

Parables of Matthew 13 (Part 1): The Mustard Seed

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 16-Aug-97; Tape #302

Have you ever found something in the Bible that just really excited you—I mean, where you just could hardly wait to tell somebody about what you found? I've been going through that experience for the last two weeks, and I'm just about ready to explode here. So now I get my chance to tell you my discovery, and by the time that I finish I hope you're as excited as I am, because I really think it just expands your horizons of what's going on.

We're going to look into the first four parables of Matthew 13. We're going to be especially looking at the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parables of the Leaven.

If you recall, when I gave the sermon a couple of years ago on the *Song of Songs*, I gave you an explanation of what a parable is. I'll quickly review what I said, because I think it's important that we understand right off the bat what it is that we're dealing with. So this is from *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, from Page 840, under the article *Parable*.

"Literally denotes a placing beside. It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison. It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the subject of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson. It is the lesson that is of value. The hearer must catch the analogy if he is to be instructed. Such a narrative or saying dealing with earthly things with a spiritual meaning is distinct from a fable which attributes to things what does not belong to them in nature. Two dangers are to be avoided in seeking to interpret parables in scripture; 1) that of ignoring the important features, and 2) that of trying to make all the details mean something."

When we went through the Song of Songs we showed that the Song of Songs was indeed a parable, and not all of the details meant something, but it gave a general idea of what was going on. Now the parables of Matthew 13 are much tighter, so we need to pay a little bit better attention to the details, because it makes a whole lot of difference.

You'll see in Matthew 13:10-17 that Jesus explains the purpose of parables. He basically says that His purpose for giving parables was not to expand the meaning to people, but to hide the meaning from the people whom He didn't want to understand. Only with the Spirit of God could we really understand the parables, but *He* has to give us the understanding. There are certain keys that unlock parables, and if you don't have the keys you're going to miss the meaning, and the interpretation is going to be wrong, or off track.

What we find out from the rest of the Bible is that it takes the Holy Spirit in order for us to have

ears to hear. You'll find that running through I Corinthians 2. To understand spiritual things you must have the Spirit of God in your mind—the mind of Christ—that in turn opens up what is in the Bible. Of course the other major key is the *book* itself, because the interpretation of the parables is within the Bible. It's not necessarily just the context around the parable; rather the entire Bible opens up the parable.

II Peter 1:19-21 We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Bet you're wondering what I'm doing here. This is a section about prophecy. Well, in a way it is also a section about parables, because parables and prophecies are very similar. It's not the same in certain respects, because parables can be prophetic, and most times I'd say they are. They hold three elements in common and they're very important. 1) Both parables and prophecies employ symbols. 2) As I just mentioned, both parables and prophecies are predictive. Usually the parable shows a spiritual state, and in many cases a prophecy does the same thing, as we've been seeing lately. And, 3) they are both inspired by the Holy Spirit. Because of these three elements in common—employing symbols, being predictive, and being inspired by the Holy Spirit—the principles of interpretation are similar, if not the same. So you would treat a parable the same way you would treat a prophecy.

Now it's from verses like these in II Peter 1, that Mr. Armstrong and others, even in the world, have derived the principle that the Bible interprets itself. It's right there: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy in scripture is of any private interpretation." In other words, the Bible provides the interpretation of its own symbols. The Bible interprets itself.

But let's add a corollary to this principle. It's very important to this sermon. Malachi 3:6, "I am the Eternal. I change not Therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed." Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." James 1:17, "God is the Giver of all good gifts, and with Him there is no variation or shadow of turning."

What does this mean? What is the common element?

God is consistent. God doesn't change.

This quality of God allows us to have faith in Him. If you know that He says "*Love is a good thing*," then we can have faith that if we treat each other in love, we're doing something good for the other person. So by this principle—that God never changes—we can have confidence and trust in God.

We can rely on what He says, because He doesn't change. If He did, could we ever trust the Bible for anything? Now let's apply this to symbols in prophecy, or in parables. If we saw, for example, the word "*star*" in Genesis, and we felt it meant, let's say, "a rocket ship" (just to bring something out), then by this same principle "*star*" should mean a "rocket ship" right

through to the end of the Bible. And you know what? It does. I don't mean that it does mean "a rocket ship." What I'm saying is that a symbol in the early part of the Bible retains the same meaning throughout the entire Bible. And if it didn't, how could we be ever sure of what it meant?

The corollary that I'm trying to get at here is that the Bible's interpretation of its symbols is consistent. The Bible interprets itself, and the corollary is its interpretation of symbols is consistent. If it is not, we could never trust what we were seeing.

I can't, at this point, prove this because it would take many sermons to go through every symbol in the Bible and show you that this works; but I believe it does, because the principle of God being consistent, or constant and unchanging is there, and He gave us all the tools we need to interpret the symbols. Now this doesn't mean that a symbol in one place can't have a different shade of meaning, or that the context may give you the exact narrow meaning; but in general, a symbol that is in Genesis will be the same, in its wider application, right on through to Revelation.

Let's just take one symbol—*lion*. Do you know that in I Peter 5 it stands for Satan? And do you know that in Revelation 5 it stands for Christ? Is that a contradiction? Does the symbol stand for two different things? No. We've interpreted it correctly, but its meaning is consistent. A lion does not stand for Satan. A lion does not stand for Christ. A lion is a *ruler*. It is a very powerful ruler. It is, very often, a *fierce* and almost *wild* ruler. Just think of God's anger and the *fury* that He pours out. That could seem pretty fierce and wild if you're on the receiving end of it.

Do you see what I'm getting at here? The symbol means a specific thing, and the context tells us, or the description tells us, to whom it applies. We could do the same thing with "stars." That one's kind of interesting, because in Genesis 37, stars stood for "the sons of Jacob." In Revelation 12, just four verses apart, it means both "the sons of Jacob" in one verse and "the angels" in another. But do you know what "stars" really symbolizes? *Sons*. The angels are "sons of God," the twelve stars are "Jacob's sons"; still the symbol refers to sons.

The context provides a fuller picture of what the symbol means and narrows it in as well. This is important when going through the parables of Matthew 13, because we can't pull symbols out of the air and attach meanings to them. We've got to look at the rest of the Bible to see how they're used throughout.

We need to get an overview of Matthew 13, because we need to understand the whole context and to see what Jesus was trying to get across to us. If you go through Matthew 13, your particular Bible translation may divide the parables into only seven parables. But there are not only seven parables there. There are eight parables in Matthew 13. Usually the eighth one is combined with the seventh one. In a way it follows it, but it is also its own parable. It stands alone.

Now these eight parables are divided into three sections. The first section consists of the first four parables—The Parable of the Sower, The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, The Parable of the Mustard Seed, and The Parable of the Leaven. We'll be concentrating on these four, and specifically the last two. The second section consists of the next three parables: The Parable of the Hidden Treasure, The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, and The Parable of the Dragnet.

The third section is the last parable—The Parable of the Householder—who shakes out of his treasure house both old and new.

I'm going to give you titles for these three sections so you get the idea of what's happening here in Matthew 13. The first section (the first 4 parables) is titled "*Satan's Plan To Destroy The Church.*" The second section (next 3 parables, parables 5, 6, and 7—Hidden Treasure, Pearl of Great Price, and the Dragnet) is titled "*God's Word In Behalf Of The Church.*" It is what God does to make sure that Satan doesn't destroy the church, and much of that has already done by Him. The third section (the last parable) is titled "*The Ministry's Duty To Protect The Church,*" or "*The Ministry's Duty To The Church.*"

I want to show you the comment that Matthew makes after he goes through the first section. In Matthew 13:34, you'll find an explanation as to why I can say the first four parables are titled "*Satan's Plan To Destroy The Church.*"

Matthew 13:34 All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world."

What was kept secret from the foundation of the world? Satan's plan to destroy the church.

This applies specifically to what He has just said—to the first four parables. But, it also applies more generally, throughout the parables. What Jesus does is open up things that have been concealed from the foundation of the world. If you go back to Psalm 78:2, you'll notice that it doesn't say, "I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world." Do you know what it says? It says, "I will utter *dark* sayings of old." That gives you another clue. It means that what has gone before in Matthew 13, is dark. What do you think is dark? What do you think of when you think of something that is dark here? Dark mysteries or, you know, dark things happening? Well, I think of Satanic things, things that are bad, things that are negative.

This gives me a clue that what has just come before is negative, not positive, and these negative things are things that have been hidden from man since the foundation of the world. What happened at the foundation of the world? Adam and Eve sinned. That was the first step in the plan of Satan—"*Get them while they're young*"—he's been doing the same thing ever since. So Jesus is saying, "*Look people, my disciples—this is the plan that you've got to fight against. Understand* what's in these parables, and you've got a pretty good idea of what's happening.

Ephesians 6:11-12 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Paul is saying, "*Look! We know this. Satan's at work against us.*"

II Corinthians 2:11 Lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

How could Paul say that? Because they were revealed in the parables. He knew what Satan was doing, because Jesus had revealed it.

II Corinthians 4:3-4 But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. [It sounds like what Jesus said about parables. He had veiled them.] Whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

Satan is keeping them in ignorance so he can take his time working with the church. Those are the ones he's planning to attack.

II Corinthians 11:3 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

I just mentioned that.

Galatians 4:8-9 But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods [demons]. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?

It sounds like the church in Galatia had allowed Satan to come in. And don't think that it doesn't happen today.

This is a more hopeful scripture:

Colossians 1:13 He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

This sounds a lot like the second section of parables—what God has done for us, so that we'll be safe.

I Timothy 4:1 Now the spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.

Put that back in your head somewhere. That'll come up.

I Timothy 5:15 For some have *already* turned aside after Satan.

Paul knew all these things because they had been revealed, and he, I'm sure, was teaching this to the church.

Before we go any further, there's one more thing that we need to go over, and that is Jesus' use of the words "Kingdom of Heaven." He uses that throughout this chapter—"The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." Don't be fooled by this. Don't think that it means "the Kingdom of God when Jesus Christ returns." That is a trap, because that's not what He meant.

You've got to remember, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is not just a future thing. It is a present reality. It is not on earth right now as a government, in the form of a nation or a kingdom, but the Kingdom of God exists. Now, how do I know this? We have just read in Colossians 1:13 that we've *already* been translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love. That word "*translated*" is better translated as "*transferred*." I think we've kind of steered away from this idea that the Kingdom of God is a present reality because of the Protestant idea of "the Kingdom of God is within you." But there's something to that. It's not correct that the Kingdom of God is within you, in the way the Protestants have misapplied that; but the Kingdom of God does exist.

Matthew 12:28 But if I cast out demons by the spirit of God, surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you.

It was present then, and working.

Mark 12:34 So when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that no one dared question Him.

In Luke 10, I want you to see that Jesus uses this term in a present tense situation. The Kingdom of Heaven is something that happens now, or can happen now. He's talking to His disciples and telling them what they're to do when they go out.

Luke 10:9 And heal the sick who are there, and say to them, The Kingdom of God has come near to you.

It sounds like what He said to the scribe back there.

Luke 17:21 Nor will they say, See here! Or See there! For indeed the Kingdom of God is *among* [as it should be better translated].

These examples show that Jesus taught His disciples that the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven exists now, but it's in a different form from what it will be when Jesus returns and sets up His government. When we yield to God, and when we are accepted, as Mr. Armstrong said, as His *embryonic* sons and daughters, we become citizens of the Kingdom of God. Now in a sense, we all are in the Kingdom of God now, but in the *begotten* sense, not in the *born again* sense.

Don't get me wrong. Mr. Armstrong was absolutely right. We are shooting for that future reality when Jesus Christ comes back and sets His throne upon this earth—when all people will, hopefully, stream to Jerusalem. That's what the entire Bible looks forward to, but there is a *present reality* within His sons and daughters. What about the following scriptures given by Paul: "Our citizenship is in heaven"; "We are ambassadors for Christ" (Ambassadors means your allegiance is to some other country.); "We are aliens and pilgrims in a foreign land."

Our land is the Kingdom of God. This land is an alien nation. In true members of God's church, the Kingdom of God is already ruling in them, and that's what Jesus means.

In fact, some scholars want to throw out the word *Kingdom* as it is used in this way. They say that they feel that this is a misleading translation. Of course most of them are Protestants and they are looking at it with the concept that "*the Kingdom of God is within you.*"

But think of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, in Matthew 13, in this sense—as the *realm* of God, or the *realm* of heaven, or the *dominion* of God, or the *reign* of God. He is already our King. He is reigning over us right now. Here is a word that we should all be familiar with—the *sovereignty* of God.

Have you come under the sovereignty of God? You bet ya! You voluntarily did. So in that sense, you are in the Kingdom of God, and its rules apply. That's what Jesus means in Matthew 13. He's not doing away with the idea that He will return to this earth and set up His government here (after putting down all other government's rule), but He is saying, "*You that I have called out, are in the Kingdom of Heaven, now—in this begotten sense, in this spiritual sense—and you have to play by its rules, and you have to fight its enemies, which are legions! So beware!*"

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed

I'm not going to read The Parable of the Sower and the Seed. You probably all know it. You know that the man went out sowing, and some seed fell here and some seed fell there. Then, thankfully, Jesus gives us the interpretation, starting in verse 18. We don't have to guess about what these things mean. It's very clear how He interpreted this prophecy, and it ends on a good note, because there are some on whom the seed falls on, and it's very good ground, and they produce like gangbusters, and it's great. There are a few not-so-good things that happen before that.

Matthew 13:19-21 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. [The next one receives the seed on stony places, and Jesus says:] But he who received the seed on stony places,

this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy: yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. Then persecution or tribulation arises, and he stumbles.

The next one receives seed among thorns and, maybe, hears the word. But the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and all those things choke him out, and he stumbles; he leaves.

Then of course there is the good stuff. So there is a mixture of positive and negative in this parable. Jesus clearly says, in verse 19, that the seed is "the word of the kingdom." It's what He plants in you and me to draw us out of this world and is what gives us an opportunity for salvation. That's very clear. This is the truth; the knowledge of God; the gospel; the whole counsel of God—however you want to put it. That's easy to see.

But the birds—now, that's kind of interesting.

Matthew 13:4 And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the *birds* came and devoured them.

It doesn't sound very good—that the birds would eat the seed. Do you know that "birds of the air" are a negative symbol? Look in verse 19. Instead of saying "*birds of the air*," He says "*the wicked one*" comes and devours that seed. Do you know what Mark says? Mark uses the word "*Satan*." He gets right down to it. Very clear. Luke says "*the Devil*."

I want you to take a look at Genesis 15:11, to prove my point from earlier. This is where Abraham was making a covenant with God.

Genesis 15:11 And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

What were the vultures doing? They were interfering between God and man. They were trying to defile Abraham's sacrifice. Get it? A slightly different context is used in Deuteronomy 28, the Blessings and the Cursings section. Let's look at verse 26. This is a curse:

Deuteronomy 28:26 Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away.

No Abraham around. "*Birds of the air*" is a negative symbol. Now to the back of the book. We're going from Genesis to Revelation here. This really nails it down.

Revelation 18:2 And he [this angel] cried mightily with a loud voice, saying Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a habitation of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for

every unclean and hated *bird*!

Guess what the "birds of the air" are? Demons! They come and try to get you when you're young in the church. Like the lion of I Peter 5, they go for the stragglers and the weak and the newborn, because they're the easy pickings. So, what is step one of Satan's plan against the church? Attack God's people early in their calling. Distract them. Persecute them. *Crush* them. That's the plan of Step 1. Attack God's people early in their calling. Distract, persecute, and crush them.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

We won't read The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares either. This one's clear as well, but it does have a few symbols that we need to look at.

Matthew 13:37 He answered and said to them: He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.

So who is the sower? Christ. God calls (as it says in John 6:44), but *He* draws them to Christ. He's the One, the agent by whom the sowing is done. Very clear. No problem with that.

Matthew 13:38 The field is the world.

No qualification on that—"The field is the world." He doesn't make any other comment and He's very consistent with this.

Now we get to "*seed*" again. Jesus calls them "the *good* seed," and He says in verse 38 that the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. But isn't this a contradiction of what He said in the first parable—that the seed was the word of God, or the knowledge of God? *No*. That's because the word "*seed*" has been modified in both of these occasions. Think about it. What is a seed? You've got an apple tree, and an apple tree produces apples, and in the middle of an apple is a bunch of little seeds.

What does the seed do? Well, the seed is the means by which an apple tree reproduces itself. It is the means by which the tree expands its domain, let's say. I'm going back and forth between *kingdom* and an *apple tree* to help you to understand the analogy here. Now, in the parables Jesus gives them their narrow meanings. He says, "the seed is the word" AND He says, "the seed is the sons of the kingdom." This is not a contradiction. The overall meaning is the same. The seed is the product of the plant, and the seed is the means by which the plant is reproduced. Now with this meaning, the meaning of seed fits both the *word of God*, and it also fits *the sons of God*, because both the *word* and the *sons* are means by which the kingdom grows, expands, and reproduces.

So in this particular occasion, the good seed is the members of God's church, and the members of God's church—you and me—are the means by which the kingdom is going to grow throughout this whole earth. We're just the kernel, the start, the little "itty bit" that God starts with.

Now the enemy, He says very plainly here in verse 39, is the Devil. He's sneaking in again. He has to be there somewhere. So this parable has its negative aspects too.

Let's go to the tares. Look at verse 38 again. "The tares are the sons of the wicked one." Did you know that Satan has sons too? Are you familiar with John 8: 44? Jesus tells the people that are listening to Him, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, ..." and so on. So, he has sons. We didn't look at II Corinthians 11 before. We kind of went past it.

II Corinthians 11:13-15 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

He not only has sons, he's got servants and apostles and ministers. What does the parable say in Matthew 13? It says that Satan has secret agents. He's got spies, he's got moles, and he's got plants right in the church! We just saw them—ministers, apostles, servants; sons—right smack-dab amongst us, and they're so cleverly disguised (says this parable) that we can't tell the difference between them and true Christians. And you know what? They're so well disguised that *they* don't even know who *they* are!

They look converted, they talk converted, and they seem so pure and righteous many times. He just told us so, there in II Corinthians 11—they transform themselves into ministers of righteousness. They look so good, they say the right things, they serve, and they teach, just like the *good seed*. But, Oh, they *are* evil! They're sneaky.

These evil enemy agents, as good as they look, work to destroy the good seed after that initial period covered in The Parable of the Tares. If Satan doesn't get you right off, He's got his plants to try to dissuade you from the right way, while you're in church, in your own neighborhood, when you're feeling relaxed and amongst friends and brethren. Jesus tells His angels (His servants, or His messengers) in the parable here, just to leave them there until harvest time. And He says elsewhere that those agents help to prove who the true ones are. So if you can stand up to the secret agents, you're doing a pretty good job.

This one ends with happy notes too. It says in verse 43, "The righteous [the ones that get through these enemy agents] will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

So Step 2 of Satan's plan to destroy the church is: Send secret agents to infiltrate the church. Remember, number 1 was to attack God's people early. number 2 is to send secret agents to infiltrate the church.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32 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, 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.

Now you probably know what the common interpretation of the mustard seed parable is.

It goes like this, just in case you aren't aware: The mustard seed represents the Kingdom of God, which begins tiny, and then, over a process of time, expands or grows into a worldwide system and becomes the home for many nations or many people and they dwell there in peace and safety and harmony.

Well, this looks good and true on the surface, but after analyzing the symbols, I think you're going to see that this is wrong. It doesn't hold water. Now verse 31 is very clear. As far as I studied, everyone agrees that the man—the sower—is Jesus Christ. We saw that in The Parable of the Tares. That's very true.

The field again is the world. That's very true too. Didn't He pull you out of the world? He pulled me out of the world.

But, the "mustard seed" is a little bit more controversial. Remember what we just learned in The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. What is a seed? A seed is the means by which a plant grows or expands or reproduces itself. Now, answer this: *Can the kingdom of God grow, expand?*

It doesn't make a lot of sense to say that the Kingdom of God grows by means of the Kingdom of God. If the mustard seed is the Kingdom of God, how does it grow by itself? Do you understand what I'm getting at?

The mustard seed is not the Kingdom of God. It's another agent of the Kingdom of God, at work to make the Kingdom of God grow and expand. Notice it doesn't say, "*The Kingdom of God is a mustard seed*," it says, "it's like a mustard seed." It's an analogy. The correlation is not exact. The comparison between "the mustard seed" and the "Kingdom of God" is not so close as to be exact—if you know what I mean. The mustard seed is not the Kingdom of God.

What is the mustard plant? In the Greek, it's *sinapi*. It's just a common word for mustard. We have black mustard that grows all across America. I can't remember the Latin name, but that's its common name—black mustard—and it's used to make the mustard that you put on your hot dogs and hamburgers and things. That's what mustard is.

Now let's understand a little bit about the mustard *plant*. Normally the mustard plant grows to be about four to six feet tall. And it has spindly branches. But, it's not a mustard *tree*; it's a mustard *plant*. But understand that a mustard plant, if it's in a perfect spot with perfect nutrients, perfect light, perfect everything, has been found to grow up to about fifteen feet (5 meters) tall. That's pretty good. That's taller than most ceilings, by quite a bit. But now tell me something. If it grows to fifteen feet, does the mustard plant become a tree? *No*. The mustard plant is always a shrub.

Just because it is fifteen feet tall doesn't make it a tree, does it? Does it have a big trunk and large branches? I just told you that it has spindly branches, and most of the time it doesn't

grow past six feet.

Of course we know about the mustard *seed*. This is one thing that people always pull out of this parable of the mustard seed—that it is among the smallest of cultivated seeds. Well that's good, and it's smallness then is really our only clue as to what this parable is teaching us at this point. The mustard seed represents something small that does its part in expanding God's Kingdom. What could it be? What's so small that helps to expand God's kingdom?

Matthew 7:13-14 Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

I tell you, Jesus explains His own symbols.

Matthew 20:16 So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

Are you starting to get some clues here? In Luke 10:2, He's sending the seventy out.

Luke 10:2 Then He said to them, The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.

Luke 12:31-32 But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Just before the day of Pentecost in 31 AD.

Acts 1:15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty).

Whoop-dee-do! Not too many for three and one-half year's work—*little flock*.

Romans 9:27 Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, The remnant will be saved.

Consider the little "itty bit" that Ezekiel stuck in his pocket, and he took some of them out and burned them in the fire too.

Romans 9:29 And as Isaiah said before: "Unless the LORD of Sabaoth

had left us a *seed* [a little itty bit, like a mustard seed], we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah."

Utterly destroyed!

Romans 11:2-5 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew, Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, [Paul says] at this present time there is a *remnant* according to the election of grace.

I think that's enough. We could have also gone to I Corinthians 1:26-29 where it says that God called the weak of the world and the base of the world to put to shame the mighty and the noble and all those. What, then, is the mustard seed? Simple. His church. The few, the small, the weak, and the base. Hopefully we're not the proud or the Marines. He's talking about those who voluntarily submitted to God's dominion, and they are *absolutely* few indeed at this point in time—compared with fifty billion people who have lived on this earth.

Now for the second verse in this parable—back to Matthew 13, with the understanding of who the mustard seed is. This is where the traditional interpretation goes off track. Jesus' explanation that the mustard seed is very small (you'll notice that's the first clause here)—"*which indeed is the least of all the seeds,*" should, at best, be put into parentheses because I think it makes everything easier to interpret. It describes the size and the strength of the church. You might want to read Deuteronomy 7:7.

I could have gone to this one too, where God tells Israel, "*Look guys, I didn't choose you because you were the greatest of people, because you were the least of all people. I called you because I loved you, He says, and because I had sworn to the fathers that I would do this.*" Jesus is, in a way, paraphrasing what He said there in Deuteronomy 7:7. Now the "*it*" in the next clause, "*but when it is grown,*"—refers back to the mustard seed that the sower sowed in the field. It's not talking about all mustard seed, it's talking about the *particular* mustard seed that the sower sowed.

When it reaches maturity, it is greater than the herbs, and becomes a tree. What's going on here? How did a mustard *plant* become a *tree*? That's the point! Jesus, the Creator, knew His botany! He knew because *He* had put it there. A mustard plant stays a mustard plant throughout its entire life! It can never become a tree. *That's the point!* Something went wrong!

The mustard plant did something unnatural. The mustard plant went beyond its God-designed limit. Get that! That's important. The mustard seed—the church—went beyond its God-designed limit. You notice the word "*but*" in there, right after the parenthetical statement—"(which indeed

is the least of all the seeds)"—"But," Jesus says, "it's grown into a tree." The "*but*" means something is wrong here. It's a contrasting statement.

Luke 13: 19 has the same parable and he says that it grew and became a *large* tree. Fifteen feet does not a large tree make. You've got trees around the world that grow a hundred feet tall! Look at those Redwoods out there in California. *That* is a large tree! A mustard plant, at fifteen feet, will never be a large tree, even if it was a tree. Those people must have been scratching their heads saying, "*This guy's crazy. He knows a mustard plant isn't a tree.*"

The point is something's gone wrong. God designed His plant—the vine, the church (whatever you want to call it) to grow into an average sized shrub, to be the salt of the earth, the spice of the earth. But something happened to make it burst through the limit that He set on it.

That word "became" means *transformed* into, or *changed* into, or *turned* into. It means, "*Abracadabra, you're no longer a mustard plant—you're a mustard tree!*" It's like a rabbit becoming a lion. It doesn't happen naturally. I think I've worn this one into the ground. You know what I'm saying. Something went wrong. It not only changed species, it changed families. It went from shrub, which is one family, to tree, which is another family.

Okay, how do I know this is correct? Because the next clause tells me that I'm right. Guess who shows up? The birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Who did we say the birds of the air were? The demons. In this unnatural, gross tree, the demons are at home!

Do you know what it says about that word "*nest*"? It means they come and pitch a tent. The demons are welcome in *this* church. That's bad. This is a negative parable through and through. What has gone wrong? Read Daniel 4: 19-27. This is Nebuchadnezzar's tree, and the birds come and dwell in its branches, and the beasts of the earth (also Deuteronomy 28: 26). It's a curse on the earth, and what does God have to do to Nebuchadnezzar? Humble him. "*Chop the tree down!*" Scary, isn't it—because *this tree* is God's church, but it has ceased to be God's church because it has grown outside its God-designed natural bound.

It has embraced Babylon. It has taken on the false system with its false doctrine. This is scary. This not only shows the rise of the great false church, but it shows the tendency of the church, at all times, to become large, great, and worldly. And God says, "*You'd better not. If you do, it is no longer Mine. I will cut it down.*" It's warning enough for me. Don't grow big. Don't try to do it all. Step 3 of Satan's plan: Influence the church to become large, strong, and worldly.

I should have gone into the Parable of the Leaven, but I will leave that to my next sermon. I hope that I've given you a lot to think about. Maybe you can study into The Parable of the Leaven, using some of the principles that I've taught you today, and figure out what the leaven is and what that parable means.