The Mustard Plant (Mat. 13.31-32)
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Introduction

Some parables are difficult to understand because we have limited material in Scripture to guide us to what they mean. Occasionally, the narrator of the Gospel of Matthew puts us, as readers, in the same position as the people who heard the preaching of Jesus. For example, he gives us some parables with no explanation attached to them. This is the case with the parable of the weeds and the parable of the Sower. Matthew records the parables, and then adds our Lord's explanation a bit later in his account. However, with regard to the parables of the mustard plant, the leaven, the treasure, and the merchant, the narrator records no explanation, and we find no explanation anywhere else in the NT. The result is that there is much diversity of interpretation regarding these parables.

Furthermore, difficulty surfaces in the process of interpreting these parables because of the preconceived notions that we bring with us to study them. We all do this in our reading. This is not a bad thing in itself. What is important is that we recognize our preconceptions and the fact that they govern our interpretations. This is part of what we call presuppositional awareness in the application of open-minded humility and critical thinking. Being aware of our presuppositions allows us to test them and keep them in perspective, which is healthy in doing interpretation (presuppositions are control beliefs like sunglasses that control how we see things).

With respect to the mustard plant parable, if we try to be presuppositionally aware, then there is an important question to ask, does this parable support a millennial view? The context is the coming of the kingdom and the teaching of Christ about His kingdom; this directs our thoughts to the question of the millennial kingdom. However, presuppositional awareness causes us to ask a sub-question, namely, "Are we asking the right question?" Should the millennial question be a question that affects how we read Matthew 13, and specifically, the parable of the mustard plant? Is this the right question to ask as we come to the text?

With presuppositional awareness in mind, my goal for today is to evaluate some views of the mustard plant first, and then to offer a positive interpretation of it.

> **He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Mat. 13.31-32)**.

1A. An evaluation of some views of the mustard plant

We need to see the basic views to give us perspective and to help understand things by comparison and contrast.

We can approach evaluation like thinking about things that belong or do not belong together in a set. For example, we might wonder what belongs and what does not belong together from this list: hammer, nails, wood, sewing machine, and square, drill, wood bits, and saw. We can readily see how connected most of these things are, and we can readily see how the sewing machine does not fit with the things on the list. Similarly, when we evaluate, we look for what fits and for what appears to be ill fitted.

There are four basic views of the millennial kingdom of Revelation 20. I want to summarize how they differ regarding the mustard plant. Then I will offer some evaluative comments.

1B. Summary of kingdom views

Please be patient and put forth a little extra effort if you get hit today with a bunch of new terms.

1) Scofield-dispensational premillennialism

Some of you may have an old Scofield Bible, which used the KJV with notes like the Geneva Bible notes, but these notes expressed a different direction of thought on Israel, the church, and biblical prophecy than the reformers and historic reformed theology.

A representative writer for this view is J. D. Pentecost (*Things to Come*). His interpretation is that all the parables of Matthew 13 track the course of the kingdom of God in the present age until the second coming of Christ. The mustard plant, he says, represents abnormal external growth of the kingdom of God based on two things. First, for an herb plant to become a tree is a monstrosity. Second, the birds that nest in the branches are antagonistic forces because of what birds signify in the closely related parable of the Sower (snatching away the seed of the word). Thus, he says that the parable speaks of an enlarged sphere of Christian profession that is inwardly corrupt, as the world gets ever worse until the end of the age (p. 147).

2) Historic premillennialism

G. Ladd (formerly of Fuller Seminary in California) taught that the mustard plant pictures a kingdom that will come to the earth *after* the return of Christ in contrast to the smallness of the kingdom in its appearing now as we wait for the return of Christ (*The Presence of the Kingdom*, pp. 34-35). Smallness refers to kingdom insignificance in the eyes of the world and greatness refers to the universal rule of the nations by Christ that begins at His second coming.

3) Post-millennialism

For the Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, this parable pictures the universal extension of the kingdom of Christ by gradual progress through the preaching of the gospel. This universality arrives across the face of the earth before the return of Christ (*Systematic Theology*, III, 856).

4) Amillennialism

H. Hanko, in his book on the parables of Matthew 13 (*The Mysteries of the Kingdom*) emphasizes the insignificant beginning of the kingdom and its progress in the world. Hence, there is the contrast of the small seed and the large plant. However, he stresses the fact that the mustard seed grows into a large herb *but it does not become an oak*. He agrees with the dispensational view on the progress of the present evil age. The world will continue to decline with wars and rumors of wars, and so forth, and the kingdom will remain insignificant in the eyes of men (as Ladd) per the standards of the world, even when it reaches its most mature form. All of this takes place before the return of Christ (different from Ladd). The kingdom will not become an oak until Jesus comes, and, at that time, brings in the eternal state (cf. pp. 41-42; likewise, Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 263).

A comparative graph on the handling of "greatness" may help us see how these views interface with one another. We isolate greatness because the small seed becomes a great tree.

<u>Dispensational</u>-greatness refers to a greatly corrupt church before the return of Christ
<u>Historic premillennialism</u>-greatness refers to the universal kingdom after Christ's return
<u>Post-millennialism</u>-greatness refers to the universal kingdom of Christ before His return
<u>Amillennialism</u>-greatness refers to the veiled universal kingdom before Christ's return
For some, as Ridderbos, greatness refers to the unveiling of the eternal state when Christ comes
And thus it refers to the universal kingdom after Christ's return

2B. Evaluative comments

1) The idea of abnormality and antagonism (as in the dispensational view) is unwarranted. If you press consistency regarding the birds, then they represent Satan working in unbelievers stealing away the word of God, not a corrupt element in the church. Furthermore, there is no degeneration anywhere in view in the parable. Moreover, the idea of monstrosity in the growth of an herb to a tree fails to appreciate just how large a mustard plant may become (many writers point out how normal and natural it is to have nests in a mustard "tree").

2) Regarding all of the other views, it is worthy of note that universality is not at issue in the parable. We have to grant that in the end, the plant is still an herb; it does not become a mighty oak or a forest of mighty oaks that fill the earth. A focus on numbers and volume seems out of step with our Lord's teaching, and there is no necessary connection between size and safety in His teaching (in the parable, greatness brings about a *safe* dwelling place for nesting).

To make this point somewhat stronger, just focus on the seed for a moment in relation to the other garden plants and ask this question, "Does it fit the context to take the seed as the

kingdom and the other garden plants as the kingdoms of this earth?" Does the kingdom grow along side of the kingdoms of the world until the end when it becomes universal? The interpretation that these questions suggest is plausible, but the wheat and weeds parable in light of the book of Daniel (2 & 7) indicates that *the kingdom is universal from the beginning*. Finally, it seems unsuitable to have both smallness and greatness refer to universality (first veiled then unveiled universality; it is first small then great; it does not just appear small in the beginning).

These evaluative comments tell us to look in some other direction to understand the parable. In other words, greatness is something positive, but it does not point us to the universality of kingdom growth, leading up either to the second coming or following it in the consummation (there is no harvest element in the parable, and the mustard plant may become greater than all the other garden plants but not greater than all plants).

2A. A positive interpretation of the parable

To propose a positive interpretation, we need to cover the point of comparison, the theme, the thrust, and the teaching of the parable.

1B. Point of comparison

It is generally agreed that we find the main point of comparison in the contrast between smallness and largeness, between seed and tree. Furthermore, there is no negative connotation; the plant is perfect at every stage of its development).

2B. Theme

We get direction on the theme from the parable of the Sower, which is basic to the understanding of all the kingdom parables (per Mk 4.13). This suggests that the theme of the parable is the gospel, the word of the king who goes forth as a Sower sowing seed. He gave us the gospel in word and deed; the theme is the gospel of the words and deeds of Christ.

3B. Thrust

We have teaching about the movement of the gospel from smallness to largeness, from seed to tree. Notably, it is not a movement regarding the influence of the gospel on people, some with hearing ears and others with unhearing ears (as in the parables of the Sower and the weeds). This parable refers to the growth of the gospel itself from seed to full grown tree. The contrast is between the gospel when planted and the gospel when it reaches its mature form.

The fact is that our Lord is the Sower and the seed is the word of the kingdom. Thus, the thrust of the parable is that the gospel comes like a seed in the words and deeds of Jesus. Then, it becomes full-blown and matures in the apostolic witness to His words and deeds. In other words, the gospel of Jesus and the apostles is like a mustard plant. This expands on how the kingdom promised in the OT is now present as the kingdom of the Son of Man who rules the nations, who has universal kingship with all people in His kingdom, and with final judgment "delayed" to the end of the age. He rules the nations now by the gospel in its full-grown form (post-resurrection).

4B. Teaching

The teaching of the parable, then, is that Jesus gave us the gospel in an undeveloped form in His own life and work. He brought in the kingdom in a way very unexpected when He proclaimed its arrival as one who "did not cry in the streets" (Mat 12.18f) and who concealed the manifestation of the kingdom in its coming by "gushing forth" in parables (Mat 13.11, 35). He healed people and commanded them to "tell no one" (Mat 12.15-16). He taught things in secret that later would be proclaimed from the housetops (Lk 8.16-17). He whispered things in darkness that later would be shouted in broad daylight (Mat 10.27). He called out the nucleus of the new Israel in twelve disciples who all left him when the going got rough (they had much to learn but could not bear it yet, Jn 16.12; later they will remember and witness; 15.26; 14.26).

Some of the dynamics of the "messianic secret" in the Gospels has to do with unbelieving Israel and her relation to the absolute submission of Christ to the Father's will. Thus, He will not accept premature exaltation, and He will not allow premature death on the cross. He must accomplish all the work that the Father gave Him to do. He must accomplish it in an obscure and foundational way because that is how the eternal covenant of redemption comes to realization.

That is what pleases the Father as He fulfills His purposes in a day-by-day, week-by-week process in history.

When the seed grows to a tree and the birds come and nest in its branches, then we have food, shade, rest, and shelter in the good news of Jesus Christ and His apostles. Thus, Jesus said these things:

> **For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light (Lk 8.17).**
>
> **What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops (Mat 10.27).**
>
> **And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Mat 16.18).**
>
> **[God builds the church] on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Eph 2.20).**

Concluding remarks and applications

1) The gospel of the apostles is the developed form of the gospel of Jesus. Their gospel is the gospel that He gave us (His witness and theirs have an organic, plant-like unity).

It is the same gospel in both the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles. If we hear Him, we must hear the NT witness that He authorized. Thus, really, the NT is the gospel of Jesus that has grown from a seed to a tree. Theological study, especially some branches of Biblical Theology need this message because they fragment the NT, cutting Paul off from Jesus. Instead of interfacing their grasp of Jesus from Paul and Paul from Jesus, they isolate the teaching of each, and then when they compare them they only find tensions between them. We need to hear this fact that the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul are the same plant that grows from a seed to a full-blown tree (cf. even O.P. Robertson, in *Christ and the Covenants*, does biblical theology of the covenants without interfacing the covenants with John 17).

2) The Gospels are truly gospel. They bring God's kingdom to sinners in need.

You have shelter for your life, a safe dwelling place for your soul, and comfort for your heart in the Gospels of the NT and in the further explanation of the Gospels in the remaining portions of the NT. The word of the king gives us a kingdom gospel. If you lay hold of the gospel, you lay hold of the kingdom and eternal life. By seizing the kingdom with determination, striving to enter the narrow gate, and acknowledging your spiritual poverty, you lay hold of the truth of God's word and you lay hold of life itself. On this pathway, you find your life rather than losing it. This calls us to a diligent use of the means He ordained of a diet on the word. Jesus, therefore, gave the command that we take heed how we hear His gospel of the NT rooted in the OT. Here, consider the value of a diet where we work through a particular book while over viewing OT and NT. We are thereby seeking the honey in the honeycomb (Ps 19.10).

3) We are to spread this "seed then tree" gospel to the world in need.

It is this full-blown message in its form as first seed than tree that defines our mission in spreading the word. Thus, like the apostles, and entering into their labors, we must take heed how we hear the gospel of Jesus in the entire NT (with an OT basis) because what God gives us is not just for our own good. He gives us light not to hide it under a bushel, but to proclaim it from the housetops. We need to come to terms with this essential fact: we have the truth that we have for a purpose. That purpose is to share, proclaim, clarify, and teach the mustard plant like gospel to those in need around us. To this goal, we must prayerfully commit ourselves.

Let us bow down before the Sower of the good news. Let us confess our need of Him and our resolve to serve Him by laying hold of His mustard plant like truth to live by it and share it with others. To Him be all glory, now and forevermore. Amen.