

Sermon Title: Colonel Mustard, In The Field, With The Word Speaker: Jim Harris  
Scripture Text: Mark 4:30-34 Date: 7-15-18

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Our venue for today is Mark Chapter 4, Verses 30 through 34. And to set the scene for what is before us this morning, it's pretty simple—just back up a little bit in the Gospel of Mark: Chapter 4, Verses 10 and 11—it says, "As soon as He was alone"—meaning, out of the public eye—"His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom"—that's the key phrase—"the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables." Now, this took place on the very day when the Pharisees had gone public with their total, final, public rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. They even went so far as to declare Him Satanic, and immediately when they did that, Jesus switched to doing all of His public teaching, for the remainder the time that He spent in Galilee, in the form of parables.

Now, one reason for using parables—or, stories or analogies—was to, as He would have put in the Sermon on the Mount, not cast His "pearls before swine." (Matt. 7:6, NASB, and throughout, unless otherwise noted). He was withholding certain information from His rejecters because, a parable without an explanation is essentially a riddle, and Jesus didn't want to keep dragging them along while they were actually rejecting Him. He wanted no more to do with the pseudo-faith and the thrill-seeking people with the hard hearts, and the religious hypocrites who were leading the way in rejecting Him.

The other reason for parables was to *reveal* new things—reveal mysteries of the kingdom of God to *true* believers; and Jesus unleashed rather a flood of parables on that day. Each one adds to a composite description of what we might call the "mystery" form of the kingdom of God; that is, How does the kingdom of God—how does the reign of God—look on Earth during this time when the King has come...and the King has gone, and the King is coming again? Now He is in heaven, and before He comes again to bring the kingdom to Earth, where He will reign for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1-7), what's it going be like between that first coming and that second coming? We just sang: "Yea, justified! O blessed thought! And sanctified! Salvation wrought! Thy blood hath pardon bought for me, and glorified I, too, shall be!" ("Complete in Thee," Words by Andrew R. Wolfe). We live between when His blood bought our salvation—because He gave His life as the propitiation, the satisfactory sacrifice for sin (1 Pet. 3:18); that was a reason for His first coming. His second coming—He comes in glory, He brings the kingdom, the reigns for a thousand years, and then He gives the kingdom back to the Father after it's all said and done (1 Cor. 15:24), and we live in that time in-between. Well, that's the mystery that was never revealed in the Old Testament; that's what "mystery" means—something not revealed the Old Testament, and now made known (Col. 1:26).

Well, during this time between the two comings—this "mystery" form of the kingdom—the expansion of the kingdom of God is going to be astounding. Jesus explains the growth of the kingdom, and the problems with the growth, in this parable of the mustard seed; it's part of that explanation of the mystery of the kingdom. And today, we come to a parable that Jesus didn't interpret for you, so we will hover over this parable today, and we're going to send in our hermeneutical forensics team to comb over it for clues that we can put together until we understand the meaning and application. Now, looking for clues to interpret a parable about a mustard seed led me to one of the finest sermon titles in a very long time: We are going to see today the story of "Colonel Mustard, in the field, with the Word."

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Now, if you don't understand that—you're too young, alright? Just ask your parents or your grandparents. That is *such* a cool reference to the board game "Clue." Here's where we're going: Verses 30 through 34 in Mark Chapter 4. We're going to learn the parable—that's 30, 31, and 32; then, we're going to have Jesus's answer to the question, "Remind me—why all these parables?"—that Verses 33 and 34; and then, we'll interpret and apply it.

Now, this is—when you do the hard work of harmonizing Matthew and Mark and Luke, and we can throw in John, but John didn't record this day—this is the third of a number of parables Jesus spoke. At least eight—and depending on how you count and what you call a parable—as many as 10 or 12 parables that are *recorded* in the gospels, and we don't know how many more there might have been. This is the first one that wasn't interpreted by Jesus; He interpreted the first one, He interpreted the second one, and then He figured you can figure it out from there. So, Jesus apparently spoke four parables in public: that would be the parable of the soils—we studied last time; the parable of the wheat and the tares—very well-known one that isn't in Mark; and then, the parable we're going to study today—the parable of the mustard seed; and then, the parable of the leaven. And then after those four, it seems He went inside with His disciples, where He interpreted the first two, and spoke some more to them, and then probably spoke even more in public.

Now, what is significant about this array of parables is that, these parables form the primary overview of the age in which we live. Remember First Peter Chapter 1 says that the prophets studied what they wrote about the "Suffering Servant," or the "Suffering Savior," and the glorious King, and then they tried to figure out, "How can that be? How can it be both?" Well, the mystery is: They didn't know about a first coming and a second coming. And this is Jesus giving us the overview of what this "mystery" form—not revealed in the Old Testament, but now made known—this "mystery" form of the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God, is going to be like today. What's the kingdom going to look like while the King is away?

Now, Mark records the parable of the soils, and then a few small ones that we saw last time. And without taking a big side-trip to Matthew to fill you in on the parable that Mark *doesn't* include—the one about the wheat and the tares—I do want to summarize what the parables leading up to this one had said. They introduce two recurring themes which describe, in part, this mystery form of the kingdom; and I'm referring to the parable the soils and the parable of the wheat and the tares. If you don't remember what that one is, go look it up in Matthew Chapter 13 (vss. 24-30).

But here are the recurring themes that have already been unfolded about the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God, in this age: First one is, that it starts small and it grows steadily. Now, that was not the expectation of the Messianically-oriented Jews of Jesus's day, because it wasn't revealed in the Old Testament, and then they had other agendas that were attached to it as well. But remember, when Jesus came to Jerusalem on the day of the Triumphal Entry, they were shouting, "Hosanna!"—they thought there was going to be a coronation (see Lk. 19:28)! They thought the kingdom was going to be in place by sundown...maybe tomorrow...at *least* by the Passover coming on Friday—and that wasn't the way it was (Lk. 19:11). In this era, it is growth that's not just a sudden imposition of a rule of a king, but it's

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more like cultivating and planting and tending and harvesting a crop, and it takes time and it takes patience. The kingdom of heaven in this age is a *persuasion* campaign; it is persuasion done by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:14; cf. 1 Cor. 12:3b; 2 Tim. 2:25), working through the power of the gospel and the Word of God, but it's not a military or political thing arriving. It's a matter of persuasion, not earthly, visible power. So it's going to start small and grow steadily, one person at a time.

The second theme that has already been introduced is that, the kingdom of heaven on Earth in this age involves a mixture of good and evil. We saw in the first parable—of the soils—that there will be legitimate responses to the gospel: saving faith, bearing fruit—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold; *and* there will be many phony responses to the message of the kingdom—they'll look good at first, but they aren't the real thing. Three of those four kinds of soils bear no fruit; they represent people who *responded* to the gospel in a variety of ways, but short of saving faith (1 Cor. 15:2; Heb. 4:1; cf. Acts 8:13, 21-23).

The second parable in this series—that we haven't seen, but I'm trusting you to check it out if you haven't—is about wheat and tares. "Tares" are weeds that look just like wheat—can't distinguish them until the time of the harvest. And *that* parable says that, wherever the wheat is planted in the world, the enemy comes along and counter-sows—or, it's sort of an agricultural-terrorism thing: go into your friend's field after he's planted his wheat and plant a bunch of weeds, and they will grow together. And these weeds represent imitators of true Christians; they are actually dupes and emissaries of Satan who infiltrate the local church everywhere in the world throughout the age.

Now, just to be accurate, let me help you make a distinction here: Keep distinct in your mind the difference between the *true* Church—that's the Body of Christ; it is composed of every genuine believer alive on Earth, and every believer from Acts Chapter 2 until the Rapture—that's the church. There are no phonies in the Body of Christ (Jn. 6:45); if you are saved, you belong to Him, you are baptized into the body by His Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), you are indwelt by His Spirit (Rom. 8:9). On the other hand, when you change from the term "Church" and you start speaking about the kingdom of heaven—or the kingdom of God—you're referring to the reign of Jesus Christ *over the whole world*. We still pray, "Your kingdom come," right? Because it isn't *here* in its fullness, in its manifestation. So the true church is comprised of all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, from Acts Chapter 2 until the Rapture, but in the mystery form of the kingdom of heaven on Earth, it is a mixture; it's a mixture of true believers and counterfeits—tares and weeds. There are different responses that *look* like the real thing for a while, but they aren't really the same things. So that's an important but subtle distinction to make. The true church is pure; the kingdom of heaven on earth is a mixture of that true church *and* other things as well, that will be sorted out when Jesus comes.

Alright, let's start our investigation of the interpretation of this next parable: the parable of the mustard seed. So, learn the parable, Verses 30 through 32 in Mark Chapter 4—"And He said, 'How shall we picture the kingdom of God'—that's what a parable is, it's a picture, a word picture, comparing something you know with something you don't know, in order to teach you about what you don't know—"How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable

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shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.' " Well, now, one thing you need to know is, when you come to this parable: the subject has not changed; the scene hasn't changed, the audience hasn't changed, the speaker hasn't changed. This package of parables is about revealing new things about the kingdom of heaven—or kingdom of God—in light of that open, public, flamboyant rejection of Jesus as the Messiah; and that was regarded as them acting as the spiritual leaders of all of Israel. So He says, "I'm going to compare this to a mustard seed."

In case we have any botanists in the group, I understand the mustard seed is a little black seed called *Brassica nigra*, or, *Sinapis nigra*. I just got goosebumps when I learned those words, that really did it for me. Now, you can grind the grain that is produced by this plant to make a variety of tangy spices that fall under the heading of "mustard"; you use different kinds of mustard, different kinds of plants, different recipes, etc. You can also take the leaves of this plant—they can be cooked and eaten. If you've lived in the right places, you may have eaten mustard greens...or, maybe you lived in the *wrong* places; somebody tried that on me one time, and...bread and water will be just fine thank you, leave out the mustard greens. I don't think we were supposed to eat the leaves; the mustard—that's good.

Now, the significance of this illustration is that, this starts out as a seed that Jesus says is smaller than all other seeds; the seed of a mustard plant is a tiny one, only about a millimeter in diameter. Now, at this point, you have the critics who come along, and they say, "Well, modern botany has identified smaller seeds than the mustard seed, so this is obviously an error in the Bible, because that isn't the smallest seed." Well, it's *not* an error—that would be a false conclusion to jump to. It was, indeed, the smallest seed *known to the residents of Israel* in the first century, but more importantly: The statement, "the mustard seed is smaller than all other seeds," was a *proverbial* statement; it was a form of hyperbole, and Jesus's hearers knew exactly what He meant. It's like when we say, "I've told you a *million* times, don't exaggerate!" Or, "He's slower than molasses," or, "He's quick as lightning"—you can use words like that, you can stretch words to *make a point*, and that's what this was: "like a mustard seed, the smallest one"—that was an idiom for something very small. Jesus would use the same idiom later, in Matthew 17 and Luke 17, to talk about "faith like a mustard seed." He's not making a scientific statement about the size of the seed, He's using well-known, everyday terminology to make His spiritual point.

Now, you plant that little tiny seed, take care of it, and normal growth for a mustard plant is that, it becomes a—and it says here in the text—a "garden plant," or, a shrub, if you will...a little bush. Now, there are various kinds of mustard plants; I mentioned the two kinds of seeds in the Middle East, there's probably others. They would range in size from, just a little tiny bush, maybe at its maximum, reach a couple feet tall; some would reach four or five, maybe even six feet tall, but the really big ones would have seeds the size of small stones. So the ones that grew from the little tiny seeds were only little bushes.

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Now, mustard plants—like all garden plants—they die out each year; you planted it as an annual herb, something that you would plant every year. And I suppose, maybe you could regulate the conditions in a greenhouse and keep one alive longer, but that isn't what the parable is talking about; it's talking about the normal routine of this little herb that you planted in your garden.

Now, the mustard plant that Jesus describes *for your imagination* does something spectacular, abnormal, surprising: it grows in a surprising way, it becomes *huge*! Mark's terminology is, it "forms large branches." In Matthew's gospel, it says, "becomes a tree" (Matt. 13:32), and he uses the Greek word for "a tree". So it would be like, you planted this alongside your tomato plants and then, you'd come back around harvest-time and you've got something the size of a gigantic maple tree shading your whole garden. That's what's shocking about this. It becomes so substantial that "the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." That would *never happen*! How many of you plant a garden this spring, and already, you have birds nesting in your plants? It doesn't happen! It doesn't work that way! That would never happen because, at the time for the birds to come to nest, the garden plant's just getting started, and it's way too small. Even at its largest, it would be, still, too small to provide safety for nesting birds; I mean, birds don't nest at cats' eyeball height, they don't do that. So this is abnormal, surprising, shocking growth—so much that the birds can make it a home.

So the key point of this parable is that, the growth that Jesus is describing is surprising and abnormal; it continues *far* beyond what you would expect it to be in any natural environment, it goes far beyond the normal expectation. Now, that's the parable; we'll get to the interpretation in a few minutes. Learn the parable—Verses 30 through 32. And then, you say, "Wait a minute! Would You remind me, Jesus: Why all these parables?" So He says it again: Verses 33 and 34—Mark says, "With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it"—in other words, this is for the ones who had spiritual ears to actually hear. It says "He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples." At this point, I've got to admit—as a Bible teacher, I wish that the gospels were just a few pages longer, and I had *all* of those explanations that Jesus gave. But, the only inspired explanations belong to those first two parables—the soils, and the wheat and the tares.

So, there's the parable; and "Remind me: Why the parables"; and now, we get to interpret it and apply it. Well, the party is over for me. Now, I've got to earn my keep by helping you find the clues that will help you understand and apply the parable of the mustard seed. It's not some mystical thing, it's a matter of doing careful Bible study. And I'll start with a disclaimer: When it comes to these parables, for which Jesus did not provide the interpretation, there are some points of interpretation that are legitimately debated by honest, Bible-believing, godly scholars. Now, there are some interpretations that are just *way out there*, and we don't want to bother with those. But there *are* different possibilities which are compatible with the rest of the Bible. Among my seminary professors, one of our favorite hobbies, of courses, was to go from one class to the next class and get this teacher to disagree with that teacher; that's hard to do when they're all reading the same Bible and guided by the same Holy Spirit, but, the most fertile place for that is interpreting parables, or things that have symbolic meanings to them.

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And we did that—it was about a 50-50 split between my seminary professors on a few of these things. But we're going to try to use every clue we have from the context, including the patterns of those first two interpretations that were set by Jesus. Now, if you are so highly spiritual that you have a MacArthur Study Bible with you, I'll let you know, in advance, that I'm going to disagree with my very good friend and mentor, John; he is not yet fully sanctified when it comes to interpreting a couple of these parables. He will agree with me when he gets to heaven. One of us will have changed our view—unless we *both* have.

But, let's start looking at the clues. It isn't all that hard, really. Alright—Clue Number 1: Matthew calls this "another parable" when he introduces it (Matt. 13:31). And he uses a Greek word for "another" that means, "another of the same kind"—it's *not* different from the first ones, it's *adding* something to them, but it's right on point with everything said in the first two parables. "Another parable of the same kind"—it's another way of revealing another aspect of something never before revealed about the kingdom of heaven. And now that the Jews have rejected their Messiah, "Well, what's that kingdom going to look like? We thought it was coming right away in its fullness," but, it won't be that way. So, here's another parable of the same kind.

Clue Number 2—let's look at the man, the seed, and the field. It doesn't seem very hard in the context to say that, the man seems to be Christ, because He's the one who is spreading the kingdom; that the seed is "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19), as it has been in the parable of the soils; and "the field is the world" (Matt. 13:38), because this is a kingdom that's coming from heaven to the whole world—it is the kingdom of God in the world. So, the new mystery is that, this kingdom is not going to come all-of-a-sudden in its fullness, worldwide; it's going to start *very small*—like just eleven scared disciples when Jesus was crucified, only 120 when the Holy Spirit came—but it's going to become something *amazingly* large. And this was a *mystery*, because all the previous predictions of the kingdom in the Old Testament spoke of it as coming in power and glory, all at once. Now, that *will* be the case—read all about it in Revelation Chapter 19—but that's not for now.

Now, here comes the point of departure that I'm going to make with some of our brethren. A lot of them stop interpreting the parable right there; they say that Jesus is using this parable to predict the amazing, steady, relentless growth of the kingdom from a tiny seed, and that's the main and the only point of the parable. They say that, the reference to "the birds of the air nesting in its branches"—that's just a way of reinforcing the point of the size of the tree. That was my English Bible professor in seminary; he just said, "Well, that's just saying, 'That's how big it got, it got so big that birds could nest in it,' and there's no significance to the meaning of the birds."

Now, there are others who say that the birds represent Gentiles who believe. Well, now, *that's* true; they say that the kingdom starts like a small seed, it's all Jewish at first, but then, when it grows up, the Gentiles are added in. Well, you can study Romans 9, 10, and 11—you know that there is truth there that will prove the point about Gentiles being "grafted in" to the tree, where Israel is portrayed as "the olive tree" and the Gentiles are the grafted-in branches—but, there's a big difference between a branch that's grafted in, and a bird that built a nest there;

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there is a difference there. And it's true that, the church age began with it almost exclusively being Jews who believed, and then, eventually, it came to include Gentiles. It's true, it started very small and it has become worldwide. No argument about those things, but, I *do* disagree that that's *all* that this parable says. If all it says is, "It's going to start small and go worldwide," you don't need this parable; He's already said it, that wouldn't add anything to what He has said.

So, look right here in the context for more clues. Clue Number 3 would be: "the birds of the air." Now, here is an important principle of Bible interpretation; I hope it's old-hat for most of you, but if not, let me introduce you to it: The meaning of any term which is not explained in its context—that meaning has to be what the original hearers or readers would have understood it to mean when spoken or written by the original writer or speaker. So you don't just use words without a frame of reference, alright? Now, in this parable, Jesus used the phrase "the birds of the air." Now, the phrase "the birds of the air" is used in several Old Testament passages, but it's used as a metaphor for several different things. You can tell, if you look at the New American Standard translation that we that we preach from, that they put "the birds of the air" in all caps—that's the way of symbolizing that, in the New Testament, those are words which are from the Old Testament. Well, the question is: *Where* in the Old Testament? And Jesus didn't give us *any hint* that He was quoting the Old Testament; He wasn't referring to anything in the Old Testament—as a matter fact, He's telling you a "mystery," which is things that *aren't in* the Old Testament, so I don't think He was quoting the Old Testament.

But there is a great clue, right in the context: Just before this, Jesus used the phrase, and then when He was with His disciples He told them what He meant by it. He began the series of parables—remember back in Chapter 4, Verses 3 and 4, He says, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up"—so He's just used birds to refer to those who destroy the effectiveness of the Word of God. If you doubt whether that's what He meant, skip down to His own interpretation: Verses 14 and 15—He says, "The sower sows the word. These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them."

It's even clearer when you put this side-by-side with Luke's description of that parable and its interpretation: Luke Chapter 8, Verse 5—"The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air"—exact same phrase—"ate it up." Then you skip down the Luke 8:12—"Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved."

Now, I'm going to stick my neck way out, and I'm going to say that, when Jesus uses the same term two or three times, in the same discourse, on the same day, to the same people, in the same place, on the same subject—He's not switching meanings from one use of the phrase to the next. And when He said "birds of the air," He was referring to the work of the devil, or those who *do* the work of the devil.

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Now, let's go to another clue—Clue Number 4: Go back to the idea that, in Matthew's words, this mustard plant "becomes a tree," or, in Mark's terms, it "forms large branches." Remember how He said that—it "becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that"—in other words, this wouldn't happen if this *astounding* thing didn't happen first; first the large branches, and then "the birds of the air can nest under its shade." That is abnormal; mustard plants might grow to varying heights, some might get bigger than others, but they *never* become trees—they are little garden plants.

Now, this is, I think, a new wrinkle that Jesus introduces in this parable. Yes, He reinforces the themes of the first two parables, but He adds something here. The first parable warned us: there will be phony responses. The second parable informed us that, beyond those individual personal phony responses, there will be counterfeit believers who will infiltrate the wheat crop, infiltrate the church, wherever it goes; or, you might say, like "birds of the air"—*not* part of the plant—that "nest in its branches." This parable adds the idea—and Jesus is going to elaborate on it later—that the infiltration will actually affect the way the kingdom of heaven is seen in the world.

Now, here we are 2,000 years later... Boy, we know this thing has grown; it *is* worldwide, it transcends continents, languages, cultures—it *is* a big deal. But if you say the word "Christian" around the world, many—if not most—people in the world think either of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Eastern Orthodox churches, or they might even lump in groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and the "latter-day saints" and all of the theological liberals—all who preach *false gospel*, who preach a corruption of the real thing.

In other words, *a lot of birds* can nest among the branches of the kingdom of God; or, as Paul put it when he spoke to the elders in the city of Ephesus in Acts 20, Verses 29 and 30—he said, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock"—he calls them wolves...they're also like birds nesting in the tree. He says, "and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them"—that would be those who corrupt and change the nature of things *within the church* (cf. Jude 4, 12-13).

So, the interpretation of this parable is very similar to the first two, but there's this fresh nuance; it will start small, it will grow steadily, and it will include a mixture of good and evil. And in *this* case, Jesus wanted the disciples to know that there would be influences from *outside*—from that same source that'll snatch the Word away, if it can—there will be influences from the outside which will find a haven in the church, or among the church; there are some who are never saved, but they're going to make it through this world, hanging out with the church, hanging out with the true believers (Matt. 7:22-23)—and it looks, from the outside, as natural as "birds nesting in a tree." But *unlike* what Romans 9, 10, and 11 is teaching, branches that are "grafted in" and become organically connected to it—the birds never become *part of the tree*. It's the tree is what grows up from the seed, and the seed represents the beginnings of the kingdom of heaven in this age—the *birds aren't part of the kingdom*; they are invaders, false converts, the fruit of false, corrupted versions of the gospel. And it is *rampant* in our age (see 1 Cor. 15:34; Phil. 3:18).



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Another clue [#5], that isn't right here in the context, is that, there was another occasion in which Jesus use this parable; it's over in Luke 13:10 through 19—I won't take you there, but that was a time when a synagogue official was upset with Jesus about Him healing on the Sabbath. Can you believe that? We've seen it a whole bunch of times already in Mark. And defending Himself—and in direct opposition to the Satanic pseudo-spiritual leaders of the synagogue—Jesus quotes this parable again, and *that* tells me that, *Jesus* saw this parable as having something to do with those who hate and oppose Him, who fancied themselves to be leaders in the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven in this age—as it grows amazingly large—He's saying, is going to be infiltrated and counterfeited.

Now, you put all those clues together, and you see that the kingdom of heaven is here described as Colonel Mustard—I probably should have said "Colonel Mustard-seed"—at work in the field, with the Word. Now, how do we apply this? What applications can you make from this parable? Well, one, I think, is obvious; we've already seen it in a previous parable: Be patient in God's work. The kingdom of heaven grows gradually, relentlessly. It is God's work, and we must go about it in God's way and in His timing, but it *will* get done (Matt. 16:18). Remember the previous one that Jesus gave us about, "It's like the farmer that planted seed in his field"—and he went to bed every night! And it grew while he was asleep! Didn't depend on him, it depended upon the soil responding to the Word. So be patient; let God do His work—our job is to keep sowing the seed (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

I read something this week, and I couldn't quite figure out how to make it *into* a sermon, but it was a story of, I think it was two guys who were both theology professors, and the one guy was known for being very relaxed and patient and gentle; and his friend came into his office, and the guy that was always so at ease was just pacing back and forth like he was really concerned about something. And his friend said, "What's wrong?" And the guy said, "I'm in a hurry—but God isn't." This is God's work, building His kingdom *one soul at a time*. Be patient, keep sowing, keep tilling, keep watering—speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and wait for the reactions (2 Tim. 2:25).

Second thing I think we can apply is: Be wary of—but don't be afraid of—large growth. Now, there are people who claim that some churches are too big, and some are too small—mainly too big. I have read books that say dogmatically that, no church should ever be more than—and fill in a number: 300 or 500 or 600 or 800, whatever it is, and when you reach that number, you should divide and you should spread out; you should plant a new church or at least, split into a couple of different congregations. Now, to be sure, some of the largest churches in the world—and in America—are very bad: preaching a false gospel, harvesting countless false converts. And we *do* agree with the idea of planting new churches. I've been involved, in my lifetime, in at least a half-dozen different efforts at starting new churches. We haven't done it through Heritage Bible Church *locally*, but we've helped people do it in other countries, and we continue to be committed to do that.

But, while we're committed to *planting*, our job is to always make sure that it stays pure—not to manipulate the size (1 Cor. 2:4-5). The perfect size church is: the number of saints who gather together on any Lord's Day, who worship God together "in Spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23-34),

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who provoke each other "to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24), who practice holiness and will exercise discipline according to the Scriptures (Matt. 18:15-18; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:14-15), who proclaim the Word of God (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9), and who administer the ordinances of baptism and communion. That's the perfect church! How many is that? Well, if you if you live in a village of 100 people, don't expect a megachurch! But a church of 20 in that village of 100 is having a *massive* impact! Suppose we had 20 percent of the population of Ada County at our church? The size isn't the issue—the truth and the purity is, and we have to let Jesus' build His Church in His way. Small is fine.

I know in Russia, the government won't let you register a church until you have the magic number of 10 baptized believers. Now, that's not terrible; if you have 10 adult believers, and they all tithe, they can support number 11 as their pastor, at the same level of that they exist. So, I don't know—10, 50, 300, 700, 2,000—it's the *content* and the people, not the size; as long as it's pure, full of love, and sound doctrine, we're happy with it.

Another application we can make: Don't be naïve about the kingdom of heaven—or, the kingdom of God—in this age. Understand: Anyplace the Word is proclaimed, the devil will try to snatch it away! If he can't snatch it away, you know what? He'll sneak some people in who will try to pervert it (e.g. Rev. 2:14); he will counterfeit the real thing, he will undermine, he will divide, he will bring up accusations one against the other—he *hates* the church! So don't be naïve. False believers will forever be trying to nest in the branches of any good church, any manifestation of the kingdom of heaven on Earth. So to the branches, I warn you: Watch out for the birds. I came one of those stormy days that we had; there was sun when I got here and I was going to be at the office for a couple of hours, so I parked my car under one of the trees out there, and I didn't heed my own advice—I should've thought about the birds that are in the branches. They *did things*, and I had to re-sanctify my car—it was *gross*! So, as the branches grow, there will be birds—don't be surprised. Now, to the branches, that's my caution.

To the birds, I have a fantastic offer to you: In *this* case, we have a transformation program; you can go from being a bird to being a branch, to being part of it. Listen to the message of the King: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest...for your souls," says the Savior (Matt. 4:17; 11:28-29). You can be part of the kingdom of heaven by faith in Jesus Christ, but as this work goes on, it is Colonel Mustard, in the field, with the Word.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for revealing to us this mystery. Please make us faithful as sowers: speaking the truth in love, preaching only Christ and Him crucified. Have Your way with us. Father, if there are any birds nesting in the branches in these parts, please expose them and, beyond that, convert them. Bring them to be part of what You are doing in building Your Church, the Bride for Your Son, who will come as the King of Your kingdom, and the one in whose name we pray. Amen.*