

Copyright © Two Journeys Ministry

Andrew M. Davis Sermon

Notes [www.twojourneys.org](http://www.twojourneys.org)

Please use in accordance with the copyright policy found at [twojourneys.org](http://twojourneys.org)

## **The Mustard Seed: From Tiny Beginnings to an Immeasurable Empire**

**Mark 4:30-34**

Imagine if one day, almost two thousand years ago, the most powerful man on earth, the Roman Emperor Tiberius, was having dinner with some of his family. Suddenly, a messenger breathlessly rushed in and begged for his immediate attention... the room becomes eerily silent; the guests apprehensively put down their goblets to listen. Tiberius Caesar Augustus beckons the man forward. He bows and says, "News, O mighty Caesar! A Jewish carpenter was crucified in Judea. Furthermore, a small group of one hundred twenty Jews who followed him are praying in a small room in Jerusalem."

Imagine the mighty emperor staring blankly at him. His Roman Empire was the largest the world had ever seen... almost 2 million square miles and as much as one quarter of the world's population... perhaps as many as 60 million people. He commanded the mightiest and most dominant military the world had ever seen... over 300,000 Roman legions that kept a forced peace and Roman rule on all those conquered territories. At Tiberius's slightest word, the world trembled. His policies shaped the lives of all the people who lived under his crushing domination.

Why would he possibly care about something so insignificant as the death of a single Jewish man in one of his smaller provinces 1450 miles from Rome? Why would he have any interest in some tiny band of 120 Jewish fanatics who were praying and

waiting in some shabby second-story room in some dusty city in the far east?

Yet from that tiny beginning, from a small black granule called a mustard seed, has spread a mighty kingdom that will outlast every human empire. From a microscopic beginning has come vast, immeasurable glory. That's what today's parable is about.

Jesus' death was the mustard seed... as were the sacrifices of all his courageous servants to advance the gospel step by step from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the Gentile worlds north, south, east, and west from Jerusalem. Mustard seed after mustard seed dying and causing growth. All of that mysteriously building a spiritual kingdom of genuinely converted souls.

Within three short centuries, Christianity would explode from the upper room in Jerusalem to conquer spiritually the mighty Roman Empire. So vast and powerful and rapid was that spread that a Roman Emperor, Constantine, declared himself to be a worshiper of that Galilean carpenter, Jesus.

But King Jesus had much bigger designs than the confines of the Roman Empire and the limits of a few centuries. The Kingdom of God has grown in every generation, vast, hidden, powerful, eternal life and growth. So vast that it is almost inconceivable how big his kingdom really is.

Today's parable predicted that staggering stunning glorious earth-shaking growth. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Simply put, the lesson of this parable is this: the kingdom of God starts small and grows large. So, as Zechariah 4:10 teaches, "Do not despise the day of small things."

#### I. The Context: Mark 4's Series of Parables

Mark 1-3: overwhelming crowds, crushing, pressing in... attracted by Jesus' stunning power over disease, demons and death

BUT very few were genuinely converted; very few were there for the true food of the Word, with hearts on fire for Christ, entering the Kingdom of God by faith

To make matters worse, the official Jewish position of him was that he was doing these amazing signs by the power of Satan... the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The authorities hated Jesus. He was certainly not winning them as friends or influencing them as people.

As an act of judgment, Jesus teaches the crowds in parables that he never explains, and withdraws in secret with his tiny band of followers; the parables are not the judgment – the lack of explanation was the judgment.

Along with this was the bewildering failure of Jesus' kingdom to take genuine root in very many hearts. Jesus' disciples had every reason to expect a stunningly successful kingdom of the Messiah

Isaiah 9 spoke of a kingdom that would last forever:

***Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.***

Isaiah 45 spoke of a worldwide dominion that would extend to the ends of the earth:

***Isaiah 49:6 [God] says [to the Christ]: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."***

And Isaiah 60 also speaks in glowing terms of the worldwide dominion of the Messiah:

***Isaiah 60:3-5 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup> "Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble***

*and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. <sup>5</sup> Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.*

And Solomon's majestic Psalm 72 exults in the eternal glorious reign of the Messiah:

*Psalm 72:5-11 He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. <sup>6</sup> He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. <sup>7</sup> In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. <sup>8</sup> He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. <sup>9</sup> The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. <sup>10</sup> The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. <sup>11</sup> All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.*

BUT instead of this glorious kingdom, most of the Jews at that time, led by their unbelieving, jealous, and power-hungry leaders, were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus responds by telling parables with no explanation... leading many of his enemies to say he was demon-possessed or out of his mind since the stories made no sense.

Privately, his disciples were wondering if this was really it:

*Luke 13:23 Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"*

Even John the Baptist!!

*Matthew 11:2-3 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples <sup>3</sup> to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"*

Jesus was in some house, surrounded by a small, weak band of common people who loved his teachings... these were the best of the vast crowd that mobbed him day after day for healings.

This hardly seemed like the beginning of a vast, glorious Davidic Kingdom in which the Gentiles would come and bow down before him.

Mark 4 is Jesus' developed manifesto for his plan of worldwide gospel advance; and it includes explanation for people's rejection of the gospel, as well as the final success of it

The Parable of the Seed and the Soils: the most important parable... it is the gateway parable; if you understand this one parable, you can understand them all. The Kingdom of God is like seed that is spread on different soils. Three of the soils produce no harvest: the path, the rocky soil, and the thorny soil. Three of the soils produce a stunning harvest – some 30, some 60, some even 100 times what was sown. SO do not despise the day of small things; instead, be very careful what kind of soil your own soul is as you hear the Word of the Gospel.

Then Jesus says the explanations are for the insiders, not for the outsiders... at the present time. But the day will come when the light of the Word of God will shine brightly for all to see. Jesus is the light of the world and God did not bring that light into the world to hide it under a bowl or a bed!!

***Mark 4:22-23 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. <sup>23</sup> If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.***

In other words, MY TEACHINGS which are presently hidden, secretly explained behind closed doors is intended to be disclosed, revealed, to the ends of the earth!

The real issue is HOW YOU HEAR the Word of God!

***Mark 4:24-25 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you-- and even more. <sup>25</sup> Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."***

If you receive the Word of God, the gospel, and grow in it, you will produce more and more fruit. The measure you use on earth is

the measure of reward you will get in heaven... the size of your personal harvest in the gospel will correspond to the measure you give to the Word. But for those who hear and do nothing with the Word, everything they once had will be taken from them.

Last week, we saw this parable:

***Mark 4:26-29 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain-- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."***

The basic idea is this: People spread the word of the gospel; God alone can make it grow... our power contributes nothing, our diligence, our knowledge. The true spiritual growth of the kingdom is something only God understands and only God can make happen.

Now in today's parable, Jesus is saying, "No matter how apparently small the beginnings of the Kingdom of God, the end will be immense and spectacular."

## II. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

***Mark 4:30-32 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."***

### A. Again: What is a "Parable?"

1. Greek means "to lay alongside"... it is a comparison
2. Using something from everyday life to teach us about the nature of his spiritual kingdom

3. He uses a preponderance of agricultural parables, and this is no different
4. Parables are best when we focus on one main central lesson and don't press the details too much

## B. The Main Lesson

The main lesson is: DON'T WORRY about the apparent failure of the gospel... the Kingdom of God has a small beginning but an immeasurably glorious... and BIG end!

## C. The Problem with the Mustard Seed

1. R.C. Sproul spoke of his involvement with the Council for Biblical Inerrancy; he said a former evangelical scholar had abandoned his commitment to biblical inerrancy specifically on this issue: Jesus was WRONG about the mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds; there are MANY seeds that are smaller than the mustard seed; I myself went to our spice cabinet a few years ago and saw a container of mustard seeds and they were pretty big for seeds—big and round; so I get it
2. HOWEVER Sproul was astounded that anyone could throw over their whole theology on this one detail!
  - a. He said we do not think that Jesus' words need to be extended to a universal scientific statement—it's more like hyperbole; like in Mark 1:45 "People came to him FROM EVERYWHERE"... we all know that is not to be taken literally! No one went from North America, or Antarctica or the moon
  - b. Secondly, we don't know for sure which species of mustard Jesus was referring to; the mustard seeds in our kitchen cabinet are probably a different genetic category; I saw a video on Youtube about the type of mustard seed Jesus was probably referring to, and a cluster of a hundred seeds was in this man's hand, and the seeds looked like tiny black powder... he pulled a seed off to the side and it stuck to his index finger; the camera zoomed in and it looked smaller than the tip of a pin—not the head of a pin, the sharp end! It was that tiny!

- c. Thirdly, in Jewish rabbinic speech and the common language of everyday Jews of Jesus' day, mustard seeds were proverbial for being superlatively small—there's small, there's smaller, then there's smallest. Mustard seeds are in that third category

#### D. The Growth of the Seed

1. Jesus says it grows and becomes a small tree, the largest of all garden plants
2. No, it does not grow as large as a cedar of Lebanon! But in terms of herbs that a family would plant in their garden, it is the most dominant of all those plants
3. Research shows that these mustard plants would grow as tall as a man... six feet high or more
4. Jesus says they become a tree with SUCH BIG BRANCHES that the birds of the air can “settle down” or “nest” or “perch” in its shade
5. So either they can build their nests on these big branches, or the branches become so thick and leafy that the birds can live under the shade

Translated: the Kingdom of God is going to grow from a tiny beginning to something vast and broad and dramatic and amazing

#### E. Connected to Nebuchadnezzar

1. This reminds me of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 4
2. The Babylonian tyrant had a dream in which he saw a mighty tree

***Daniel 4:10-12 I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. <sup>11</sup> The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. <sup>12</sup> Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.***

Daniel interpreted the dream:



***Daniel 4:20-22 The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, <sup>21</sup> with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air-- <sup>22</sup> you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.***

Now in the dream, the tree is condemned by God to be chopped down, and its branches all stripped off... all the fruit stripped off, the birds and beasts living under its shade scattered

BUT the tree of the Kingdom of God will never be destroyed... that is the lesson of the Book of Daniel:

***Daniel 2:44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people.***

Or as Nebuchadnezzar will say himself as he wrote that chapter, Daniel 4:

***Daniel 4:34 His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.***

So... the Kingdom of God will be a mighty tree with a vast root system and innumerable leafy fruitful branches that will last for all eternity! That represents PEOPLE from all over the world finding rest and flourishing in Christ's lavish, eternal kingdom

### III. Jesus is the First and Greatest Seed

#### A. With Both the Lamp and the Mustard Seed: Jesus is First, and We Follow His Pattern

##### 1. Jesus is the Lamp that Cannot Be Hidden: Mark 4:21

***Mark 4:21 He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?"***

***John 8:12*** When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

***Isaiah 9:2*** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

BUT THEN, Jesus said this to US

2. We are the light of the world: Matthew 5

***Matthew 5:14-16*** "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

So, Jesus is the pattern; we follow his pattern to achieve the growth of the kingdom

B. Jesus the First Seed; We Follow His Pattern

1. Jesus linked the concept of a seed falling into the ground with his own death

***John 12:24-26*** I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. <sup>25</sup> The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

2. This is the lasting pattern for the spread of the gospel... willingness to die to ourselves, by faith to give up ourselves to spread the gospel

IV. Our Acts of Faith are Countless Mustard Seeds

A. Later, Jesus Will Use the Mustard Seed Analogy to Speak of our Faith

***Matthew 17:20*** I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

## B. The Smallest Things We Do Can Have Eternal Impact

1. Church history is full of seemingly minor moments that end up having massive impact, even for all eternity
2. We can easily become discouraged and wonder “What difference does anything I do make at all??”
3. We can “despise the day of small things”... like Zechariah 4:10; the replacement temple the returning exiles had been able to build was very small and unimpressive compared to Solomon’s glorious temple that the Babylonians had destroyed
4. But God has the power to take the smallest act of obedience and make something great of it
5. The faith like a mustard seed which is able to move a mountain—behind all of that is the limitless power of omnipotence... the infinite power of Almighty God

## C. Examples of tiny acts of obedience

1. The daily work of a Christian mother singing “Jesus loves me this I know” to her child as she lays the baby down for the night, night after night; gradually, the words of that simple song start to take root in their growing minds; one day, the truth of the gospel comes alive in their souls; their lives in Christ develop to be a vast and complex as the mustard tree—many leafy branches, many eternal consequences; all because a mom faithfully sang and whispered gospel truth into her babies’ ears
2. Or take a man giving himself to sharing the gospel with a barista at a coffee shop; he comes faithfully week after week, the barista knows he is a Christian; they have several gospel conversations; nothing ever seems to come of it; but one day, he says something the unsaved man has never heard before... it is a simple comment, but it reminds him of something he heard from another man years ago and there’s no way this guy could have known to say that; he cannot shake that one comment... it keeps him up that night... one phrase, a unique comment... it lodges like a HOT COAL in his mind and shatters his resistance to Christ

3. Little moments of faithful service... writing an encouraging note on a bill at a restaurant and leaving a big tip... at precisely a time when the server is desperately hurting for cash
4. Following an inner prompting from the Spirit and calling a lost friend from college just to say hi, not knowing she has been battling depression and was sliding toward suicide; you never find out until years later that your phone call probably saved her life
5. Secret patterns of prayer for missionaries... feeling led, feeling prompted by the Spirit, stopping and praying for one of them not to be discouraged, not to give up... never knowing till heaven that that was the moment they needed it the most
6. Like the widow giving her two tiny copper coins which together made up a fraction of a penny, how many children have put in tiny amounts of money into the offering plate... and God saw and moved and used that giving to establish a pattern in their growing hearts that led to eternally fruitful ends
7. Mustard seeds of faith, mustard seeds of sacrificial service... growing into big things later... a word, a prayer, a gift, an act of kindness, a gesture, an encouraging note, a song sung... the universe is made up of atoms, the Kingdom of God is made up of mustard seeds of faith-works
8. It is a vast pattern that God is using every single day, in the pattern of Jesus' death on the cross... a willingness to die to yourself and to serve God and others... never knowing what effect your small acts of obedience will have in eternity

## V. The Glorious Consummation of Christ's Kingdom

### A. So, How Big Will Christ's Mustard Tree End Up??

1. Heaven alone can tell
2. Of course, there is this

***Revelation 7:9-10 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.***

***They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."***

3. In the language of Daniel 4 and Nebuchadnezzar's tree, these are the fruit and the animals and birds from the ends of the earth that come to live under its shade forever
4. These are souls, individual human beings, rescued from Satan's dark prison, who will spend eternity in Christ's heavenly Kingdom
5. The church is presently immeasurably bigger than you can possibly imagine

#### B. From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

1. The death of one man, Jesus Christ, changed all of human history
2. So also the tiny cluster of ordinary people, the Twelve Apostles and a number of others, gathered in that upper room on the Day of Pentecost, were also like a mustard seed
3. The Spirit was poured out on them, and they poured out into the streets to change the world
4. They moved out in Jerusalem, spread out boldly from there to Judea... then Philip and others brought the gospel to Samaria, then the Ethiopian eunuch took it south along the winding course of the Nile to his African nation... merchants and tradesmen and travelers in caravans brought the gospel along ancient trade routes; coastal traders poked along the inlets and cliffs and coastlines of the Mediterranean Sea; apostles took the gospel as far east as India and it seems as far west as Spain
5. The tiny mustard seed of 120 believers began to turn the world upsidedown for Christ
6. That amazing pattern has continued to this present day... to the distant coastlands and farthest islands—Moravians to the sugar plantations of the West Indies, William Carey to India, Adoniram Judson to Burma, Hudson Taylor to the inland regions of China, David Livingstone to the heart of the Dark Continent of Africa

7. Christianity claims hundreds of millions of converts from every nation on earth... the church of Jesus Christ is vastly bigger than you think it is
8. And not just the famous missionaries... unnamed evangelists have walked courageously across the street to welcome newcomers to the neighborhood with some kind hospitality and an invite to dinner... a little mustard seed of an evening turns into a family of changed lives for all eternity

## VI. Lessons

A. Come to Christ!

B. Do Not Despise the Day of Small Things

1. As we look at our city, Durham, NC, it's easy to be discouraged and think nothing we do can ever make a difference
2. But that is a lie from Satan!
3. The Kingdom of God is still like a mustard seed... it grew from a tiny beginning to a vast hidden tree of holy glory
4. What small works of obedience is his Spirit telling you to do
5. DO THEM! Plant your own mustard seeds this week and see what God will do to grow them

C. Look Forward to the Heavenly Revelation of the Hidden Magnitude of Christ's Kingdom