

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 13:31-32

In our previous lesson, we were studying the parable of the tares, a parable describing the kingdom of heaven. We saw that the kingdom's present state here on earth is imperfect. It is a kingdom in which wheat and tares are mixed. The good is mixed with the bad. Such description of the kingdom makes us wonder about its future. We might become somewhat discouraged. What future does the kingdom of God have if it is a mixture of good and evil? Here is Jesus' answer to this concern. Right after the parable of the tares, He tells us the parable of the mustard seed. Let's read this parable in Matthew 13:31-32.

Matthew 13:31. 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."

From small to big

Try to imagine the Lord Jesus teaching to the crowd by way of a parable, perhaps pointing to a mustard plant that was standing there in the field. And He says, 'The kingdom of God can be illustrated by this mustard tree. It was sown as a very little seed. And now, look how it has grown!' The mustard seed was the smallest of its kind in the ancient Near East. The mustard plant, however, could grow quickly to a height of about 3-4 meters. That is why it can be described as a tree.

The Lord Jesus says, 'When you look at this tree, you get a picture of God's kingdom. When the kingdom is sown, it is sown into this world like a tiny seed. What do you expect from a tiny seed? You expect a tiny plant, right? But instead, what you have is a tree that is big enough for birds to nest.'

You see that the fundamental image of this parable involves a transformation from something very small to something large enough to provide shelter for animals.

The imagery of seed

In several of His parables, the Lord Jesus used the imagery of seed to talk about the spiritual transformation that takes place in the kingdom of God. We have the parable of the sower. We have the parable of the growing seed. We have the parable of the tares. And now, we have another parable involving seed, the parable of the mustard seed.

Let us consider for a moment this matter of the seed. If you want to understand the scriptural teaching of salvation, just look at Jesus' teaching when He speaks about seeds. Think about it in this way. When a seed is sown into the ground, it dies. In a certain way, it 'disintegrates.' But also, it germinates. It bursts its body. Do you see the picture of burial, death and resurrection? A new life comes forth literally from the burial, the death and the resurrection of the seed. The Lord Jesus says, 'The kingdom of God is like a grain. It may be very small, as small as a mustard seed. When it is sown into the ground, it becomes out of sight. It is buried in the soil where it dies. But after some time, it is alive again. It springs up and grows.' In the same way, Jesus died. He was buried. He seemed to be gone for good. But He rose again to a new life.

Now, what happens when the seed continues to grow? It brings forth fruit. It produces a whole new batch of seeds. That is the teaching of Jesus in John 12:24. He says, *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.* The first seed brings forth a whole batch of new seeds through dying and rising again. In the same way, the Lord Jesus, through His dying and rising again, brings forth disciples. He brings forth the church.

Notice that the life found in the new batch of seeds derives from the original seed that died. Similarly, the new life that we have derives from the Lord Jesus who died and passed on this new life to us. This shows that we get our new life from the resurrection life of Christ. We live because Jesus died and rose again.

Then what happens to this new batch of seeds? They don't just sit there and wait. The new seeds will eventually be sown again. They will, in turn, die and produce fruit. That is what is going to happen to the disciples. We received a new life through Christ's death and resurrection. But we must realize that we are also to die and rise again. That's the meaning of John 12:25. *He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* This verse refers to the believer. And Jesus says that the disciple must lose his life to bear eternal life.

The seed parables

This comes out in the parables of Jesus in the same way. If you look at the seed parables, you will see the same thing. Let's take them backward.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we have the story of a mustard seed that is sown into the ground. It dies and comes back to life again. Here the mustard seed is representing the Lord Jesus for the kingdom of God is personified in Christ Himself. He is the kingdom of God. This parable does not describe a particular situation inside the kingdom of God as such. Rather the focus is on the growth of the kingdom itself. And this kingdom becomes a reality in the world through the dying and rising again of the Lord Jesus.

In the previous parable, the parable of the tares, the kingdom of God is compared to the sowing of good seed in the field. We saw that the good seed represents the sons of the kingdom, the true Christians. In other words, when Jesus gives us a new life, He also sends us out into the field, into the world where we, in our turn, become like seeds. We die and we rise again, bearing fruit for God. That is why right after speaking about the seed in John 12:24, Jesus says, 'The person who tries to save his life will lose it. But he who loses his life for my sake will have it.' Unless we become a seed, unless we go out into the world, deny ourselves and live for Christ, we will not have the fullness of His life. We will bear no fruit.

When we look backward still further to the parable of the sower, we see that the seed is the word of God. The word of God is sown into my heart and I become a son of God who is going to be sown into the world. In consecrating my life to God and giving it up for others, the life of Christ will be imparted to many others. That is how a seed becomes fruitful.

A message of life and transformation

A true Christian is someone who has the life of Christ in him. This is important to grasp. Let's consider this point from the perspective of the parable of the mustard seed. The seed is the Lord Jesus in this parable. The mustard seed dies and brings forth a new crop. This new crop of mustard seed derives its life from the death and the resurrection of that first seed, i.e., Christ Himself. Every believer has the life of Christ in him. And what is the life of Christ? It is the new resurrection life that the Holy Spirit creates in us so that we become a new creation. It is not just having the form of godliness. It is not just having the right religious behavior. It is having Jesus dwelling in our hearts.

Notice another thing. Look at one seed, and look at the other seed. What do you observe? The latter seed, the new seed, looks like that original seed. There is a close resemblance between the two seeds. You see, the true Christian takes upon him, by the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, the beauty of Christ. He becomes more and more like Jesus in his attitude and in his thinking. He learns to behave as Jesus behaved and to think as He thought. Paul says in 2Corinthians 3:18 that 'we are changed from glory to glory into the image of Christ by the Spirit of the Lord.' Therefore, if you are a genuine Christian, the likeness of Christ should be manifest in your life. You gradually become like Him in every way as you go on in the Christian life.

Once we understand this point, we can also understand why we speak of sowing the sons of God into the world. We are Christ's representatives in the world. We are His body in the world. And the world will know Christ when people see Christ in us. Just as a seed bears resemblance to the original seed, the true Christian takes on the likeness of Christ. When people look at him, they see Christ. They see the life of Christ working in him. In all the parables where this picture of the seed is used, we find this wonderful message of life and transformation.

In the parable of the mustard seed, this transformation involves a growth from a small entity to a large one, from seed to tree. By stressing the difference between the smallness of the seed and the greatness of the plant, Jesus wants to show that the kingdom will start out small but end up big. 'God's power is there. Even if the work seems small, even if the seed looks tiny, a great work will come forth.'

How great will this work be? Jesus says, 'Well, even the birds of the air will come and live in it. They will make their nests in it. They will dwell in the branches of this mustard plant.' So this is the other point of the image. Not only is there a contrast in the start and finish of the seed, there is also an emphasis on the product: a place of shade and shelter. It is a place where birds are able to nest.

A residing place for many

The picture of birds in the tree directs our attention to the OT where it occurs several times. The closest OT parallel to the parable of the mustard seed is found in Ezekiel 17:22-24. This passage is of particular interest to us because it refers to the messianic kingdom, the kingdom of Christ.

Ezekiel 17:22. Thus says the Lord God: "I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar and set it out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on a high and prominent mountain.

23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell.

24 "And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."

Notice these words in v. 24. 'I have exalted the low tree.' In the Bible, this is a recurrent pattern. God takes the lowly things of this world and exalts them. He takes the foolish things to confound the wise. He chooses what is weak to shame the strong. And so, this is what is happening here. He brings down the tall tree and makes the low tree grow tall. He dries up the green tree and makes the dry tree flourish.

Here Ezekiel makes reference to a cedar tree. The cedar is a massive tree known for its grandeur and vigor. It is highly esteemed for its fine and durable wood. That is why the picture of a cedar tree to describe a kingdom is often found in the OT. But the use of a mustard plant to describe a kingdom is quite unusual. Because the mustard plant, compared to a cedar, is scarcely a tree. And yet, it develops into a tree in which birds are able to find shelter.

'In the shadow of its branches, birds of every sort will dwell.' In this verse, it is important to understand the meaning of the birds dwelling in the branches. Ezekiel 31:6 tells us that the birds and the beasts represent all the great nations of the earth. This is what we read. *All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young; and in its shadow all great nations made their home.* All the great nations will make their home in that tree ... in the mustard tree. The mustard tree is not a normal image of kingdom and shelter. As such, Jesus makes the point in His parable that the kingdom comes in a surprising way. He deliberately points to this reference in Ezekiel 17 and then makes an adjustment to it in order to describe the surprising and inevitable growth of the kingdom. 'Don't be deceived by the humble form of the kingdom right now,' Jesus says. 'It will assuredly become very large, reaching everywhere. It is like that promise made in Ezekiel to the nation. A Davidic rule will grow until the shade of its branches produces rest for many.'

So the picture is that the kingdom of God, beginning in an insignificant way, will surprisingly become a great power in the world. So much so that the nations will come to dwell under its shade.

A call to trust

Of course, when the disciples heard this, they had to take Jesus' words by faith. There was no great nation living under the shade of the kingdom yet. The kingdom was at the stage of the mustard seed. It was insignificant. The disciples had no proof that what Jesus says is true, that one day the great nations of the world will shelter under the branches of the kingdom of God.

But today, we are witnessing the fulfillment of Jesus' teaching. We see that what He said is true. Many people and nations, believers and non-believers alike, have found help and safety in the covering of Christianity. To a large extent, laws and institutions of mercy, justice, and honor have evolved from Christian principles. Even some great nations have taken shelter under the branches of this tree, declaring themselves to be Christian nations. This doesn't mean that they are Christians in reality. Notice that in the parable, the mustard plant is the kingdom and the branches of that plant represent the Christians. The word 'branches' is commonly used in the Bible to refer to Christians as you know. In John 15, Jesus says, 'I am the vine; you are the branches.' In Romans 11, Christians are pictured as the branches of the olive tree. The birds, however, are not part of the tree. They are not part of the kingdom of God, but they do seek refuge in it. This is another way of saying that the influence of the kingdom of God has become so powerful that nations find shelter in its teaching, in its shade, even though they don't necessarily recognize the lordship of Christ.

This mustard tree has not yet reached maturity. It is still growing. Actually, the parable of the mustard seed is a prophetic parable. The ultimate fulfillment of this parable is yet to come because the prophecy is on-going until the time when the kingdom of Christ will govern the whole earth. At that time, every nation will be subject to Jesus. Every tongue will confess Him as Lord. This has already been prophesied in Daniel 2:35 for example, in the picture of the great stone which will fill the whole earth. In the NT, we see the same thing in Revelation 11:15 where voices in heaven declare, *The*

kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever! When Jesus comes back, all the nations of this world will be subject to Him. He will be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Now this, we have to take it by faith too.

The parable of the mustard seed is a call to trust God's word. As we pointed out earlier, the first disciples had to listen to Jesus on a sheer act of faith. Because at that time, who was Jesus? He was just a simple carpenter, from the obscure village of Nazareth. And this man is saying that the world is going to be subject to His kingdom. How can anyone believe that! He is followed by men with no position, with no prestige. The leaders of the nation, the religious leaders, the political leaders, they don't accept Him. Can He be right when all the leaders are against Him? And this poor man ends up dying on the cross! His kingdom? Great nations are going to shelter in the shade of His tree like birds? That must be a joke! But the disciples believed Jesus. Even today, this parable involves a call to trust, for God has not yet completed the kingdom program.

This parable is also a great encouragement to every believer. It brings hope to all those who participate in the kingdom by arguing that after its humble start under Jesus, the kingdom will some day spread across all the earth. No opposition to Christianity can stop God's kingdom from covering the world because God is causing it to grow. And the growth will inevitably continue until the day when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached to all the nations. Then the tree will be fully grown and the end will come (Matthew 24:14).