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 Title: "The Kingdom of God is Like a Mustard Seed"
 Text: Mark 4:30-34 (Gospel parallels – Matt. 13:31-35; Luke 13:18, 19)
 Big Idea: The rule of God is present in our world even when it would appear contrary to the eye of sight. "The example of the mustard seed should prevent us from judging the significance of results by the size of the beginnings." (Walter W. Wessell, "Mark," in EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 8:653).

Introduction:

"This parable . . . contrasts the insignificant, even enigmatic beginning of God's kingdom, embodied in the presence of Jesus, with the greatness of the end result to be established at His Second Advent when it will surpass all the earth's kingdoms in power and glory." (John D. Grassmick, "Mark," in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 121).

"The parable serves to assert hope despite what seems, at first sight, a rather meaningless exercise: burying the seed! You put dead things into the ground. Of course, we know all about seeds and germination. The parable invites us to believe that God's reign - the good that God will bring and does bring - will happen.

The image of sowing and harvest has its roots in biblical tradition as a way of speaking of God's future action. It also inspires the parable of the mustard seed. We can correct the claims about the mustard seed being the smallest. This is clearly not the case. None of that is relevant to the point it is making, which is one contrast: between what we see now and what we will see.

People have often wondered whether Jesus invented these parables to defend his ministry against the charge that it had achieved little success. The parable of the sower doubtless served well to help the first Christians come to terms with uneven success." <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost2.htm>

"Today we are particularly conditioned not to hear things. We have trained ourselves to reduce advertisements, commercials, background music, television, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to 'white noise,'" James Edwards observes. "Next time you are on an airplane, watch people during the seatbelt demonstration. They are intent not to hear a spiel that is intended to save their lives.... But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?" (Parables, pp. 44 and 48).

<http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/ParablesStudyGuide3.pdf>

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*. © 2006 The Center for Christian Ethics

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect? <http://www.baylor.edu/christianethics/ParablesStudyGuide3.pdf>

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The [First] Problem:

“Luke 13:18 retains the double question which Matthew 13:31 does not have, though he has it in a very different context, probably an illustration of Christ's favorite sayings often repeated to different audiences as is true of all teachers and preachers.” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament* on Mark 4:30).

“What is the smallest seed in the world? A little study into horticulture will show that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world. Poppy seeds, for example, are smaller than mustard seeds. The point of the parable is not mustard seeds; the point is the kingdom of God. Mustard seeds are only part of the stage decoration Jesus used in getting across the point he was making about the kingdom.”

<http://www.christianodyssey.org/mark/mark025.htm>

The [Second] Problem:

Our second problem in dealing with the gospels is contained in the following statement.:

“The kingdom, however, is not to be identified with the church.” (John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 121).

This same author refers the reader back to his comments on Mark 1:15 where he says, “The kingdom of God is a dynamic (not static) concept that refers to *God's* sovereign activity or ruling over His Creation.” (Ibid., 107).

Unless this author has said something elsewhere that alters his understand of the kingdom of God, why would the church not be a part of the in time expression of the kingdom? He appears to confuse the idea of kingdom by making it something geographical. It is this kind of understanding that fractures the purpose of God in securing for Himself a people who love Him and worship Him forever.

If the kingdom of God is the rule of God, then there has never been or will ever be a time when God is not ruling. Please hear me out. The kingdom of God goes unabated. From the beginning of creation and time to the end of time and the ongoing activity of God, He rules. What that rule looks like has many faces, but it is one rule. It looked different

- Before the fall (Innocence)
- After the fall (Conscience)
- In the establishment of human government (human government)
- In the giving of promises (Promise)
- Through a theocracy (Law)
- After the cross and (Church)
- In the culmination of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10 [Millennium]).

But God rules, and this rule has never stopped.

Thus, let us not trip over the idea that the church is part of God's sovereign rule. God's rule is being manifest in and through His Church.

What impresses me with our Lord's instruction is His determination to teach or educate His audience. He really desires for them to understand what He is saying.

In the outline of Mark that I use, 4:1-34 is called "Teaching by Parables." This is followed by 4:35-5:43 where Jesus is "Teaching by Miracles". The section concludes with Jesus being rejected at Nazareth (6:1-6a).

R. T. France (*The Gospel of Mark*) calls 4:1-34: "Explanatory Discourse: The Paradox of the Kingdom of God." In the preceding chapter, a "great multitude from Galilee followed him" (3:7). People come to him "in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon" (3:8). At the same time, people say "He has gone out of his mind" (3:21b). Scribes from Jerusalem say, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (3:22). How can there be such diverse responses to Jesus? If Jesus is proclaiming the coming of the *basileia* of God, how can people respond so differently? Why isn't he being universally embraced? If demons recognize and confess who Jesus is, why not the religious leaders? Chapter 4 seeks to answer these questions." <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark4x26.htm>

THE BIG PICTURE

Second Cycle - Later Galilean Ministry (3:13 – 6:29)

- The challenge to His ministry (3:1-6)
- The choosing of the 12 apostles (3:13-19)

Beginning of THE BUSY DAY (3:20-5:20)

- The charge of demonic activity (3:20-30)
- The characteristics of God's family (3:31-35)
- The clarifying of His kingdom (4:1-34)
 - The parable of the soils (4:1-20)
 - The parable of the lamp (vv. 21-25)
 - The parable of the seed (vv. 26-29)
 - **The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30-34)**

The intent of our Lord's instruction is to make known what is not understood. He uses what is known to open up what is unknown. He starts from the common and advances to the complex, from the least to the greatest. Of Jesus' forty parables, only two of them are explained. Thus, it is the context that will tell us the meaning of the text.

Its Eternal Value:

There is nothing little about the kingdom of God. Our difficulty is that we live by sight and not by faith. We stop at the shadow and fail to see beyond the shadow and into the substance. We fail to see how right now, in our fractured and fallen world, the victory of God is marching forward. This church is the greatest place on earth. These people are the greatest people on earth. The work that God is doing in and through His people right now in this place is glorious.

“Open My Eyes That I Might See”
Clare H. Scott, 1895

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Refrain
Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

The Present Danger:

It is impossible for us to remove this parable from the larger context in which Mark’s places it. He has already pointed out how the kingdom is constantly expanding, how it is unavoidable, and the completion of it is certain. To all of this, Mark adds the largeness or magnitude of the kingdom. From the parable of the soil, one might conclude that only a fourth of the seed ever produces. However, from such lowly beginnings grows an unimaginable harvest.

We often view the doctrine of causative election in which God picks man for faith and family as a small, exclusive idea. Yet the parables of our Lord continue to assure us that the victory of God is not only unstoppable and inevitable, it is also unimaginably large. **God’s victory is far greater than Satan’s defeat.** It is gigantic. God’s election in redeeming His people is far more inclusive than those excluded because of unbelief. **Heaven’s citizenship is far greater than Hell’s occupants.** All of these parables assure us of God’s victory. I find it unfortunate that many believe Hell’s population will surpass Heaven’s worshippers. The victory of God reaches into the crevices of hell. The darkness of His absence cannot stop the glory of His presence.

The Storyline:

The victory of God continues to march forward. From a little fragile and frightened beginning will grow an unimaginable kingdom.

“The parable shows 2 sides to the kingdom. 1) It starts off small but ends up large. The kingdom which began in Jesus’ ministry would, according to Jesus’ parable and seen in history since, will spread and become large the choice of the mustard seed appropriately described the almost infinitesimal presence of God’s rule relative to the popular expectation of the times. At the same time, this dimension did not represent the total

picture. A second dimension included the coming of 2) **the Kingdom in its greatness**. The contrast gives instruction about both dimensions but offers little about the interval in between or the growth process. Guelich, Robert A.: *Word Biblical Commentary : Mark 1-8:26*. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 2002 (Word Biblical Commentary 34A), S. 252"

Question:

1. What response do you think this parable had on those who were outside the kingdom of God?
2. What response do you think this parable had on those who were inside the kingdom of God?
3. In Jesus' parable, the farmer waits patiently for the seed to bear fruit. What are the dangers today of Christians being impatient and trying to determine the gospel's effect?
4. Was what Jesus taught understandable by His immediate audience?
5. Why did Jesus not explain everything to everyone and only to His disciples?

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know Jesus as the goal of God's purpose.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose Him as our ultimate joy, satisfaction, and rest.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of resting in the rule of God.

Remember that a parable is to be heard and not read. We are to feel the immediate impact of the big idea and not overanalyze each of the various details. The details are only means to get us to hear the big idea.

The Outline:

I. The Message of the Mustard Seed (vv. 30-32)

A. The Shadow - Unassuming - The Mustard Seed

"In Palestine a grain of mustard seed stood proverbially for the smallest possible thing." (William Barclay, *Mark*, 109).

"In fact the mustard seed is neither the smallest of seeds, nor does it grow to become the largest plant. But this does not make the story void, the story is not a hard science of botanical study but uses popular analogy to communicate a message."

<http://ordinand.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/mark-430-33-small-kingdom-large-kingdom/>

"I think that we often miss the most significant element of this story. Rather than concentrating on 'small'. The important image is 'mustard plant.'

The mustard seed was a traditional symbol of something small. (It is used in Matthew 17:20 & Luke 17:6 to illustrate small faith.) Scientifically, it is not the smallest seed even in the Middle East. The orchid seed, for one, is smaller.

Mark is more correct than Matthew and Luke, when he calls it a large shrub, rather than a tree. According to the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* ("flora"), the mustard is a common weed at present in Palestine. If it was considered a "weed" in Jesus' day, we have quite a contrast with Ezekiel 17:22-23 (part of the thematic First Lesson for the day). NOTE ALSO the image of birds living in its shade.

I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain.
On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.
**Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest**
winged creatures of every kind.

The cedar grows to be about 100 feet tall. The mustard about 10 feet. The cedar flourishes in the mountains of Lebanon, but it doesn't grow in Israel. The mustard is a common weed in Israel. One interpretation is that this parable lampoons the old pictures of the cedars of Lebanon. Today we might make a contrast between the mighty Redwoods of that exotic land, California, and the crab grass or dandelions growing in our own yards. Which is more illustrative of the kingdom of God, the power of God?

The giant Redwood tree that grows in northern California, like the cedar, would be a fitting symbol for the might and power and grandeur of God's rule coming to earth. They are trees that seem to live forever. Their tops seem to reach right up to heaven. The trunks can grow so large that a tunnel can be cut out large enough to drive a car through. They are a magnificent, mysterious, part of God's creation.

In contrast to the cedar trees or the giant redwoods, Jesus says that the *basileia* of God is like mustard plant. There is nothing grand and glorious about a mustard plant. It is a common, ordinary bush that grows everywhere around Palestine. Perhaps like crab grass or dandelions in most of our neighborhoods -- or sagebrush in the deserts of Wyoming. [Like the common dandelion the kingdom of God is pervasive and almost indestructible].

Is God ruling now or not? Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places -- staring up in the sky for tall trees, instead of looking on the ground for common weeds -- and maybe we do the same thing with people.

This interpretation of the parable -- God's rule is like a weed -- is one that certainly would challenge and threaten the hearer's world of assumptions of the coming, powerful kingdom of God. Yet, when the seed of a weed is covered by cement, they seem to find a way to grow through the tiniest of cracks."

<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark4x26.htm>

There is much talk of signs and wonders with the idea that the kingdom of God has “flash” or “glitz and glamour.” This, however, is never the picture of the New Testament Kingdom.

B. The Substance – Universal - The Kingdom of God

The universality of the kingdom of God is indicated here (cf Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6; Daniel 4:17-19).

This phrase is usually translated "kingdom of God." There are at least two difficulties with this. The first is, that although *basileia* can refer to the **area** ruled by a king (e.g., "kingdom"); it can also refer to the **power** or **authority** to "rule" as king. The idea of "kingdom" can make us think of a place -- such as a place we go when we die. More properly, I think, we should think of *basileia* as the ruling power that emanates from God -- perhaps translating the phrase as "God rules" or "God's power." As such, it is more about our relationship -- being under the "king's" authority, than about a place.

The second difficulty is the complete lack of experience of most of our members of living under an absolute ruler. Living under the authority and power of a "king" or "lord" or "master" is foreign to most of us. **Whatever the *basileia* of God is, it is not a democracy.** (Emphasis added) <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark4x26.htm>

What about the birds who would come and nest in the tree? There is probably a linguistic echo of Ezekiel 17:22-23.

²²“Thus says the Lord God: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest” (Ezek. 17:22, 23).

“The birds of the air make their nests in its shade. Ezekiel and Daniel both use this as an image of a great kingdom, growing like a tree until those around can shelter under it (Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6; Daniel 4:12, 21). Don’t worry, Jesus is saying. Remember who your God is and what he’s promised. Realize that this small beginning is the start of God’s intended kingdom – the kingdom that will eventually offer shade to the whole world.” (N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 50).

Because this is true we can make two observations concerning the work of God and our mindset in it.

1. The work of God is to be marked by optimism.

We must never be daunted by small beginnings. Every larger ministry that you and I marvel at once began as a small thing.

2. The work of God is to be marked by diversity.

There are three short comments I would make concerning this diversity.

a. A diversity of thought

“It is good for a man to have the assurance that he is right, but that is no reason why he should have the conviction that everyone else is wrong.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 111).

b. A diversity of ethnicity

The church of Jesus Christ is made up of white, yellow, red, black, and every shade of color in between.

c. A diversity of culture/generations

Somehow we are to see the church of Jesus Christ as being very diverse and generationally rich. We must never forget that body unity is not built around doctrinal conformity but by a solidarity that exists in the body of Christ.

“The church is the family of God’ and that church which began in Palestine, small as the mustard seed, has room in it for every nation in the world. There are no barriers in the church of God. Man made barriers and God in Christ tore them down.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 112).

Verses 33 and 34 are Mark’s editorial on the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ. There are two questions confronting us in these two verses. Was what Jesus taught understandable by His immediate audience? Why did Jesus not explain everything to everyone but rather sometimes only to His disciples?

II. The Method of Our Master’s Instruction (vv. 33, 34)

A. Our Master taught with plainness and simplicity (v. 33).

He did not preach what he could not illustrate; and when he was finished, the people who heard him understood what he had said. “Our Lord spoke in parables, adjusting His discourse to their capacity to understand. The implication is clear that parables were employed to make truth plain.”¹ They understood what He said in a context. The circumstances of the moment lent itself to interpreting the story. What might appear confusing to us was possibly apparent to His immediate audience. The larger idea presented by our Lord was clear. What He wanted them to understand could be understood.

¹ Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:95.

Let us make no mistake here. There is a distinction drawn in our text between the group found in verse 33 and that of verse 34. The group found in verse 33 is the teeming masses that crowded around our Lord forcing Him to teach from a boat while the unruly gathering swirled around Him. By direct application, if your only interaction with our community of faith is Sunday morning, then you are a part of the larger audience to whom Jesus is teaching in verse 33.

Verse 34 makes it clear that there was more to His teaching than what was openly or publicly taught. Not everything He wanted to communicate or make known was done in the public arena.

However, there is a second aspect to our Lord's methodology.

B. Our Master taught with intensity and design (v. 34).

In addition to the larger group whom He addressed publicly, there was another group that showed themselves open and responsive to further instruction. I believe Mark's comments are designed to show us the distinction between the two groups. New Testament scholar D. Edmond Hiebert confirms this idea with the following comment, "But privately to his own disciples' - in contrast to 'those without.'"² There was more to His instruction than what they heard publicly. I am immediately led to think of Matthew 28:18 and the call to disciple the nations and 2 Timothy 2:2 where we are called to take some further than the general listening population.

"The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).

In light of my current ministry, I would like to take the time to share my perspective of the Sunday Morning Preaching hour. First, I believe the Word of God properly handled has inherent power and is effectual. This means that if we did nothing but stand up and hear the reading of God's Word, God could change our lives for good. Second, I believe my primary responsibility is to explain the text in its historical context. Third, I believe a secondary responsibility is to provide and guide the audience with areas of application. Fourth, I believe the Spirit of God takes the Word of God and makes certain and necessary application in the people of God. Fifth, because of the limitations placed on us by our depravity to understand, our physical ability to listen, and necessary time restraints, I do not believe I can say all that needs to be said on a Sunday morning in a 35 minute time slot. This is why I provide the fuller study in the foyer before the service. You can take the study and go "deeper" into the text if you so choose. Sixth, because I do not believe everything that needs to be said can be said or endured in any 35 minute slot, we have provided ABF response groups, GLORIA, and various men's and women's Bible studies. Seventh, there is constant interaction by the elders with individuals on a personal, individual level for the purpose of soul care. Here is where the most intimate and delicate application is made to the audience.

² D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, 112.

Eighth, because of my involvement with the flock on a personal, intimate level, I am careful as to how far I take certain applications. No one with whom I counsel and from whom I have received personal information wants to become a part of my application or illustration. For me to use any private situation as a public illustration is a breach of pastoral ethics and professional confidence. In light of this, my application is principle driven and broad. Although I believe my application is pointed enough to address specific issues within any given individual, they are broad enough to represent our fallen state at large. Ninth, I am constantly growing in my pastoral ability to handle the Word of God in a public arena. I am a teacher; this is my gifting and I do not apologize for it. But this does not mean or assume I have attained any degree of perfection. I am persistently looking to see how I can better communicate the Word in a manner that is understandable by the congregation. I want to believe there is a unique relationship between the teaching elder/shepherd and the sheep identified in a community of faith.

With all of this said, let me propose the following thought: If you only attend on Sunday morning, then I would encourage you to consider attending some of our various other studies. I would encourage the men to lead their families by attending the ABF response groups, by attending GLORIA, by attending a men's study, by attending a Saturday morning study. Women also have many of these same options available to them. Rare and perhaps unhealthy is the person who can attend everything, but it is equally unhealthy to only attend Sunday morning. If Sunday morning is your only option, then praise Him. But if you have other options in addition to Sunday morning, and you can but do not avail yourself of them, you should consider strongly how you might start going to the next level.

May God continue to grow us in our understanding of who He is, what He is doing, and who we are in Him. May we never tire of seeing His working in His people.

You and I must never lose sight of God's kingdom work in and through the church. Although we are part of a church that is geographically, ethnically, and culturally distinct, we are equally part of something that inclusive and universal. We are to take heart in the midst of our journey.

SHEPHERDING THE PEOPLE: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Do not lose heart in your present activity. What appears as a small thing with little initial impact is a part of something whose measurement is staggering.
 - a. The investment you make behind the scenes will reap an immeasurable harvest.
 - b. What you invest in your spouse is a part of this larger harvest
 - c. What you invest in your children is a part of this larger harvest
 - d. What you invest at church is a part of this larger harvest

We must never despise the day of small things. God is building his Church, gathering in his elect, and establishing his Kingdom.

Much of life has a small beginning:

- Opening a door
- Lifting your hat
- Standing when introduced
- A hand shake
- Picking up after yourself
- Cleaning a room unasked
- Writing a note
- A spouse's rejection or approval can set you into a state of ecstasy or depression.
- One small thought can place you back into a pattern of bondage and addiction.
- Each day of calm, rest, contentment, is but a series of small events.

2. Pay attention and learn to listen as if everything is a parable (which the shadow is). God is speaking to you through your circumstances and relationships. The events of your life are a part of God's communication to you.
 - a. God is speaking to you through your spouse
 - b. God is speaking to you through your children
 - c. God is speaking to you through your employment
 - d. God is speaking to you through your suffering
 - e. God is speaking to you through your abundance

3. As citizens of His kingdom we are to rejoice that He rules with certainty and we are to rejoice in the victory of His rule.
 - a. God is controlling your success and your failure. You may place whatever twist you wish on what that means, but I believe God is ruling even in your failures, frustrations, and finishes.
 - b. Somehow God is working in your struggling marriage.
 - c. Somehow God is working in a struggling economy.
 - d. Somehow God is working in a nation at war.
 - e. Somehow God is working in a rebellious child.

Let us never lose sight of God's rule.

4. Let us broadcast the seed liberally, but let us also invest in individuals intentionally and by design. Let us make no mistake here. There is a distinction drawn in our text between the group found in verse 33 and that of verse 34. If your only interaction with our community of faith is Sunday morning, then you are a part of the larger audience to whom Jesus is teaching in verse 33. If you only attend on Sunday morning, then I would encourage you to consider attending some of our various other studies. I know the women of WBC have various Bible studies available to them. I would also encourage the men to lead their families by attending the ABF response groups, by attending GLORIA, by attending a men's study, by attending a Saturday morning study.

Often what you reap is a result of what you've sown; because you have infested little, you have reaped little.

- You do not understand your kids
- You do not understand your spouse
- You do not understand your church
- You do not understand life

Why? Because you touch only the edge, you skim the surface, perhaps you have tried but were met with resistance so you've given up. Well perhaps today is a day of new beginnings. Perhaps today is a day where you restart and invest anew in the relationship.

May God continue to grow us in our understanding of who He is, what He is doing, and who we are in Him. May we never tire of seeing His working in His people.