

The Upside Down Kingdom 3: The Parable of the Mustard Seed

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KBF Sermon

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Matthew 13:34-35

34 Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. 35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,

I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”^[c]

I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. What wondrous and powerful thing for Jesus to say. Things hidden since the creation of the world. What did he mean by this?

When you read the parables of Jesus Christ, do you ever stop to think about what it is that might be hidden within them? Do you ever wonder what lessons have been hidden since the creation of the world? As I think about these words it makes me pause. If there were people on earth for thousands of years and Jesus is only then revealing the things hidden since the creation of the world, that is a long time of people missing these secrets.

Good Morning KBF. What a special morning that it has been. A massive thanks to Pastor Esther and Pastor Lee for such a special dedication this morning. It is exciting to see 7 families stand up and declare that they are dedicating their children to the Lord. I can't wait to see how these babies grow and impact our world. Bless you parents for standing up and declaring your intention to raise your children in the way of the Lord. I pray that you will find favour in your efforts!

This morning we are in our 3rd week of our series on the upside down kingdom. In this series we have been exploring some of the differences between the Kingdom that God encourages us to build and the kingdom that has been built by the work of humans.

In doing so, the intention has been to see the differences between a human way of living and a Godly way of living and I hope that by shining a light on these kingdoms we can be more intentional in following God in all areas of our lives.

This morning we are examining the parable of the Mustard seed. It is not such a long parable, however, it is emphasized in three Gospels; Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This morning, let us start in the Gospel of Luke.

An Upside Down Scale

Luke 13:18-19

18 Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? 19 It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”

What is the Kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? These are great questions for us to begin with.

Comparison. Who here has ever compared themselves to someone else? Your looks, your fashion sense, your behaviour. Comparisons are everywhere and I think that it is intentional that Jesus is referencing comparison here.

Let me ask you a funny question. If you compare yourself to a plant, any plant, which one would you choose? Or, if you could be any plant, which one would you choose?

Me? A big black spruce tree, or a Californian Redwood? Why did I choose these? Because, they are tall and beautiful trees. They are big and solid. I would like to think that these are characteristics that I have, or want to have. Big, solid, trustworthy, smells nice.

There are many analogies for faith throughout the Bible and there are many that specifically reference trees, some of which referencing big beautiful trees.

Psalm 1:3

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Psalm 92:12

The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

Psalm 104:16

The trees of the LORD drink their fill, The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,

Isaiah 14:8

"Even the cypress trees rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, 'Since you were laid low, no tree cutter comes up against us.'

Cypress trees, Cedars of Lebanon, Beautiful Palms that have been firmly planted. It communicates a grandeur. It makes sense. I would naturally think that the 'Trees of the Lord' would be large and majestic! Isn't it interesting then that Jesus would pause here as he introduces this parable. What is the Kingdom of Heaven Like, hmmm, What shall I compare it to?

A Mustard Seed? Guys, this is a mustard seed. It is an exceptionally small seed! This week I did more reading about mustard seeds and mustard plants than I have in my entire life, and there is a lot of debate as to which exact plant Jesus is referring to, but many believe that a mustard plant is a garden shrub that does not really grow about 9 feet. It is not an elegant and dramatically majestic plant to look at. What an interesting choice that Jesus makes. Why?

Could it be that Jesus is encouraging us to dramatically rethink the scale of the kingdom of God? If we only expect big, perfect looking trees, maybe that will cause us to think that the Kingdom of God has to be a big and perfect thing and that our own faith has to be this big perfect looking thing that others come and marvel at.

By choosing this specific imagery, is Jesus challenging the way in which we usually compare things? Rather than the biggest end of the scale, he starts at the smallest. The smallest seed.

I think this is the first way he shows us the upside down kingdom. He flips our expectations upside down by encouraging us to see the Kingdom of God, not as this big and powerful 'thing', but instead as this small and nearly invisible seed.

Growth Beyond Our Expectations

Mark 4:30-32

30 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

The smallest of all seeds but becomes the largest of all the garden plants. I wonder if this would be considered comedy back in Jesus' day. The largest of all... And everyone is waiting for the punchline, because mustard plants are not that large. The largest of all... Garden plants.

Really, mustard trees are not huge, but do not be fooled. Consider the growth between the seed and the plant! What a miracle that this tiny seed becomes this great big shrub, standing as high as 9-12 feet tall.

If we compare it too a Californian Redwood it is not super remarkable. But remember we have already been warned to be careful about how we compare. If we compare the end result to the place of beginning, it is mind boggling that there is so much potential within this small seed. That given the right conditions of sun, soil and water this plant becomes as big as it does. It is a miracle! What's more, mustard plants grow rapidly. Within 8 weeks they can produce seeds. Miraculously, each plant will produce pods of seeds, each containing between 8-20 seeds in a pod. Think of the multiplication that is happening! If each pod has on average 15 seeds and one plant can produce over 10 pods... I'll let you do the math!

If we were to let our expectations of size and power prevent us from comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed, we would miss the incredible characteristics inherent in the mustard plant. The smallest of seeds, but the largest of all garden plants! The kingdom of Heaven has the potential to grow and multiply beyond our wildest expectations!

Who is 'In' and 'Out' of the Kingdom?

Matthew 13:31-32

31 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. **32** Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, **so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”**

Let me ask you a question. If you are growing plants in your garden, specifically ones that bear seeds. Seeds that you want to keep so you can make, say, mustard. Would you be happy with birds coming and sitting in the branches?

My mom has a beautiful garden back in Australia. She grows bananas, eggplant, papaya, mint, tomatoes, rosemary dill... and the list goes on. With some plants, she has to specifically protect them from mice, bats, kangaroos, and birds. If she doesn't the animals will eat all of the fruit and she will have done all the hard work of tending the garden without getting the benefit of the fruit and vegetables!

Could it be that Jesus is being playful here? He has challenged our expectations by comparing the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed, and then spoke about the growth of the plant. Perhaps this final detail is not an accident. Maybe Jesus is calling us to challenge the conventional wisdom of the garden.

If the conventional wisdom says that we have to protect our valuables from outsiders by putting barriers up, could it be that Jesus is calling us to think about about an upside down kingdom by challenging us in how we put up nets and fences to keep intruders out. If he is saying the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard tree that grows large and becomes a tree, so that the birds can come and perch in its branches. Is Jesus asking us to think about how we treat strangers? Instead of keeping out the pests, should we be inviting and allowing them in so they can rest? Sharing the branches for rest and the seed for food?

Is this then a picture that challenges the definitions about who is in and who is out of the kingdom? If the kingdom of heaven grows into a big tree from a little seed, so that birds can perch in the branches, is this a way of demonstrating what it means to be blessed to be a blessing?

If we think about a Kingdom, we can often think about a big, strong, defensible territory, with strong leadership and a powerful army to keep outsiders out. In the parable of the Mustard seed, much of this is flipped completely upside down. We

have a tiny seed that grows into a big prosperous shrub that multiplies and allows outsiders in. It is a radically different picture!

After all of this, would you still rather be a rose, or a redwood tree, or would you be happy, excited even to compare yourself to something so humble as a mustard seed? What a beautiful picture of 'Kingdom' we discover through this analogy.

What Story Will You Write?

So why does this story matter? It is nice to think about Jesus telling us nice stories and fun to go through the deeper meanings of the parables, but what is it all for?

Well, the story is kind of empty unless it encourages reflection and action. If Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is like this, how can you enter and live within the kingdom of heaven?

Perhaps the first thing is to rethink the scale.

In what areas of your life do you prioritise comparisons on the grand scale? What model are you trying to follow? Are you trying to build a family that looks big and tall and perfect? What about a career? What about your own self image? Even at church, what do you want to see happen here? What drives you?

Is it time to re-think the scale and start with the small things? Rather than seeking trying to compare ourselves to big famous things, what comparisons can we make to be more like Christ. In particular, what are the small areas in your life that are like seeds. Seemingly small but hold incredible potential for growth?

If we are aware of the scale in the Kingdom of Heaven, it will help us to make sure that we do miss the little ones. We are starting small, building something that can grow rapidly, and something that will multiply. This is different to thinking of a model that is perfect and then trying to build that. Instead, I think that this represents a gentle and beautiful kingdom because we all start small, either physically small like the children dedicated this morning, or small in the confidence we have in our faith. How wonderful to think that even the smallest of us has the potential to grow more than we could ever imagine and be a part of something that grows and multiplies.

Ad finally. What is our welcome like? Are we truly welcoming others? Even when it is inconvenient? How does this impact our families, or work and our church? Rather than building a life that is focused on simply protecting ourselves from outsiders, how do we reach out? How do we welcome those that are outsiders? This might sound like a big challenging question, but it can start very close to home. When your brother or sister is annoying, when your spouse is getting on your nerves, when there is a person at church that has bothered you... do you behave in ways that shut them out, or can you still serve and love?

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

The Kingdom of Heaven is upside down when compared to our human expectations of what a kingdom should be. But Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. It defies our expectations of scale, it grows beyond our expectations and it provides shelter for the outsiders.

I pray that this morning has encouraged you to think about the comparisons that you make about the Kingdom of God and what ways you choose to live this out. My prayer is that we might be faithful to the picture that Jesus describes in this parable. May we build a kingdom that is more like the mustard seed.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11

11 Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you

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| 1 | Message Title | <i>The Upside Down Kingdom 3: The Parable of the Mustard Seed</i> |
| 2 | Scripture Verses | <i>Matthew 13: 31-35</i> |
| 3 | Verse for the Bulletin | “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.” Matthew 13:25 (But only the attached portion) |
| 4 | Bio | <i>As Previous</i> |
| 5 | Sermon Script | https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wcPotgK_HC0xqe9KrAdyv-qtR82-cSpJKfftSP5i3o/edit?usp=sharing |
| 6 | Benediction | 2 Corinthians 13:11 11 Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you |