

Dear Friends,

Jesus taught the parables primarily to convict the unbelieving religious leaders of Judaism in His time. However, if we cannot find a spiritual application for our own faith-walk in them, what is the profit of studying them? My study and writing on Jesus' Parable of the mustard seed has nudged me to do a bit of soul-searching and thinking. I pray it will have a similar impact on you. What is the "Mustard Seed" factor in your life today? How has it fared through the last two years? If we were to assess our personal walk of faith over the last two years, would our conclusion reflect Jesus' mustard seed, or would it more suggest a patch of weed seeds liberally planted? Where do we go from here? What shall we plant and cultivate from this day till we check out? For one, I long to work with my "Mustard Seed" factor and to stifle the weeds in my life.

Lord bless,

Joe Holder

#### Parable of the Mustard Seed

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 KJV 1900)

In an age of mega-churches and large Christian gatherings, Jesus and His ministry seems oddly alien to the ideas of our time. Sincere, Bible believing Christians would serve their faith far better if we make Jesus and His ministry the norm, and reject populist ideas and mega-church cultures. After roughly 3.5 years, Jesus had a total of 120 (Acts 1:15) faithful followers who were willing to wait for Him for those ten days between His ascension and Pentecost. Yes, many more people believed in Him and were touched by Him, but only this 120 were willing to wait for Him in anticipation of His promised empowerment on Pentecost. (Acts 1:8) Despite the Jerusalem Church growing into the thousands quickly, the common New Testament churches were often quite small. For example, we read of a church that met in a person's home. (Colossians 4:15)

It is believed that the normal population of Jerusalem during those religious holy days such as Pentecost multiplied many times over its normal population. Imagine the contrast. The normal population of the city is estimated between 20,000 and 50,000. During a holy day such as Pentecost, that number grew to as many as 200,000 people. Imagine yourself in that upper room with the disciples on the eve of that eventful Pentecost reported in Acts 2. The streets and the temple are packed with

visitors who traveled from throughout the Roman Empire. (Major nations from which these people traveled are named in Acts 2:7-11)

Imagine being in that upper room with that small group on Pentecost. Imagine further being one of the eleven who went into the temple where this throng of people crowded to offer their service on Pentecost. Jesus' words in this parable are accurate. The Lord's "Kingdom" started with a tiny gathering, but it grew quickly to a far larger and more influential body.

While the number of faithful followers grew rapidly, as recorded in the Book of Acts, this small band grew far more rapidly and powerfully in terms of the influence they had on the culture of the day, the whole culture of the Roman Empire, but especially on the religious Jewish leaders, the primary objects of Jesus' parables.

Jesus' promise (Acts 1:8) was for endued power, not a multiplication of numbers. He abundantly fulfilled that promise as recorded in the Book of Acts.

When we think of our churches today, we are nothing more than a tiny mustard seed compared to the various denominations of Christianity, far smaller compared to the whole culture in which we exist. To our shame, we are far smaller than we should be because of our own bickering over non-essential issues or, even less defensible, personalities. When churches allow any divided opinion to grow in their numbers, they inevitably divide, emotionally if not literally, often both sides eventually dying because they divided over carnal opinions, not over spiritual substance. We naively think of church divisions as a separation of one body into two. However, in reality every church division actually involves at least three groups; 1) Side "A," 2) Side "B," and 3) the third group of quiet people who become so disillusioned and disenchanted that they quietly disappear from the church scene altogether. Every church division begins with a simple disagreement. To the extent we allow, much less contribute to this carnal action by harboring divided opinions or ideas, we personally contribute to this ungodly conduct.

By New Testament indication, most churches were likely on the small side in terms of numbers. For example, the church that met in a member's house. (Colossians 4:15) Even Jerusalem Church, despite a brief number bubble, had relatively small numbers when compared to the numbers who met at the temple in Jerusalem, or, for that matter, the numbers who thronged to the various pagan temples. But the whole Book of Acts affirms Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. Despite their small numbers, that early church was known widely. Her influence spread far beyond her numbers, like the mature mustard plant.

How is it for us as a people today? How widely do people outside our faith know us? And the answer must be "Barely if at all." Contrast this with a report of our people in 1883, roughly fifty years after the 1832 separation of Old School from New School Baptists. William Cathcart, a New School Baptist, compiled and edited "The Baptist Encyclopedia," a comprehensive encyclopedic format two volume set on Baptist culture. He wrote an extensive piece on our Old School ancestors. I love his summary.

Many of the Old-School brethren in the ministry possess decided ability as expounders of Scripture, the members of their churches are commonly persons of deep piety, and of extensive Biblical knowledge. The Baptist Encyclopedia.

How do we as a people measure up to this description 150 years later? Do our theological critics respect our preachers as having “decided ability as expounders of Scripture,” or our members as “commonly persons of deep piety, and of extensive Biblical knowledge”? If we do not measure up to this description today, we can only look in the mirror for the explanation of our failure.

A more current example. In my youth in the ministry, some sixty-five years ago, I was visiting with an old deacon in the spring time of the year. He was a man of limited financial means but sitting in a simple bookcase was a complete set of John Gill’s commentary and Body of Divinity. It had been a bitter winter, so his time outside had been limited. During our conversation, he pointed over to Gill’s commentary and quipped. “I spent my winter reading him cover to cover.” He read Gill’s whole commentary and Body of Divinity in a matter of four or five months. Further, he spent the next few minutes telling me what Gill wrote about various Bible passages and doctrines, some with which he agreed and some he disagreed, and he told me why with Bible verses and reasoning. Previously I knew the man for his godly grace, but I had a special appreciation for him after that conversation.

Although the parable primarily applies to the Lord’s broad “Kingdom,” how is His kingdom faring within us? Based on the parable, and based on New Testament teaching, Matthew to Revelation, every believer in Jesus has the potential to grow large and strong “...in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18 KJV)

Let’s bring this lesson down to “Home.” How is the “Mustard seed” factor with you in your personal life? Are you most known in your circle of friends for your faith in Jesus and for your godly conversation and knowledge of Scripture? Or are you most known for your obsessions and opinions regarding your unusual personal world view or the latest hot-topic issues in our culture, things like COVID or national politics? If you died today, how would your friends remember you? For your faith and for your “deep piety and extensive Biblical knowledge”? Or for your political heat or your COVID zeal? Life is too short, each day too full for us to grow a reputation for both. We choose what we shall be remembered for by how we “Spend” our time-money. And once we spend a time-dollar, we can’t reclaim it, nor can we erase it from the memory of the people who observe us. Did we use that time to grow their respect for Jesus or to grow their knowledge of our personal eccentricities? Will we leave a life influence in them more like a weed seed or more like Jesus’ mustard seed?

Let’s pause from whatever we are frantically chasing for just a moment of reflection. We’ve all wasted some of our “Time-dollars.” We can’t reclaim a second of that time. It is spent and gone. How shall we use our future time-bank-account? To promote our favorite opinions or ideas regarding this world and its madness? Or to learn—and to reflect in our personal lives—a true and winsome reputation for Jesus? That dear old brother who read Gill’s commentary in a winter didn’t spend his time fretting over some shadowy “Them” or what “They” wanted to do to us. He trusted the “Thems” of his time to the “Him” of his faith, and he invested his time for the Lord.

Much of conservative Christian culture in our time invests inordinate amounts of time and emotional energy in various conspiracy ideas. The idea seems to be that the more we can learn of our favorite conspiracy the more power we have over them. In fact, our knowledge or ignorance of them has no impact on them whatever. Whether they exist and are as real as imagined or are wholly

imaginary is of little consequence to me. These dear people are trying to deal with the problem in an unwise manner.

For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4-5 KJV; emphasis added)

Any valid “Faith” strategy against ungodliness must follow this model, or it dooms itself to failure. The moment we step outside Scripture—or stretch Scripture to the wresting, breaking point—to justify our unbiblical, non-faith strategy, we predict our certain failure. Remember Solomon, the man endued with wisdom directly from the Lord. As he grew older, Solomon allowed that wisdom to fade into the background. He indulged far too much of his carnality at the radical cost of his faith and his wisdom. Finally, in the end, the Lord gave him one last flash of light, the Book of Ecclesiastes. What is the message of Ecclesiastes? He tried it all, and it all failed, “Vanity and vexation of spirit.” In the end, only one thing endured his final season of examination and test.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 KJV)

These words are as true as when Solomon wrote them. Our only hope of honoring Jesus and His “Mustard Seed” parable is to immerse our minds, hearts, and faith in Scripture alone, not Scripture plus anything else. How large is His “Mustard Seed” in your life? In your faith? In the time you spend daily? Is it a necessary sidebar to your private passions? Or has it grown into the largest “Tree” in your life? You can’t grow His mustard seed to maturity while planting your private weed patch.

Elder Joe Holder