

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Mark 4:30-34

Mark 4:30-34 – *“Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; ³² but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.” ³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.”*

Background Notes

The mustard seed is a very small seed, *“smaller than all the seeds on the earth.”* The idea is that the mustard seed is smaller than all the seeds that the Jewish farmers knew and used and planted in the soil at that time. However, it could grow and become larger than all the herbs. The mustard plant could actually grow as high as ten to fifteen feet, with lots of branches and leaves, so that it was ideal for the birds to use.

Doctrinal Point

The “Kingdom of God” is not synonymous with the “Body of Christ.”

Do you understand the meaning of “Doctrinal Points”? They are “teaching points” - what is the Bible teaching here? A doctrinal point, or teaching point, or point of truth in this passage is: The “Kingdom of God” is not synonymous with the “Body of Christ.”

As you know, the body of Christ is composed *only* of believers, but the kingdom of God is a much larger sphere. The kingdom involves believers *and unbelievers!* Now that might shake some of you, if you thought the kingdom was composed only of believers. No, several of the “parables of the kingdom” in the Gospel of Matthew show very definitely that there are unbelievers within the kingdom at the present time.

In Matthew 13, the “parable of the wheat and the tares,” is a parable of the kingdom. *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field”* (v24). The wheat that grows in the field, of course, represents the true believers. But the tares (weeds), that look like wheat but are not real wheat, represent *professing* believers. The tares

are growing within the “field” of the kingdom, and they claim to be believers, but they’re not true believers. Just as the tares look like wheat, but they’re not real wheat, so the unbelievers appear to be believers, but they really only profess to be believers.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the servants said, “Well, shall we tear out the weeds so that we only have wheat?” And the master answered NO, because you might, by mistake, rip up some of the good wheat at the same time. The master said, *“No, while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.”* We don’t want that to happen. *“Let both grow together until the harvest. And at the time of the harvest, I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.’”*

So you see, then, here is a parable of the kingdom, and the sphere of the kingdom is a lot larger than the body of Christ. The body of Christ is only believers. But within the “field” or sphere of the kingdom, there are both wheat and tares. They continue together right up until the harvest—the wheat going into the Lord’s “barn,” (heaven), and the tares, the professing believers, being bound for judgment (burning).

In Matthew 13 the Lord also gave the “parable of the dragnet.” *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.”*(v47) In this parable a large fishnet was thrown out from a fishing boat, and all kinds of fish were drawn into the net - some good, and some bad. In the parable, when the fish were sorted on the beach, the bad ones were thrown out, and the good ones were kept. What does that mean, anyway? Well, the Lord tells us. *“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”* So there’s no mistake what is meant by the “bad fish” here. They are unbelievers, and judgment awaits them. But notice - they’re in the dragnet along with the good fish, and the dragnet represents the kingdom. So the sphere of the kingdom, containing both believers and unbelievers, is a lot larger than the body of Christ, which is comprised *only of believers*. The sphere of the kingdom is not synonymous with the body of Christ.

In Matthew 25 Jesus gave another parable—the “parable of the ten virgins” - and it’s another parable of the kingdom, because it starts with *“the kingdom will be like ten virgins...”* Five were wise, and five were foolish. The wise ones, of course, represent believers; the foolish represent unbelievers. There’s no mistake about that, because when you come to the end of the parable (Matthew 25:11-12) we read this: *“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you. I do not know you.’”* The Lord did not know these foolish ones, because they were not part of His own body - and yet they were included in the wedding group, in the sphere of the kingdom.

So the kingdom of God is not synonymous with the body of Christ. The kingdom of God on earth now is “professing Christendom.” Everywhere that Christianity has spread and made inroads, and where people profess some allegiance to Christianity, you could say that’s the “sphere of the kingdom.” But we know that many of these people only claim to be Christians’, but are not true believers.

So in the parable of the mustard seed, then, the tiny seed represents the good beginnings of the kingdom, and the large plant is what the seed has grown into - the great plant of “Christendom. “

That brings us to the birds. Do the birds that nest in the mustard plant represent something good or something evil? There are two interpretations here. One interpretation is that they represent something good—that is, people from all nations finding rest and shade and Christianity. On the other hand, there’s the idea that it represents something evil—that is, false teachers - even cults that say they are “Christian,” that come under the umbrella of Christianity, or under the umbrella of Christendom. They call themselves Christians, but they deny the deity of Christ, for example. The Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormons, the Unitarians, the Christian Scientists - they all CALL themselves “Christians,” and they would say they’re part of the plant, but they’re not *true* believers.

I lean toward this second interpretation for two reasons:

1 - it is a parable of the kingdom. It’s not a parable of the body of Christ. It’s not a parable of the Church; it’s a parable of the kingdom. And we do know, as we’ve just belabored, the sphere of the kingdom is larger than the Body of Christ; it does include unbelievers.

2 - I do see a connection (many times you’ll see this in the parables) between the birds here and the birds back in the parable of the sower. In the parable of the sower, the birds were definitely emissaries of Satan: *“It happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it” (Mark 4:4).* What do those birds mean? Well, we don’t have to guess because the Lord gave the interpretation in verse 15: *“And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.”* That’s not our interpretation, that’s the Lord’s interpretation.

So I lean then towards the interpretation that the birds in the mustard plant represent those who are false teachers or cults that are nesting in the branches of Christendom. They’re under the umbrella of Christianity, and they’re part of the kingdom at the present time – but only until harvest time when everything is sorted out. But they’re not true believers – they only profess to be believers.

Practical Application

Make sure you're a "possessor" and not just a "profess-er"!

The Bible makes it very clear that you can be just a "profess-er." You can jump on the bandwagon of Christianity and make a profession of believing in Jesus - but it's lip service only, and you're not really a true believer. 2 Corinthians 13:5 warns us to make sure that we're true possessors of salvation and not just mere "profess-ers." This is written to believers: *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified (or fail the test)."*

Now that verse is written to believers – not to scare us, but to warn us to be sure that we are true believers – people who truly possess salvation in Christ, not just profess-ers.

Some people *think* they're Christians because they have "professed" to believe in Christ. They come "under the umbrella of Christianity" - after all, they're not Hindus, and they're not Muslims. Maybe you are in this category. You were raised in the church, even helped out in a ministry, but you're still only a "profess-er." You haven't invited the Lord Jesus to come into your life as Savior. You haven't come to Christ as your only hope of salvation. You're still only a "profess-er." Could this be said of you?

Why not become a true possessor of salvation - a true believer - today? Make sure you're a possessor and not just a profess-er!