

Mustard Seed Ministry

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There are five references to 'mustard-seeds' in the Bible, in two contexts. One referring to the Kingdom of God, and the other to our faith:

Kingdom of God

Matthew 13:31-32 MKJV *He put out another parable to them, saying, The kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; (32) which indeed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.*

Mark 4:30-32 ESV *And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? (31) It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, (32) yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*

Luke 13:18-19 ESV *He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? (19) It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."*

Faith

Matthew 17:20 MKJV *And Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you.*

Luke 17:6 ESV *And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

Yellow mustard seed is extremely small and fine, almost like flour. It is sold online at "100 mesh and up". Which means the largest particle is 149 microns in diameter which is approximately 0.006 inches. This is around twice the thickness of a human hair. Black mustard seed is larger, about the size of the head of a pin. The resulting shrub can grow 12 to 15 feet high (4-5 meters).

In ancient Jewish thought the mustard seed was the smallest thing that had any real existence. It was, in some ways, their idea of the 'atom' or basic particle size. The mustard seed was also seen as a symbol of the humble ego. The thing that did not boast of itself.

The Roman historian Pliny describes the ancient mustard plant: *With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand, when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once. (Pliny, "Natural History" 19.170-171)*

Later (around 200 AD) the Mishnah forbade the planting of mustard seeds in domestic gardens because the tiny seeds would be spread everywhere by the wind (including the neighbor's yard) and the seeds would 'germinate at once' (in 3-10 days in cold moist soil) in turn producing a new mustard plant which would repeat the process until it was totally out of control like a noxious weed.

The Kingdom metaphors are obvious: small beginnings, becomes large, spreads everywhere, out of control, impossible to eradicate, blown by the wind of the Spirit, immediate propagation, 3 days in the earth (grave) before new life, fiery, pungent, cleansing, healing.

A mustard-seed ministry starts small and is full of faith and of the life of God so that it rapidly propagates in bible studies, small cell groups, house churches and is 'blown by the wind of the Spirit' to start in new places and spread new life there as well. Soon these small bible studies become churches on their own so that people can come and be at home there and they can be places of spiritual rest.

Mustard-seed ministry is fiery and holy and pungent and healing. It brings the gifts and the power of the Spirit to bear. It moves mountains and uproots the established order of evil and oppression and casts it into the sea.

Mustard-seed ministry is always counter-cultural to some extent. It is the outbreak of the Kingdom of God amongst the kingdoms of this world. It upsets the principalities and powers of wickedness that seek to control the governments, religions, media and business operations of this world.

The mustard-seed is small and humble and planted in the earth, the very opposite of the boastful self-exalting sin of the Devil who sought to set his throne 'above the most High' (Isaiah 14:13,14). Yet this radical humility brings great vitality and fruitfulness and in the end the mustard-seed becomes a substantial sized tree. The seed does not remain small forever. The idea is to get as many saved as possible. So God scatters many mustard-seeds, blown by the wind, and makes each into a large tree.

The tree with the 'birds of the air' nesting in it is used as an image of human empires in Ezekiel 31:3-6 (where it refers to Assyria) and Daniel 4:12 (where it refers to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon). In both cases the birds of the air are the

people of the many lands that are conquered. In Ezekiel 17:23 the twig that becomes a great tree is the Messiah and the great tree is the Kingdom of God.

Ezekiel 17:22-24 ESV *Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. (23) On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. (24) And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."*

My interpretation of this is that Ezekiel 17 refers to the Kingdom of God as a whole. This shall be massive and will defeat great empires such as Assyria and Babylon. In the end the Kingdom of God will be the 'stone cut without hands' that shatters the kingdoms of this world (Daniel 2). Within the Kingdom of God as a whole are many different mustard-seed ministries which are planted by the Holy Spirit. These can be in all stages of growth from just germinating bible studies to well established churches.

The common thing about all these mustard-seed ministries is that they have 'mustard-seed faith'. They do not move in the flesh. Instead they rely on the word of God and prayer. They see themselves firstly as spiritual organizations with a spiritual inner dynamic. They may need to consult architects, engineers, accountants and lawyers but they are not controlled by them in the same way as a human corporation would be.

Their leader is God, first and foremost and while there is leadership, and it is respected and financially supported, they do not look to any man or woman as a mediator between them and God. Their eyes are on Christ.

The mustard-seed analogy is very potent as we approach the End Times. We need to quickly propagate the gospel if the task is to be achieved. We cannot (metaphorically) wait for tiny acorns to turn into mighty oaks which then take 20 to 70 years to produce the first acorns of their own. That is the institutional model and it won't evangelize the world in time. We need to spread the gospel like a holy weed that plants itself everywhere and which cannot be eradicated. This will come about as we develop explosive faith, spiritual sensitivity to God's timing and methods and boldness in proclamation.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE LEAVEN

Matthew 13:33 ESV *He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*

There is a Greek word play here. Leaven (yeast) = *zeo*, whereas the word for God's life is *zoe*. The same letters in a different order, an anagram. So the leaven is the all-pervading eternal life of God working through the soul of the believer and then throughout society as a whole.

The three loaves are possibly, on an individual level the body, soul and spirit - and on the societal level the three divisions of mankind in the ancient world (sons of Shem, Ham and Japheth).

The woman in this parable, is the Church, the bride of Christ, which does the hard work both of getting the gospel into the hearts of men and women and of spreading the gospel throughout the nations of the world.

Since leaven was a well-known symbol of spiritual contamination and is associated with everything from immorality to hypocrisy, malice and evil (Deuteronomy 16:4, Matthew 16:6,11,12; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Galatians 5:9) it then seems a very unusual choice for a symbol of the Kingdom of God! Leaven symbolized the pernicious, corrupting nature of sin that could start small and then defile a whole church or society.

Jesus however used it in the opposite sense – of how a small amount of good could influence and take over a whole society!! This actually happened with the Roman Empire.

One of the things we need to understand about the Kingdom of God is that it cannot be defiled. It has too much life and power for that! When Jesus touched a dead person He was not defiled – rather the dead person was raised to life! When a woman with an issue of blood touched Jesus, Jesus was not defiled, rather the woman was made whole. When Jesus reached out to a leper, He was not made unclean, instead the leper was made clean and new. And when Jesus was offered as a sin offering on the cross and took all the sins, all the pain, all the sickness and all the uncleanness of the world on Himself -He still rose from the dead!

Thus when faithful Spirit-filled Christians are mixed into society, it is not the Christian that will be defiled – but rather society that will be influenced and transformed (providing that we stand firm in our faith and do not compromise). There is no food, drink or circumstance that 'automatically' taints us if we are seeking to be holy. We can reach out to lepers and to broken hurting people without fear of spiritual defilement.

Paul put the possibility of our victory over evil this way: **Romans 12:21 ESV** *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The abiding Spirit-filled Christian does not need to fear the world. Instead the world and its demons, powers and principalities should fear the powerful life of God that dwells in the heart of the believer!

Now the leaven has to be kneaded into the dough. So often we compartmentalize our faith and keep the leaven over in one part of our life, or the church over in one part of society unable to influence the rest. Every part of your life must be surrendered to God and filled with the transformational life of God.

Leaven is organic, exponential, fast-growing and powerful. My brother Peter and I found out just how powerful yeast is when as curious young boys we decided to have a go at making 'fermented orange juice wine'. We knew you needed orange juice and yeast and a bottle that could take the pressure. So we got an old champagne bottle from our parents,, two packets of baker's yeast and the orange juice and mixed it all together, wiring down the cork with an enormous amount of fencing wire.

A few hours later we went to check on it and found orange juice spurting out from under the cork and the wire stretched to breaking point. It was about to explode! Peter got some pliers and undid the wire. The cork flew out, juice sprayed everywhere, and the eaves of our house were covered with a revolting black mold that was impossible to remove. The yeast had quietly but powerfully created an enormous pressure inside.

This is the powerful hidden force of life. The force that disrupts the old order and even breaks through rocks and concrete. The leaven is 'hidden' in the flour. It is invisible at first but its effects soon take over, changing everything. A believer with the life of God within them will undergo an explosive transformation. Even though the gospel is hidden in the heart it will soon do its work and transform the whole person breaking up even the toughest areas of the human personality.

So we see the twin parables (mustard-seed and leaven) are about things regarded as pests because they were so rapidly propagating, powerful and all-invasive. The life of God is a powerful, explosive, world-invading force.

We have to have confidence in the Kingdom. We do not need to seal the leaven in a glass jar to protect it. Rather we are to mix it in. We are to get out there and encounter the powers and principalities being totally confident that we are the more powerful force.

The faith-filled believer knows that what he or she has can topple the walls of Jericho. There is a sense that our life is real and the world is just a shadow that is passing away. We are the agents of change, the quiet revolutionaries, the leaven and the mustard seed. The small, small, lively things that disrupt everything else.

LOAVES AND FISHES: CONSECRATION AND MULTIPLICATION

Luke 9:11-17 MKJV *But knowing this, the crowds followed Him. And He received them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God, and He healed those who had need of healing. (12) But the day began to wear away, and coming up the Twelve said to Him, Send the crowd away so that they may go into the villages and farms all around, and lodge, and get food. For we are here in a deserted place. (13) But He said to them, You give them something to eat. And they said, We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless we go and buy food for all these people. (14) (For they were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, Make them recline by fifties in a company. (15) And they did so, and made them all recline. (16) And He took the five loaves and the two fish. And looking up to Heaven, He blessed them and broke, and He gave to the disciples to set before the crowd. (17) And they ate and were all filled. And there was taken up twelve hand baskets full of fragments of that left over to them.*

This story is repeated in all four gospels: Mark 6:35-44, Matthew 14:15-21, Luke 9:11-17 and John 6:5-15, John's version adds the details of the small boy and the dialogue with Philip. It was a turning point in Jesus' popularity, after it some even wanted to make Him King by force (John 6:15).

There is an enormous need for Christ in the world, and the hour is late and evening is falling and the multitudes are hungry for the bread of life and Christ says to us 'go and feed them'. We cannot demur because we are only one, or few, or underfunded. For a small mustard-seed ministry, when blessed and consecrated, can 'feed the multitude' with the Word of God.

Jesus was not put off by the disciples questioning or by the lack of material resources. He had a lesson to teach them and a miracle to perform. His statement to the disciples 'you give them something to eat' was a deliberate test because Jesus knew all along what He would do (John 6:6). Jesus wanted them to appreciate the weight of the task, and to sense that it was impossible, before He made it possible.

The key to mustard-seed faith is believing that the impossible can be made possible. It is knowing that 'nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:37, Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27) and all things are possible to Him who believes (Matthew 17:20, Mark 9:23).

The resurrection is the greatest New Testament example of the impossible being made possible. In the Old Testament the conception of Isaac was an illustration of Abrahamic faith bringing the 'impossible' into reality. Other examples in the Bible include the parting of the Red Sea, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the defeat of Goliath, the stilling of the storm on Lake Galilee and the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus constantly worked to increase the faith of His disciples and His sharpest rebuke was 'o ye of little faith' (Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8). Jesus' main

method of teaching faith was via experience. Jesus would ask the disciples to do the impossible or put them into situations that were frightening, dangerous or increasingly difficult – such as encountering demon-possessed people who were so wild they could break chains. As they saw God's miraculous power demonstrated they grew in faith and eventually learned to walk in faith themselves.

In the miracle of the loaves and the fishes Jesus is asking the disciples to stick their necks out socially. The disciples get everyone into fifties, expecting to be fed, before there is any sign of food appearing. It would have been like having a family of six sit down for dinner, with plates and cutlery all out on the table, when all the food you have is one small potato chip. It would have felt incredibly risky, ridiculous and potentially embarrassing. It would have produced a situation of 'trust in the midst of tension'.

Trust in the midst of tension is an operational definition of how God grows us 'from faith to faith'. Mustard-seed ministries operate under constant tension over issues such as finances, security, spiritual attacks, workload, the need for volunteers etc. We have to trust God as we face problems that we are simply too small to solve on our own. The blessing of Jesus is the solution to our overwhelming sense of embarrassment and inadequacy when we are faced with the needs and demands of God's work.

It was as Jesus blessed and broke the bread that the miracle occurred. The blessing of Jesus on the loaves and fishes mirrors God's original blessing on Creation:

Genesis 1:22 ESV *And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."*

Notice the commands – “*be fruitful and multiply and fill...*” Blessing produces fruitfulness, multiplication and the potential to fill the designated area of operation (in this case the earth). With the loaves and fishes the area of operation was a crowd of 5000 people *And they ate and were all filled*. A blessed ministry – such as a church will 'fill' the people with the bread of life in the area of operation that God has assigned to it. We are not to be content with occupying a small patch of land when God has called us to fill a city or a region with the gospel!

Acts 5:28 MKJV (The High Priest) *saying, Did we not strictly command you that you not teach in this name? And behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and intend to bring this man's blood on us.*

The out-poured revival blessing of Pentecost resulted in the first assigned territory (Jerusalem) being filled with the gospel and thousands coming to faith. Twelve consecrated men of God were enough to do the job.

So what does the story of the loaves and fishes teach us are the steps and stages to such blessing, to such multiplication and to the filling of our assigned territory?

1. Recognize the vast need

2. Recognize your own inadequacy to meet the need
3. Seek the solution from Jesus Christ
4. Do what He tells you even if it seems crazy, believe for the impossible to occur
5. Be part of the solution – consecrate yourself to distributing the loaves and fishes
6. Receive the blessing
7. Move outward to the people, confident in the blessing
8. See the miracle
9. Make sure everyone is filled
10. Measure the miracle (5000 men) and pick up the pieces (the 12 baskets)

Small ministries can have big impacts if they see the supernatural blessing of God on their 'loaves and fishes' - with all their heart.

JESUS AS THE MUSTARD SEED

John 1:14 MKJV *And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us. And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and of truth.*

Jesus is the mustard-seed, the energetic life-source from which the whole Kingdom of God grows and spreads and becomes great. The Son of God, the Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among us and the name given to Him was Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins.

As a baby in the manger Jesus was insignificant, but as the mustard-seed of God, He was powerful, the King of Kings in swaddling clothes. He grew and became a man and dwelt unrecognized by the world until after His baptism. Then the mustard-seed blossomed and became a great tree and filled the whole earth.

Now all 'mustard-seed ministry' must be founded upon Christ. He must be the center of all that we do and say and teach and become. True ministry flows from who we are becoming in God. As we grow more and more into the image of Jesus Christ and go from glory to glory through the work of the Spirit, so the quality of our ministry increases in the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18 MKJV *(18) But we all, with our face having been unveiled, having beheld the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are being changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Lord Spirit.*

All our leadership, teaching, energy, and dignity flows out of being in the image of Jesus Christ. All our spiritual giftedness proceeds from the holy mustard-seed within us. All our righteousness, just-mindedness, and depth of character flows from Christ. We cannot construct such things on our own, they are imparted to us by

God. They are free gifts from Heaven given from the life of God dwelling in our the midst of our being.

Ministry has to proceed from the Spirit, it cannot be done in the flesh because the flesh has no knowledge of Christ or of holiness. It wants quantity when God wants quality. Look at the epistles! The apostolic concern is always with the quality and nature of the church and never even once with its numerical growth, its budget or its facilities.

In Acts, Luke reports numbers as historical facts but numbers are never central to what God demands of His ministers. Paul never writes to Timothy saying "you must witness to at least four people a day and bring at least two people to Christ a week". Paul's concern is that Timothy stir up his gifts, teach the truth, walk in righteousness, flee youthful lusts and endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. These are all quality issues not quantity issues.

Whether Paul is writing to the Ephesians about being one in Christ Jesus or Peter is writing to the church elders telling them to shepherd the flock without compulsion - it is quality issues that count.

The issue is whether we are showing forth the life of Christ that has been planted within us, the 'seed' of the Word implanted in us.

1 Peter 1:22-25 ISV *Now that you have obeyed the truth and have purified your souls to love your brothers sincerely, you must love one another intensely and with a pure heart. (23) For you have been born again, not by a seed that perishes but by one that cannot perish-by the living and everlasting word of God. (24) For "All human life is like grass, and all its glory is like a flower in the grass. The grass dries up and the flower drops off, (25) but the word of the Lord lasts forever." Now this word is the good news that was announced to you.*

1 John 3:9 ISV *No one who has been born from God practices sin, because God's seed abides in him. Indeed, he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born from God.*

The Kingdom of God manifests itself as righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). these are inward qualities produced by the life of God dwelling in us; they are the fruit from the seed, and the seed is Christ:

Galatians 3:16 MKJV *And to Abraham and to his Seed the promises were spoken. It does not say, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, "And to your Seed," which is Christ.*

(the same Greek word family 'sperma' is used for mustard-seeds and for the Seed being Christ).

Christ is the incarnate Word, the Word is also the seed the sower sows, the Word is what saves us and that which plants the seed of God into us when we are born-again, and that divine seed within us, the holy mustard-seed, is Christ and from this small but eternal beginning we grow into maturity in all spiritual things.

It is not our human abilities that make a great ministry, rather it is our conformity to the image of God, our acceptance to being ruled by the life of Christ that is planted within our souls. When we get to Heaven our positions, possessions, looks and finances will be of no account. What will count, and what will be admired there is our likeness to our Lord.

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