

Good morning,

I'd like to read from Mark's gospel, chapter 4, verses 30 to 32:

Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."[Mark 4: 30-32]

Let us pray:

Almighty God, our Father in Heaven! How great You are, above all beings in the universe, because You created all things both in heaven and on earth!

We are but Your creation and yet You delight in having us come to You in spirit and in truth. We feel so very unworthy and unfit to be in Your presence.

Yet we implore that You see the needs in us poor souls. Oh, God, we need Your help very much. And we ask humbly that You delight to be in our midst and speak to us through the poor lips of this unworthy servant.

And may Your spirit quieten our hearts that we may hear Your voice speaking to each individual soul according to its needs. Help us we pray. We ask in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

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This parable of mustard seed is recorded in the three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Both Matthew and Luke record two occasions where Jesus spoke of the mustard seed. In both occasions the emphasis is in how small a mustard seed is and the amazing growth it can experience and the potential benefits that a fully grown mustard tree can provide to other living things such as birds of the air. Today I'd like to speak why and how this parable of mustard seed applies to Christians of all ages and the truths hidden in this parable that might be shared with all of you for your benefit. And let me state the truths of this parable first as follows:

The first truth of this parable is that God wants to give life to us.

The second truth is that God wants to give growth in us to the full maturity of Christ.

Thirdly, God would like to see good fruits as a result of this growth in us.

In a sense this parable refers to the growth of the Christian church, which had a very small beginning, but has grown remarkably and its sphere has spread over all continents and the number of believers is now in excess of two billion people.



At the same time, the parable also depicts the growth of faith in a person's life, which was as small as a speck of dust, yet it will grow into a significant tree with many branches that offer resting places for birds of the air, thus fulfilling a useful function to other living creatures. This is a precious possibility for all of our lives.

Your life may have been empty with no firm purpose or goal. In fact, the humanity since the days of Adam and Eve have fallen away from the rest and blessings they enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. The process of corruption and depravity has continued since the fall of the first couple some six thousand years ago. Thus we were born in a lost state as a consequence of the first parents' sin.

Some may boast that they were born in the faith of their professing parents. That, however, is not a correct statement because no one is born with the faith in Christ, no matter how faithful their parents might have been. One must encounter the gospel of Christ as she grows and come to the realization of its true meaning as a rational person.

Jesus explained this process of receiving faith as the seed falls into the soil, which is our heart. For the seeds to be scattered, there must needs be farmers, who are God's evangelic workers. Over the centuries many godly men and women with their hearts' devotion in the furtherance of the kingdom of God, have labored to spread the seed of the gospel to searching souls in many lands in accordance with the Great Commission of the Lord.

Some grounds are too hard to receive the seed, which dies before germination. Some grounds are so full of thorns and thistles so that the little sprouts of the seed fail to grow and soon die as choked. Some grounds are in dark shade all day long so that it never receives any warm sunlight so that the seed never has any chance of taking roots. Some grounds are too dry for germination because it just does not give off the moisture, which is essential for seed germination process to begin.

These are all unsuitable conditions for the seed germination. However, there are many grounds which have enough soft soil in them that allow the seed to take its roots and start growing. Friends, let me tell you there was never any perfect land for farming in the first century. In the land of Palestine where Jesus grew up, the grounds were often rough with stones and thorn brushes. That meant the farmers had to work hard to remove rocks, weeds, thorns and thistles to clear out the impediments to the growth of the seeds planted.

The various types of ground we mentioned represent the various conditions of our hearts when we come in contact with the gospel of Christ. However, friends, do not be dismayed and become despondent that your heart may not be suitable to accept the truth of God. God sees possibilities in all of us. No one comes as perfectly prepared soil for the gospel, not many. Yet no one is without hope.

As farmers in Palestine had to remove rocks, weeds and thistles from their fields, you can, with God's help, also remove the hard rocks of bitterness, remorse, hatred, unforgiveness and unbelief from your hearts, so that some soft, good soil may be exposed to the surface to receive the seed of God's word and allow the seed to take its roots down into the soft, tender parts of your heart and mind, to sprout and to start growing, just like the mustard tree that Jesus spoke about.

You can also remove the doubts, self-pity, low self-esteem, material greed and indulgence in fleshly cravings, so that the true seed of the gospel of Christ can take roots, grow and bring about marvelous changes in your heart and life.

In God's eyes there is no soul without a possibility for the tree of life to grow and bear fruits. Let me tell you, friends, God wants to give life to your life. I mean the true life of Jesus, the spirit of His Son, His love and truth into your hearts and lives. He wants to come into your heart and life and have fellowship with you so that the spiritual life that takes root in you could grow, and mature fully to bear wonderful fruits that are pleasing to Him and that benefit those around you.

It pains God's heart to see our hearts left deserted, left barren and full of rocks, thorns, weeds and brambles, useless to any good growing, unproductive and desolate in His eyes. We were not created so useless. We were created in God's image and likeness so that the true life of Christ might grow, bear fruits and thus bring honor and glory to God the Creator.

The second truth in this parable of the mustard seed is that God wants to give growth to the spiritual life in us to the full maturity of Christ. Apostle Paul wrote about this as in Eph 4: 12-15:

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: [Ephesians 4: 12-15]

Paul speaks of the work of the ministry and the sanctification of the church, which is the body of Christ, towards the goal of reaching the full maturity of Christ in faith and in knowledge of the Son of God. In other words, Paul states the ultimate goal of the saints' sanctification is the growth to the fullness of Christ in the lives of the saints and in the church. This is the goal of God's ministry, which is assisted by the Holy Spirit. And this is the goal of individual saint's endeavor as Christians--to reach the full maturity of Christ in them.

Now this is a very tall order for all of us. When I first read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel back when I was in high school in 1960's, I thought the teachings of Jesus were too lofty to achieve. In Matthew 5: 44 Jesus taught,

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; [Matt 5: 44]

I thought this goal I could never achieve. How could I love my personal enemies, much less not avenging them? For many years even after I committed myself to Christ, I never took this teaching as one of my own goals because I did not believe I could become so noble. So, when I was a junior naval officer and one of my senior officers humiliated me and struck me on my face in the presence of others, I challenged him to an evening fight, just two of us in the moon lit empty parking lot at night. He came in a combat uniform ready to fight. But I was more ready than he and having a black belt in Taekwondo I was physically more skillful than he. I made a flying side kick at him, which knocked him down flat on the ground. He then got up and apologized to me for what he had done to me. I was vindicated. I accepted his apology and we made it up.

Looking back to this incident, I now see that the Lord God granted this experience so that I may learn the need for God's help in growing to love even my personal enemies. And I hope I am not encouraging young people here today to engage in evening duels in an empty parking lot when you have a grudge against someone. I confessed this awful failure of mine as a negative example of failing to grow to the full maturity of Christ. This failure occurred because I never believed I could grow to love others, even my personal enemies.

Very soon after this first incident, however, another officer who was ten years senior to me, started to treat me in difficult ways. You may wonder what I did to cause this man to treat me badly out of hatred, but the cause was his jealousy that I was different from him as a Christian and my refusal to live as he did as a worldly person. He was a very arrogant person who had to have everyone around him kowtow to him in subservience. He simply could not tolerate anyone who would not side with him and serve his interests. Because I would never let myself be like him with the pride, greed and wrongful professional bossiness, which were corrupting the entire atmosphere of the unit, he started hating me and humiliating me in public nearly every day in the hope of destroying my spirit. He would call me with all kinds of dirty names and deride me for living a morally righteous life as a Christian, because I would not side with him and come to his evening drinking parties. Anyhow, I had to learn the lesson of loving the enemy in a fresh way. And this time I believe I learned how to love this hateful man.

When David was fleeing from King Saul who was pursuing to kill him, he implored God for help, as in Psalm 59, verses 1 to 4;

Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God: defend me from them that rise up against me. Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, and save me from bloody men. For, lo, they lie in wait for my soul: the mighty are gathered against me; not for my transgression, nor for my sin, O Lord. They run and prepare themselves without my fault: awake to help me, and behold. [Psalm 59: 1-4]

During the four years of this difficult relationship at work I prayed each morning to God to give me His grace and strength so that I could show forth Christ-like spirit towards this hate-filled man another day, just as David did towards Saul. Just as David passed up two opportunities to take Saul's life, the Lord gave me sufficient wisdom and grace to overcome even the most difficult situations, showing a meek and quiet spirit, harboring no hatred but only compassion and pity towards this man and others in his group. As a result, I excelled in my responsibilities and was awarded commendations from the minister of defense and from the president of the country. Just as David was vindicated and became the king of Israel after Saul was killed, this man left the navy in due time in the relief of all who knew him, and I was promoted to become a director at the Navy headquarters.

I told you these two stories of my life to illustrate that the Lord God gives growth in us and the spiritual growth is not from ourselves. Reaching the full maturity of Christ is not possible with human efforts but must be a teamwork between a Christian and the Holy Spirit. Paul recognized this truth that although he labored to bring the gospel to the people in Corinth and Apollos, another evangelist ministered to this newly established church, it was God who gave growth to it, as he wrote in I Corinthians 3: 6.

I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. [I Corinthians 3: 6]

Jesus spoke another parable, the parable of the leaven, to illustrate this process of growth that occurs within our spiritual life, in Matt 13: 33;

Another parable spoke he unto them; the kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. [Matt 13: 33]

I have never baked bread so I cannot speak about the process of baking bread with any qualification. But I watched my wife bake bread a few times and it is indeed remarkable that a lump of flour kneaded with a sprinkling of either baking soda or yeast is turned into a delicious bread that satisfies our appetite. The preparation of a heart to receive this leaven, which is a type of God's true word, is our portion. You ladies know with what care you prepare a meal of flour for making bread. But what happens within the meal of flour after you have mixed it with yeast comes from the property and power that is in the yeast and not from the baker.



Just as there is a power in a small mustard seed to germinate and to grow to a large tree, there is a power in the yeast to change and transform the meal of flour into

something entirely different from its former state so that it becomes delicious edible loaf of bread. So the process of transformation in a Christian's spiritual life is in the domain of the Holy Spirit and not in us. That is why I say it is a teamwork between a Christian and the Holy Spirit. Each has a part to play for this miraculous work to occur. Paul stated that we have been chosen to attain our salvation through faith and sanctification, as in II Thess 2: 13;

But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: [II Thess 2: 13]

Before He was crucified and again before He rose to ascend to heaven, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to His disciples in John 14: 26;

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. [John 14: 26]

The three and a half years of Jesus' ministry on the earth was not enough to achieve full maturity in the disciples of Jesus. That is why the Holy Spirit had to come to continue the work of ministry among the believers after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. And this work of the Holy Spirit has been continuing ever since the Pentecost event, teaching, admonishing, building up and nurturing the Christians for growth in our spiritual life towards the full maturity of Christ in us.

Just as the leaven, when it has been put into a meal of flour, never stops working, and just as the little mustard seed, when planted in a good ground, never stops growing until it reaches its fullest measure planned by God, the spiritual life planted in us through the gospel of Christ never stops growing through the sanctification work of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of Christ until the image of Christ is reached, as Paul prayed in I Thess 5: 23;

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [I Thess 5: 23]

So, what is our part to play in this teamwork of sanctification together with the Holy Spirit? I'd like to point out that the division of labor is not apparent in this work of sanctification but it is a collaborative process in each and every phase of sanctification. For example, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to remove the following from their hearts and lives, as he wrote in Eph 4: 31;

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: [Ephesians 4: 31]

You might say, "So I have to do all the hard work to do the cleaning up of all the bad things in me and the Holy Spirit can come in and build the good things of Christ in me, is that how things work?"

Friends, I used to think so and get so discouraged when I kept failing and fall into remorse and regret. It was a bad cycle of trying, failing and regretting. Are there any of you who have had similar experiences? I bet some of you feel the way I used to. But, friends, that is not quite how things work. God has a better plan, a much better work plan that works a lot better than the cycle we mentioned. It is co-work between God and man in every step of the process. In other words, the teamwork of sanctification is not like an automotive assembly plant where each worker does her work before the next person does his work with job specifications clearly defined. When a worker fails to do his part, it disrupts the whole assembly line. Each worker has to do his part correctly and in specified time interval for the work flow to continue on and a car is produced as a result.

That is not how God's work of sanctification works, and thank God it is different from an assembly line. The big difference is that the Spirit helps us in each process. Although God has granted the free will to the human and expects us to exercise our own judgment and choices in each step of our life, God is there to help us make the right choices and to do it right.

The Holy Spirit and the angels of God were besides Jesus when He was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil and afterwards, as recorded in Matt 4, verses 1 and 11;

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. [v. 4:1]

Then the devil leaves him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him. [v.4:11]

Can you imagine the Holy Spirit taking a vacation while the Lord Jesus was being tempted by the devil? Both the Holy Spirit and the angels were standing by while Jesus was being tempted and proving Himself as the victor over Satan. Likewise, they were besides Jesus while He was in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, as recorded in Luke 22: 41-44;

And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. [Luke 22: 41-44]

To the disciple watching his Lord praying in the garden of Gethsemane, only one angel was seen helping Jesus endure the agony of the impending tribulation of unjust trial and the cruel death on the cross on Calvary. But friends, I assure you that in this night the entire host of heaven and God the Father were watching from above in great interest and encouraging Jesus, the Son of God, go through the final phase of His great mission as the Savior of humanity while Satan and his host were hoping that the human nature of Jesus would rise in protest of the utter injustice of this awful experience and refuse to go through the sacrificial role as the Lamb of God to be slain as the ransom for all sins of humanity.

You might say in disagreement, "God's help was with Jesus so special because He is the Son of God. And I am a mere believer and I am not so important to God as Jesus was. So do I have the same level of attention of God as Jesus did?"

My brothers and sisters in Christ! There are many parents here amongst us. And if you are like normal parents, you would not discriminate among your children in the way you love them. In fact, you would give a greater amount of care and attention to a sickly, unwell child than to healthy children. The entire family would pour out their love and care on a sickly, handicapped child in unison. Likewise, when you feel weak and unable to do your part in the sanctification work, God will provide a greater amount of help to you.

Apostle Paul wrote about this helping work of the Holy Spirit, who prays on our behalf when we hardly know what and how to pray in a dire circumstance, as recorded in Romans 8: 26;

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. [Romans 8: 26]

I'd like to emphasize to you friends that the most important part that we can do in this great teamwork of sanctification is that we spend time faithfully with God, quietly meditating and praying and reading the Scripture. Christians must pray for our spiritual life to grow. Without praying we cannot have joy and peace of God in our life. A church cannot grow unless its members spend time daily in their private lives in praying and having communion with God. The pipeline of living water needs to flow down from the throne of God to each individual Christian's heart so that the precious life of Jesus can grow to His full maturity and bear fruits that are pleasing to God the Father, as written in Rev 22: 1-2;

And he showed me a pure[a] river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. [Revelation 22: 1-2]

Lastly, God would like to see us bear fruits, spiritual fruits that the Scripture mentions a number of times. Jesus said, "Therefore, by their fruits you shall know them [Matt 7: 20]." Apostle Paul gave us a list of the desirable fruits in a Christian, in Galatians 3: 22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. [Galatians 3: 22-23]

Those of you who are farmers know that a plant, once planted and taken roots down, needs to spend a long period of hot summer heat, periods of rain and windstorms before its fruits begin to mature and come to the time of harvest when the fruits are fully matured. Likewise, we need to spend hours exposing ourselves to the warm sunlight of Christ, rainfalls of His word and sometimes God's discipline of correcting us before this maturation process can fully be achieved.

I am not saying that only older Christians can bear good fruits. Some plants have wonderful looking branches but no fruits. Yet many young plants and trees, with tender stocks and branches that are not fully grown, do bear delicious, bounteous fruits so early in their life to the delight of the farmer. Young people amongst us have just the same privilege and potential of bearing beautiful fruits of the Spirit as adults do. And the secret is that we spend our time of prayer with God daily and reading the Scripture in search of the knowledge of God's truth and the wisdom of how to apply the principles of God to our personal lives. This is the part we play in our teamwork with God.

God takes delight in working with you, collaborating with you, coaching you and helping you as you provide humble willingness to work with God. Some people are very zealous in helping others. But the pre-requisite for all of us is to let God help us first before helping others.

God loves people who recognize they need His help, come to Him seeking help and keep asking for His knowledge and wisdom. Along this process, the growth will come to us, just like in the case of a meal of flour and a mustard tree. Let us all grow in Christ to His fullness in every aspect of our life so that individually and as a Church, our lives show forth beautiful fruits of God's righteousness before this perishing world and as sweet smelling savor to God our Father.

Let us pray:

Almighty God our Father!

We thank you for granting us this time of worship and sharing Your truths with this congregation. Your truth is so clear and delightful to those who seek You with honest and humble hearts. You delight to work in their hearts and lives.

As each of us come to you individually, bare open our hearts to reveal the need of Your help and earnestly seek You to work in us and amongst us, we implore that You grant the help of Your Spirit so that the sinful elements are removed from us and the good seed of Your truth be planted, take roots and grow so that each of us grow to the fullness of Christ in the end.

We are especially thankful for the young people in this congregation. We ask that You take special interests in each of them so that, as they seek to live for Christ each day in their schools, homes, and in extracurricular activities, help them be victors and truthful witnesses for Christ.

We pray for the mature generation of this congregation. They have endured the turmoil, ups and downs of life for many years and have proven truthful to You. Provide comfort and confidence that when their lives are over, Your heavenly glory and praise will be their reward. And there is heaven waiting all of us. Help us joyfully walk this journey with You.

Lord, help this church so that Satan may not creep in to take his roots down in any soul. May Your power work mightily in this congregation so that this church stands as a shining torch of true light in this community and in this country of America.

We present these request in the name of our Savior Jesus. Amen.