

THE MYSTERY OF EXPANSION

"Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." Matthew 13:31-32.

In this brief parable Christ drew an illustration from something with which His hearers were familiar. He talked about a grain of mustard seed, which was the smallest seed husbandmen were accustomed to sowing. This accounts for the fact that "small as a grain of mustard seed" was a proverbial expression among the Jews for something exceedingly small.

Normally, the mustard seed did not grow into a very large plant. However, in this case Christ said that its growth was so remarkable that what should have been an herb developed into a tree. It was large enough to attract the birds, and they came and lodged or settled upon its branches.

This rapid and phenomenal growth of mustard from such a small beginning is a picture of the tremendous growth of Christianity. In the light of this fact, the birds represent the agents of Satan. They find lodgment in the tree but are unchanged by it; instead, the tree is defiled and polluted by them. It is thus when unsaved people unite with our churches; they do them injury and impede their growth.

The nameless man of our parable took the one seed in his hand and looked at it. It was so tiny that he had to look closely or he would not have seen it. He might have been discouraged over the smallness of it. As he looked at it, he might have wished that he had a larger seed. But, he put it to its proper use by placing it in the soil in his garden. That was an act of faith on his part. It is always an act of faith to sow seed; because you have, for the time, to give it up, and receive nothing in return. When that naked seed came in contact with the soil it germinated and grew. That was exactly what the sower had hoped would come of it when he placed it in the ground. It was not just an ordinary growth, but rather it was so expansive that it spread out its branches to such an extent that the birds of the air were attracted to it. Surely, no more fitting emblem nor apt symbol could have been chosen to represent the kingdom of Christ than a grain of mustard seed.

Obviously this mustard seed and its resultant growth was chosen by the Lord because it was recognized as a striking instance of increase from that which was very small to something comparatively large. An exceedingly small commencement resulted in tremendous growth. A large growth from a little seed, a great result from a small beginning, that is the one thought of the parable, and of that our Lord declared that His kingdom on this earth is an example. These verses in this parable set forth two things about Christianity:

I. Its Small Beginning.

One day the Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, a very small town, in a poor and despised country, rather than in one of the great cities of the world. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. He was reared in obscurity. He began His ministry without any pomp or show. Without the patronage of any of the so-called great of the world, He just stood up and taught in a simple and unpretentious way. His friends were obscure, uneducated and poor. The apostles were, for the most part, unknown and without much learning, wealth or influence. Christ never made any special effort to attract the great, the rich, the proud or the noble. He and His early followers were the object of opposition, scorn and ridicule. When He died on the cross His followers were still comparatively few in number.

II. Its Great Expansion.

By this parable, our Lord taught His disciples an important lesson which is badly needed today, namely, not to despise the day of small things. He wanted them to know that His kingdom would expand and become great and glorious in spite of its small and despised beginnings; that the little movement already stirring society would grow to vast dimensions. He suggested that the reason for this growth is that the originating principle of the kingdom has vitality in it.

Christianity involves a living relationship between man and God. It is no mere human philosophy of life. It is no simple matter of human kindness and good will. It is no system of social legislation and human well-being. Christianity is the life of man rooted in the life of God. This relationship is brought about in and through Christ the Saviour of men. Christianity means that the divine life has entered the human life. It means forgiveness of sins. It means peace of mind. It means release from fears. It means sturdy rootage in the things that abide. It means joy of spirit. It means the transformation of human life.

Christianity is a vital power for living. In the story of the mustard seed Christ plays up the contrast in size. He also implies that appearances are sometimes deceptive so far as Christianity is concerned. This business of faith in God may appear to the worldlyman as being very insignificant, but it has a drive and power for living that far overshadows its humble origin. Out from the life of Christ has come an influence that has changed the world.

It is easy to mistake bigness for importance and size for significance. Those who worship at the shrine of appearances need to know the potent vitality and the great power of the Christian idea. It makes the servant master. With it the pure in heart are always victorious.

Science is always reminding us of the "infinitude of the little." It likes to demonstrate the importance of the seemingly unimportant. Take sunflower seeds, for instance. Nobody gave them a thought until an immigrant ex-millwright named Amel De Vlieger came along. He elevated the lowly sunflower seed and the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture confirmed his early experiments with seed. They stated that sunflower seeds are packed with nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, iron and niacin. Laboratory analysis shows them very nearly as high in protein content as a T-bone steak. They glow with vitamin A and generate more vitamin B and D than any other field crop. As such they are beneficial to eyesight, complexion, blood pressure, nerves, and to combating obesity. Who would have dreamed that sunflower seed could amount to so much? Why, actually they can do as many things for you as the Revlon products! By the same token men overlook the power of the gospel of Christ for great living. Only those who experiment with it find that it can do more than anything else.

Christianity affords a program of living and serving. When the tiny mustard seed became a tree, it was an object of usefulness. It put out branches under the shadow of which the birds could lodge. Christ said that His kingdom was like that. It is not an end in itself. It finds fulfillment in serving mankind. It grows as it gives. It becomes stronger as it serves. This is the secret of its amazing vitality and world mission. We strengthen ourselves as we bring strength to others.

In the beginning Christianity was very small and insignificant compared with the other religions of that day. It was so small and obscure as to be almost lost in the world. Then it grew and attracted so much attention that men began to make a profession of Christianity for political reasons. Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, which was a colossal tragedy. From that day until the present the agents of Satan have deceived and deluded souls, and multitudes of them have been persuaded to unite with the Lord's churches who have never been regenerated. The greatest menace to churches today is the increasing number of unsaved people in their membership. What a pity that it has become popular for the unregenerated to unite with churches for their own personal advantage.

Although the birds found refuge in the mustard tree, they were not a part of it. Even so, false professors try to leave the impression that they are in the kingdom of our Christ, but only born-again people are a part of the kingdom.

As sowers of the Word of God, under Christ, let us ever remember the glorious encouragement of this parable. Our business is to sow the Word of God in human minds and hearts, and then let God take care of the results. Our labor for the Lord in this great task will never be in vain.