

Jesus' Parables in Chronological Order

Three Kingdom of Heaven Parables (#13-#15)

Parable #13 — Mark 4:26-29 — The Growing Seed

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

Parable #14 — Mark 4:30-32 — The Mustard Seed (Also appears in Matthew 13:31-32 and Luke 13:18-19)

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² 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.”

Parable #15 — Matthew 13:33 — The Yeast (Also appears in Luke 13:20-21)

³³ He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

³⁴ Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. ³⁵ So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

Three Kingdom of Heaven Parables (#13-#15) ~ Discussion Questions

Jesus had recently told the parable of the four types of soil, then the parable of the weeds among the good plants, and now he tells this parable, recorded only by Mark, about plants growing from seed.

1. Who does the man who plants the seed represent? The seed? The plant it grows into? The soil? Think before you answer.
2. Have you ever tried to grow a plant from seed? Does every seed sprout? Does every seed grow to maturity? What does it take for a plant to grow, and where do you get the things you need?
3. What was the growth process like for the seed in the parable? (4:27-28) Quick or gradual? Well understood or mysterious? What's the meaning of the parable?
4. Does the seed have anything to do with being "born again?" (1 Peter 1:22-25) How about with saving your soul? (James 1:21)
5. How does this parable help you better understand what the kingdom of God is like? How do you feel knowing the message of Christ has a mysterious power in itself?
6. Does this parable imply an obligation for believers to sow the seed, water it, and fertilize it in others, i.e., speak of your faith to others? (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)
7. What small or seemingly insignificant possession is worth a great deal to you? Why?
8. Jesus often referred to mustard seeds in what context? (Matt 17:20, Luke 17:6)
9. The parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32) must have been confusing to Jesus' listeners. Everything was wrong. The mustard seed is not all that tiny, while the yellow mustard plant is only 8" tall and the black mustard bush is typically about 5 feet tall, hardly a tree that could shelter birds. Explanation please?
10. How does yeast work?
11. Can you summarize these two parables in a simple way as to what they meant to his listeners then and what they mean to us today?
12. Jesus often spoke in parables. Are there examples, stories, or illustrations that you can use to help share your faith in Christ with your family or friends?

Three Kingdom of Heaven Parables (#13-#15) ~ Notes for Leader

1. Who does the man who plants the seed represent? The seed? The plant it grows into? The soil? Think before you answer.

The man represents the planter of the seed who might be Jesus or might, in fact, be a believer planting the seed in a non-believer. The seed represents the word of God (it does not represent a person, which may be a bit confusing, because the mature plant does, in fact, represent a believer). In this parable and the previous ones, people also seem to be initially represented by the soil (“All by itself the soil produces grain...” 4:28).

2. Have you ever tried to grow a plant from seed? Does every seed sprout? Does every seed grow to maturity? What does it take for a plant to grow, and where do you get the things you need?

3. What was the growth process like for the seed in the parable? (4:27-28) Quick or gradual? Well understood or mysterious? What’s the meaning of the parable?

Whereas the parable of the four types of soil stresses the importance of proper soil for growth of the seed and the success of the harvest, here the mysterious power of the seed itself is expressed (“the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.” –4:27). Once the seed is planted, the farmer perhaps waters and fertilizes it, but verse 28 says, “all by itself the soil produces grain...”

What’s the meaning of the parable? It seems to be that “once planted in a fertile mind, the gospel message contains its own power to grow and mature.”

4. Does the seed have anything to do with being “born again?” (1 Peter 1:22-25) How about with saving your soul? (James 1:21)

These two verses show how the seed, which is actually the word of God, can work within you.

1 Peter :22-25 - ²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord stands forever.” [Isaiah 40:6-8]

James 1:21 - Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

5. How does this parable help you better understand what the kingdom of God is

like? How do you feel knowing the message of Christ has a mysterious power in itself?

6. Does this parable imply an obligation for believers to sow the seed, water it, and fertilize it in others, i.e., speak of your faith to others? (1 Corinthians 3:6–9)

Answer: yes to all of the above. All Christians have an obligation to plant seeds, water them, and fertilize them by speaking of our faith or giving our testimony to others.

1 Corinthians 3:6–9 - ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

7. What small or seemingly insignificant possession is worth a great deal to you? Why?

8. Jesus often referred to mustard seeds in what context? (Matt 17:20, Luke 17:6)

In Matthew 17:20 Jesus says, "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." Again in Luke 17:6 we have: He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

9. The parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32) may have been confusing to some of Jesus' listeners, but clearer to others. Some things probably seemed "wrong." The mustard seed is not the smallest seed, but it is small compared to the seeds of other vegetables and herbs. The black mustard bush is typically about 5 feet tall, hardly a tree that could shelter birds, although in the wild it can grow to many times that size. What is Jesus saying here?

First, why a mustard seed? Probably because it is the most tightly packed seed of all. There is no place for air inside it. As a result it can withstand high pressures and high temperatures. Also, of the seeds sown in the East to produce edible products, the mustard seed was probably the smallest known by most people.

Why refer to the plant as a tree? A cultivated mustard seed does not grow into a tree "naturally," although in the wild a black mustard bush can grow to 10 or 15 feet tall. Even so, the large closely-spaced branches capable of offering nests for the birds of the air does not seem to be possible in a mustard bush however large it grew.

For it to grow into a tree it would have to be an unusual (some say supernatural) occurrence. Perhaps Jesus was painting a picture of a dramatic work

of God, so that his listeners would envision a huge mustard tree that was like nothing they had ever seen before.

But there are other aspects of this parable that are equally, if not more important. Think of these when you compare the growth of a mustard seed to the growth of the kingdom of God. The pod of seeds on a mustard plant holds thousands of seeds so one plant can give rise to hundreds more plants. In many ways a mustard plant is like a weed: it sprouts quickly but can also lay dormant for many years. Also it is not easily killed; a fire in a field will destroy everything but the mustard plants. It grows with attention from the farmer, but also grows on its own (with attention from God). As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

So as Jesus started telling this parable they might have been thinking, "huh, a mustard tree? Any bird sitting on it's branches would crush the little bush," but at the end of the parable those who understood it would be thinking, "Wow, the kingdom of God is amazing in the way it grows and it is really going to be beyond anything we have ever seen before."

10. How does yeast work?

11. Can you summarize these two parables in a simple way as to what they meant to his listeners then and what they mean to us today?

Jesus used these parables to show that although Christianity had very small beginnings in Jesus, a day was coming when it would grow into a worldwide community of believers (roughly two billion today) and its greatness and impact would be seen by the whole world. Today, if you feel alone in your stand for Christ, realize that God has faithful followers throughout the world and your faith, no matter how small, can join with that of others to accomplish great things.

12. Jesus often spoke in parables. Are there examples, stories, or illustrations that you can use to help share your faith in Christ with your family or friends?