Listen to [Revelation 11:15-19](#),

Rev 11:15 (NKJV) Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying: “We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. ¹⁸ The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth.” ¹⁹ Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.

Obviously, the most important aspect of all of this is making sure that right now, today, at this moment that we are a part of His kingdom. If we are a part of His kingdom right now, then we are assured that we will be a part of His kingdom then. At times I am sure that you feel that this spiritual battle that we are in for the souls of men is so great and so overwhelming that it is discouraging? At times, it is for me personally. The effort seems so incredibly huge and our efforts seem so incredibly small. Just think for a moment how those first 120 people must have felt. No education, no money, no communication, no cars, no jets, no support, no Internet, and no World Wide Web. They had nothing but a message of truth.

So, what does it mean that the birds come and nest in the tree? Some teach that the birds represent the false emissaries of the enemy in the church – false teachers, false prophets. However, in reality, one of our rules for interpreting the parables is that every element in a parable does not necessarily have some specific spiritual connotation to it. In this case, it is just a normal picture of what happens in a mustard tree. Birds make nests in trees, they roost in trees, and they rest in trees. In this parable, if we just let it be a picture of what really happens, then the tree simply provides a place for the birds to nest and live – something very normal that should not be spiritualized.

Think of it this way - wherever Christianity flourishes, all people prosper even though they may not know Christ. For years and years, America has been known as a Christian nation. The very foundation of what we as a nation were founded on were the laws of God. Our heritage is a Christian heritage, and it seems that everywhere America turned that the whole world benefited from God's blessings on us. There have been a lot of birds nesting in our bush, and even if they are not Christians, they still benefit. No wonder everyone wanted to come to America. The dignity of life that we enjoyed, the legal system, our laws that protected people and their rights, our high standards of living, our educational system, our health care systems, our infrastructure, our wealth, our churches, our freedoms – they all came about because of our Christian heritage. Everyone, lost or saved, has enjoyed these blessings. If you go to other countries that have not enjoyed these Christian freedoms – places like India, China, the Soviet Union, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras – the majority of people live in utter poverty, have very little to live for, and have such a low standard of living that it almost defies description. America has been the world's most critical economic and spiritual shelter for decades and decades. People have found lodging in our branches.

In the ancient Roman Empire, secular historians record the gracious way that Christians cared not only for their own, but also for the poor, the dying, and even the slaves at large in the empire. Everywhere that the work of God's kingdom has spread, not only have there been new converts that follow Christ even to death, but there have also arisen thousands of schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages, job training institutes, hunger relief programs, literacy training, relief for the poor, prison ministries, and a host of other works that benefit society. There is nothing small about the influence and effects of Christ's kingdom in the world. Whatever small beginnings you observe of Christ's kingdom, be assured that it will grow far beyond your comprehension.

So it is with the kingdom of heaven, with the kingdom of God. In spite of the opposition, in spite of the bad soils, in spite of the presence of the tares, the kingdom of God will grow, and it will bring great benefit to those who embrace it. [Luke 12:32](#) says it this way,

Lk 12:32 (NKJV) Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.