

# The Christian Arsenal

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## Parables 04 The Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32

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These next two parables (Mustard Seed & Yeast) were given as a pair because they describe similar characteristics of the kingdom of heaven in two different ways. Jesus spoke all seven of these parables in Matthew chapter 13 on the same day in response to the events of Matthew chapter 12 in which he received strong opposition from the religious leaders in spite of the overwhelming proof that he gave them by the miracles He preformed. His disciples were a little confused because they fully expected the whole nation of Israel to submit themselves to the Messiah when he presented himself to the nation. Instead, the religious leaders were becoming hostile and confrontational towards Jesus. The majority of the people seemed to be vacillating between enthusiasm and indifference. They thought that the Messiah would surely be acknowledged by everyone in Israel and that he would sit on the throne of David and ultimately rule the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2).

Jesus then began to veil his teaching through the use of parables. After telling the first four parables to the multitudes who were listening, Jesus then told three more to his disciples privately. The first parable, the sower and the seed, describes the effect of the "message of the kingdom" on those who heard it. Each of the next six parables begin with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like". The kingdom of heaven should not be confused with the Church. When Peter was given the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matt.16:13-19) he was not given the keys to the Church or heaven itself. The "**True Church**" is that group of called out ones who have been redeemed by Jesus, (also referred to as the "bride of Christ" or the "body of Christ"). The children of the evil one are not a part of the true Church. The kingdom of heaven is better understood as the "**Institutional Church**", or those professing allegiance to the king and where the king's authority is acknowledged. Within professing Christianity there are true believers and those who are not.

- READ MATT. 13:31-32

### 1.) The Background-

- a.) **Mustard** - The variety of mustard seed that Jesus was referring to which grew in Palestine during the first century was more than likely the black mustard (*Sinapis nigra*) which was cultivated in New Testament times for it's oil and as a seasoning for food. These plants commonly grew 2 to 4 feet in height although it has been said that some have reached a height of 10 to 12 feet. One visitor to Palestine reported that he saw wild mustard plants that were as tall as a horse and rider. Although a mustard plant may grow as high as 12 feet, under the best of conditions, nobody would ever mistake it for a great tree. The exceptional growth of the mustard plant in Jesus' parable was used as an illustration of growth that was beyond its natural ability. The mustard plant is an annual (also described as an herb) with a soft tissue stem that only lives for one growing season and never develops a woody trunk like a tree.
- b.) **The Smallest Seed-** Jesus said in verse 32 that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds that are sown. The critics of the Bible like to point out that the mustard is not the smallest of all seeds, so therefore Jesus was wrong. The black mustard seed is less than 1/20 of an inch in size while the seed of the wild orchid is 1/100<sup>th</sup> of the size of the mustard seed. So therefore Jesus was either unaware of this fact (which means that He was not God), or he just simply accommodated the common misunderstanding of His day (which would mean that He didn't tell the truth). Neither of these accusations is valid though. Jesus was not saying that there weren't any seeds that were smaller than the

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mustard seed. He was simply saying that of all of the seeds sown, that is agricultural seeds, the mustard seed was the smallest. In their attempts to try to disprove the Bible, the critics miss the point entirely.

- 2.) **Various Interpretations-** Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation. Some interpretations ignore some of the basic established rules of hermeneutics and as a result reflect someone's preconceived idea rather than the idea of the speaker. Sometimes these differing interpretations can confuse us more than clarify the issues. But sometimes a difficult passage is interpreted with completely different meanings by well qualified, bible believing scholars who are committed to faithfully explaining the scriptures. Since only one of the interpretations can possibly be correct, it can sometimes be helpful to examine different interpretations by these respected commentators to see which one best fits the context of the passage and is in harmony with the rest of the scriptures.
- 3.) **Interpretation #1 -** Some commentators view the parable of the mustard seed that grows to enormous size as representing the success that the gospel would encounter when it is proclaimed throughout the world.
  - a.) **The Mustard Seed -** Since the mustard starts from a very tiny seed, and in this parable it grows into an enormous tree. Some teachers say that this is a picture of the rapid expansion of the kingdom during the church age. Just as a seed contains life, the word of God is alive and powerful... (Heb. 4:12). The church started out as a small seed planted by Jesus and expanded into the lives of the twelve disciples. Then it grew into the 120 disciples in the upper room. Then on the day of Pentecost, the church expanded rapidly into the 3,000 who became believers that day. From there the kingdom expanded beyond the borders of Israel into Samaria, and then into the whole world. This is seen by some as the successful expansion of the church in the world. This was the view that many of the early church fathers such as Augustine held. They taught that it was the church's responsibility for Christianizing the world. When this is completed, then the kingdom of God would be established on the earth and then Jesus himself would be able to rule the earth in an everlasting kingdom.
  - b.) **The Great Tree-** God causes this herb to take on supernatural proportions so that it becomes a great tree. Just as Isaiah predicted "the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).  
**The Birds-** As Christianity spread throughout the world, people from various races and languages found shelter and safety under the branches of the church just like birds seek shelter from a storm in a mighty tree. Even the natural man himself benefits from the protection of the church.
- 4.) **Interpretation #2-** Other commentators view these parables as a continuation of the first two parables that Jesus interpreted for us. He began with the parable of the sower and the seed in which he taught that the message of the kingdom would yield a limited success of thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold increase in only one of the four soils in which it was sown. Only one of the four soils bore any fruit, which is the natural outgrowth of the life in it. He then used the parable of the wheat and the weeds to teach that there will be others in the world that will look just like the wheat but who are actually sons of the evil one. Because they are so hard to tell apart, the angels of God will have to separate the wheat and the weeds at the judgment.
  - a.) **The Mustard Seed-** Jesus was not trying to convey the success of Christianity but was describing how the kingdom of heaven, or this sphere of Christian profession, would grow outwardly to unnatural proportions. Since a mustard plant can never grow into a tree. Jesus is describing something that develops into something that is foreign to its nature.
  - b.) **The Great Tree-** If Jesus was trying to teach that Christianity would naturally grow into a large tree he could have used the cedars of Lebanon to illustrate this because they were naturally large trees that his listeners were familiar with. The world has never been a favorable place for the kingdom of heaven to grow. In order for the world to be a favorable

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place for the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom would have to change its character and become a friend of the world, which is described as the enemy of God (James 4:4). In fact, Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

- c.) **The Birds-** The NIV says that "...the birds of the air come and perched in its branches". Kenneth Wuest translates this as they "...come and roosted in its branches." Or to say it another way, they made their home there. In the interpretation Jesus gave of the parable of the sower he used the very same word to identify the birds as being the evil one who snatches away the word of the kingdom that was sown in the heart (vs.4 & 19). Someone might raise the objection that that's an illustration from a different parable. But since all of these parables were given at the same time and all of them are on the same subject (the kingdom of heaven) then it would be reasonable to expect that Jesus would have told us if he was changing the meaning of this symbolic element. We are told in *Revelation 18:2* that fallen Babylon "*has become a dwelling place of demons, and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird.*"(NASB) The enemy who has only had limited success in snatching the seed from the hardened pathways has another strategy which is to limit the fruitfulness of the true sons of the kingdom. The branches of this tree have even become the home of the agents of the evil one. Through the popular media and through a few undiscerning Christians, some of these unbelievers have even become the spokespersons for Christianity.

**Conclusion-** Just as the shallow heart and the crowded heart soil in the parable of the sower will look like the real thing from a superficial viewpoint, and the weeds or tares are virtually impossible to distinguish from the wheat, these individuals who will profess an allegiance to Jesus will swell the ranks of the institutional church. Nearly every institutional Christian church or organization will grow out of proportion to the actual number of the sons of the kingdom who are a part of it. As the western church began to increasingly adopt the philosophies and unscriptural views of those who joined her ranks during the middle ages, the institutional church eventually dominated nearly every individual person living in Western Europe.