

The Parable of the Grain of Mustard Seed.

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Matt 13 : 31, 32.

The parable as a means of illustrating spiritual truth was peculiarly Christ's chosen method of teaching. We are surprised as we come to the record of His teachings to find so many of the fundamental truths of Christianity set forth in the form of parables. The effectiveness of the method is not difficult to see in the light which the accumulated progress of nineteen centuries has brought us. To the early disciples, however, it was a matter of great surprise that their Master should convey truth by a method which tended to obscure it to the minds of the great majority of His listeners. This fact would occasion no little surprise on our part to-day, did we not see what the early disciples failed to see, namely, Christ's immediate purpose in founding His Kingdom upon earth. That purpose was, not the immediate conquest of sin, but the establishment of a Kingdom in its outwardly small beginning, which should continue to develop until at last it should embrace the wide, wide, world. Satisfied with such a small beginning, Christ could say to the very limited number of His followers: "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God; but to others in parables."

The very method of teaching which He adopted afforded the best possible opportunity to illustrate the power which Christianity possessed to propagate itself, from its seemingly insignificant inception in Judea, until it should achieve universal conquest.

The parable of the grain of mustard seed is one of a series of seven parables which our Saviour used in one single discourse, all intended to illustrate different aspects of this one truth,—the power which Christianity possesses to enlarge its influence intensively and extensively, in the individual and in the world.

The precious teaching was lost upon the multitude. But it became the cherished heritage of the small circle of hearers for whom it was specially intended—a circle which is ever widening as the purpose of the eternal is unfolded. As those who belong to this favored number, it is our duty as well as our privilege to understand the practical meaning of the doctrine here set forth, as it affects Christianity in its beginning and in its present stage of development.

And it is important first of all that we should understand what is the truth which the Saviour intended to illustrate by the parable of the grain of mustard seed. The scope of the parable has been misunderstood. It has been used as an illustration of the universal conquest which Christianity shall ultimately make when all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest.

It scarcely needs to be said that the parable was not intended to illustrate this truth, nor can it be made to do so. To regard it thus is to identify it in its scope with the parable of the leaven which immediately follows, and which is clearly intended to teach that Christ's dominion is to be universal. But the parable of the grain of mustard seed is given for a different purpose as we can plainly see. If it were intended to set forth the magnitude of the kingdom of God it would not be difficult to suggest figures by which that truth could be more aptly illustrated.

The great teacher would have more fitly and forcibly used the oak of Bashan or the cedar of Lebanon as an emblem of his kingdom did he want to impress simply the fact of its greatness and power in themselves considered. But the grain of mustard seed far better served his purpose to emphasize the exceeding smallness of the kingdom in its initial stage, and its comparative greatness in the later stages of its development. The grain of mustard, while not absolutely the smallest of seeds, was yet the smallest seed from which so large a plant or tree could grow, the full grown plant being often nine feet in height. And in order to understand the purpose and scope of the parable we must consider both the smallness of the seed, and the comparative greatness of the tree. Remembering this, we shall see that the figure illustrates the truth which it was intended to illustrate better than any other that could be suggested.

Our Lord might have likened his kingdom in its beginning to the first stone of the foundation of a building, using the finished building to represent the kingdom in its completeness. Thus the idea of a great result from a small beginning could have been aptly illustrated. But in this case the ideas of life and of organic growth would have been lacking, both of which are necessary to any right conception of the kingdom of God. Therefore the living seed and the living plant, relatively the smallest cause and the largest effect, best enforce the two-fold truth which the parable is intended to teach.

How literally true has this prophetic parable proved with reference to the kingdom of God, considered (1) in its world-wide aspect, (2) as a local organization, and (3) as it exists in the heart of the individual believer! In each case the beginning has been of the grain of mustard

character, while the harvest of that seed has been relatively very large.

1. When we speak of the beginning of the kingdom of God in its world-wide aspect, we quite naturally think of the organization effected in Judea by Jesus Christ nearly nineteen hundred years ago. It is the visible kingdom that rises to the eye of our imagination. In reality we might go back of this thousands of years, and find the germ of the earthly kingdom of God in the promise given immediately after the fall. 'The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head.' And all history from the time when this promise was given might very properly be viewed as the unfolding of the history of Christianity. Regarding it thus, how are we impressed by the exceeding smallness of the beginning! Simply a promise unfulfilled, and to all appearances incapable of fulfilment, save as faith could rely upon the omnipotence of him who promised. Verily that beginning seemed like the little mustard seed cast into the earth, in a soil altogether uncongenial to its development. And great indeed is the contrast between the apparently hopeless condition then existing and the present state of spiritual enlightenment, as the promise receives ever larger fulfilment.

But if we came down to what is historically known as the beginning of the Christian era, and study the conditions then existing as the first stage in the development of the kingdom of God upon earth, we are no less forcibly impressed by its small beginning. What do we find? The sole representative of the kingdom we find to be a Jewish carpenter, of very humble origin, unlearned, untravelled, without any social influence as the world goes; dwelling in a village so iniquitous that out of it nothing good was looked for; coming forth to the world with claims which nearly all regarded as the wild pretensions of a foolish dreamer; teaching doctrines that were either above popular apprehension, or that ran directly counter to popular beliefs; unable to find a solitary man who could enter into hearty sympathy with him in his designs; moving onward, almost alone and unaided, toward persecution, betrayal, and shameful death.

Such was the beginning of Christianity. Such the character of its founder, as he appeared to the world. Could anything be regarded more insignificant—more utterly hopeless? To anyone who judged Christianity in its beginning, according to outward appearances, it must have seemed a vain project indeed which was destined to speedy and utter failure. But in that seemingly forlorn cause there was the germ of a movement which was destined to make its influence felt to the uttermost part of the earth and to bring every other power under the irresistible sway of its sovereign rule. The little grain of mustard seed had been sown and was destined to become a mighty tree.

Could we take a view of the Christian world as we find it to-day we could not fail to be impressed by the marvellous growth that has followed the planting of that little seed.

All the predictions which its feeble beginning called forth are seen to have been wide of the mark. The feeble light that flickered in an obscure corner of the earth has cast its beams afar until the whole world is bright with the dawning. Whole nations which worshipped at the shrines of dumb idols, have bowed beneath the sceptre of the Carpenter of Galilee.

Man-made faiths which bitterly opposed Christianity, have proved their human origin by becoming extinct, while the kingdom of God was never so widely regnant as it is to-day.

The sanguinary opposition of the civil power which baptized the early church in blood has almost entirely ceased. The futility of worldly opposition is recognized; and Christianity marches onward with steadily lessening resistance to make good each claim of its founder.

Shall its conquest be complete? Shall its dominion be universal? It is not within the scope of my text to answer these questions. But no one can intelligently grasp the conditions existing in the Christian world at the present day without realizing that the tiny seed of the first century has become a mighty tree at the beginning of the twentieth,—a tree, under the branches of which representatives of every nation are even now resting. Christ's prophetic parable has already found literal fulfilment. And whatever may be the ultimate goal, it is apparent to every observer that the tree of life is still sending its roots down deeper into the soil, and covering with its branches a larger area as the centuries go by. The intelligent observer stands amazed in the presence of the phenomenal growth that has followed the planting of that little seed.

2. We are impressed by the marvellous results that have followed the small beginning, as we view Christianity in its world-wide aspect. No less forcibly are we impressed by this same fact as we read the history of its growth in any community in which it has gained a footing. Never does it come with the sound of trumpet or the beat of drum to present its claims to men. Its coming is rather like that of the lightning which silently flashes out of the east and shineth even unto the west. Worldly enterprises have been launched and supported

by the enthusiasm of the multitude. The gospel has always found its first support in any locality from the self-denying, faithful minority.

Measured by human standards its beginning has seemed hopelessly small and weak. Lacking the support of wealth, numbers and social influence, it seemingly required no prophet to foresee its speedy downfall.

But the gigantic enterprises of man, like Babel's tower of old, have come to nought, and Christianity has reared her eternal structure upon their ruins.

On the west coast of Ireland is a small barren island, around which the mighty Atlantic beats its angry waves, keeping its handful of inhabitants close prisoners during six months of the year. Toward this island a rude vessel steered its course on an autumn evening more than thirteen hundred years ago. It was a flimsy craft, but the tide was calm; and as the boatmen plied their oars they lifted up their voices in psalms of thanksgiving. Landing on that heathen island, they hastily built a few rude huts, and a small Christian temple. The freight of that little ship was the gospel, and the errand of the saintly strangers was to tell to the benighted heathen the glad story of life.

It seemed a hopeless task as Columba and his twelve disciples brought over from Ireland that little grain of mustard seed and planted it on Jona's rocky shore. But that little seed developed into the mighty tree that spread its branches out far beyond the island that nourished it. The famous monastery of St. Columba became the mother church, from which Christianity was first introduced into Scotland and the north of England. And if we look for the mustard tree to-day, we find that its shadow extends to the most distant shores. The self-denying zeal of those thirteen missionaries proved to be contagious; and by the time that human calculations would have expected realized defeat, the little one had become a thousand.

We have but to go back less than three hundred years in the history of the neighboring republic in order to find wild tracts of wilderness where to-day we find the great centres of commercial and industrial activity. Here was the forest primeval undisturbed by the woodman's axe. Yonder were vast stretches of unbroken prairie land, the haunt of the wild buffalo and the uncivilized Indian. Nowhere was to be seen the magic influence of Christian civilization. How utterly forlorn seemed the hope of conquest "when a band of exiles moored their bark on the wild New England shore!"

When the Pilgrim Fathers stepped ashore at Plymouth Rock in 1620, there lay before them a prospect which to all human appearance foreboded disaster and death to the last member of their party. Behind lay the uninviting ocean that separated them from the land of their nativity. Before, the no less uninviting forest and wilderness, where they must hew out a home for themselves and their children, or perish in the attempt. Everywhere difficulties presented themselves which might cause the stoutest heart to faint, not least among them the awful severities of a northern winter.

But human calculations would fail to take into the reckoning the real resources of that heroic party. They came not with the greed of conquest or the lust of gold. They come with the cherished hope that here they may be given the freedom denied them in Old England,— "freedom to worship God." They bear in their bosoms the lofty, heaven-born ideals, in the working out of which there was to be developed in later years, the sturdy Puritan life of New England. And while material resources were indispensable to the realization of their hopes, their sole reliance was in the God who had delivered them from the perils of the deep, and brought them to what they hoped would prove a land of freedom.

Out yonder in the wilderness they planted the tiny mustard seed of Christianity, and there that seed took root and grew. Out of that small beginning was evolved the history of the great American Republic, as it has been written, and is still being recorded. Would you see the mustard tree? Then look abroad over that vast expanse of country. Study her institutions, chiefly those that are distinctively Christian and philanthropic. Follow her missionaries to far-away lands, and acquaint yourself with the history of their devoted labors, and after you have summed up all that is truly great in the life of that great nation, you must trace the life stream back to its source at Plymouth Rock less than three hundred years ago.

The seed sown was very small; but it had in it divine power, and lo, it has become a tree of great dimensions.

But why go abroad for illustrations of the truth of the text when we find it so well illustrated in the history to which we as an association have been permitted to contribute! We have but to study the history of the rise and development of our denominational life in these provinces in order better to understand the parable which we are considering.

If we go back a century and a half in the history of the Maritime Provinces we find them a bleak, barren wilderness, so far as Baptist doctrines and ideals are concerned. The great distinctive tenets of the Baptist denomination had not yet begun to make the power of their influence felt upon our shores. The union of church and