

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED.

An Encouragement and a Caution

Matt. 13: 31-32.

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Two interpretations incompatible.

This well-known parable is usually thought to portray an encouraging picture of the growth of Christianity from small beginnings to an ultimate great and blessed development. Neander's introduction to his Church History has been pointed out as exemplifying this popular interpretation. He writes, "It shall be our purpose to trace from the mustard grain through the course of the past centuries—the growth of that mighty tree which is destined to overshadow the earth, and under the branches of which all its people are to find a safe habitation." Such an interpretation makes the growth symbolized to be one of unmixed good, and such is the popular interpretation. Now there can be no question but that growth is the central thought of the parable, but does it teach the mere fact of growth and permit the assumption that the growth is entirely healthy and desirable? The parable of the sower depicts growth, but it is a limited growth; the parable of the tares depicts growth, but it is a mixed growth. May it not be that something more than the mere fact of growth is taught in this parable? Some careful expositors consider the parable of the mustard seed to teach an abnormal growth of the Kingdom. They hold that the growth of the plant and the resultant attraction of the birds to its branches tells of an unnatural growth of the Kingdom and its undesirable consequences.

II. The Growth Unnatural.

To some this will come as a new interpretation, but is it not a fact that abnormal growth is the first impression gained from this parable? We read that a mustard plant attains the dimensions of a tree and at once the thought comes, "Is that not an unusual thing? It is, indeed, and therein consists the very point of the parable, but we, unfortunately, lose it again upon further inquiry. For we learn that, though to us such a development of the mustard plant is unknown, yet it does attain remarkable size in Palestine. Thereupon we assume that what seems so unusual to us would be quite familiar to Christ's hearers, and consequently the parable must merely set forth the fact of a great development from a small beginning. But in this we are mistaken. We have no right to suppose that because the people of Palestine were familiar with such an unusual growth of the mustard plant that they did not recognize it to be an unusual occurrence in the natural world. Though the sight might have been common enough to be passed by unnoticed, yet that does not signify that, when thought was given to it, they would fail to observe that such growth in an herb was unnatural. Indeed, when the literal rendering of Rotherham is examined it

can be clearly seen that the unusually great development of what is only a garden plant is brought out in the Greek.

"... like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; which, indeed, is less than all seeds, but when grown is greater than garden plants, and becometh a tree. . ."

This rendering, by the words "greater than garden plants," brings out more forcibly the thought that although it was a remarkable growth in a mere herb was fully recognized in Palestine. Moreover, thus translated, the fact of abnormal growth is clearly shown to be the point of the parable. Here is a plant that belongs to the garden herb class, but which, as it were, so outdoes itself in growth as to transgress the law of its nature.

There are trees that grow from seeds very small and insignificant as against the size of the full grown tree. Had our Lord desired to symbolize a healthy and substantial growth, why did He pass by such trees and choose instead the seed of an herb that tries to become a tree? Must it not be that He did not wish to symbolize solid and substantial growth, and therefore had to pass by tree seeds for the mustard seed? This appears the more clearly on consideration of the question of Christ prefacing the parable as given in Mark and Luke: "Whereunto shall we liken the Kingdom of God, or with what comparison shall we compare it?" The questions signify that it is not easy to find a suitable symbol. But, if the mere fact of great growth alone be what is to be illustrated, nature furnishes examples aplenty. If, however, it is abnormal growth that must be symbolized, then the question may well be asked, "Whereunto shall we liken the Kingdom?" for one does not readily light upon that in nature which transgresses the limits of the growth of its kind. In choosing the mustard seed, since in Palestine it does exceed the usual limits of growth in a garden plant, the Lord chose that which aptly symbolized abnormal growth.

Dr. Bruce, although holding the popular interpretation of the parable, yet, strangely enough, perceives the point of the parable while missing its significance. Claiming that the mustard is "properly not a tree but only a garden herb and an annual," he insists on the point of the parable being "that what is in its nature an herb becomes in dimensions something approaching a tree." But is not this abnormal growth? The Companion Bible says "This growth is contrary to nature, to show that it symbolizes an unnatural result with its consequences." A recent book on the parables of the Kingdom, by Dr. J. J. Ross, entitles the chapter on this one, "Abnormal Growth of the Kingdom," and there seems no reasonable doubt that this is a statement of the real point of the parable. So viewed, the parable becomes a caution rather than an encouragement.

Let us take the statement of Dr. Bruce just quoted as to the point of the parable and try to find the significance of the symbolism. Consider first the words "in its nature an herb." Wherein does that which is in its nature an herb appear a

well chosen symbol? Simply in this: that Christ's Kingdom on earth is in its nature comparable to a mere garden plant as against the great trees of the world kingdoms. This can readily be seen upon a consideration of the principles of His Kingdom. The Kingdom of Christ possesses ideas of greatness entirely opposed to the world's ideas of greatness, and this fact ought, we should suppose, to have kept its growth within humble "garden plant" limits. Dr. Ross has a long paragraph showing how utterly at variance are the ideas of greatness embodied in the kingdom principles of Christ with those that govern world kingdoms. He instances five points of contrast. The first is wealth. While wealth is a sign of worldly greatness, poverty is a mark of greatness in Christ's Kingdom (Matt. 6: 19, 24, etc.) Then there is authority, held as an indication of greatness in the world, while humility and submission mark greatness in Christ's kingdom (Luke 22: 24-6. Population comes next as a sign of greatness in a worldly kingdom, but of the kingdom of Christ, "few there be that find it," in its true sense (Matt. 7: 14). Fame signifies worldly greatness, but in the kingdom Christ established, meekness and modesty denote greatness (Matt. 6:3, 4). Finally, the ability to resist is an essential to greatness among the kingdoms of the world, but in His kingdom resistance and retaliation are forbidden (Matt. 5:39-40.) Here then are principles hidden away in the very nature of Christ's kingdom such as should greatly limit the growth of the kingdom in a world ruled upon such opposite principles. "So far removed from the world's idea of the requirements of a kingdom were the principles of His, that when His enemies would mock Him they could devise no more telling and bitter taunt than to robe Him with kingly purple and mockingly bow and hail Him King of the Jews" (Marcus Dods). "In its nature an herb," how well these words describe the kingdom of Christ!

From such a seed as Christ sowed what would we expect? Surely from teachings so self-denying and humbling would be produced a kingdom of people who would be "the lowest, the most patient, the most despised, the meekest, the poorest, the most humble, the most insignificant of men" (Ross). But what has the real development been? The herb has tried to become a tree. What is in its nature an herb, has indeed become in dimensions something approaching a tree. From the time of Constantine great growth was attained, not however by spiritual power but by political power, by the outreaching of a state religion. And what was true first of the Papal power, the main stem, has become true to a greater or lesser degree of the other branches put forth since the Reformation. By various means, differing with the years and with the doctrines and practices of the different churches, an abnormal growth has been secured by "super-imposing of the principles of the new life of Christ upon those who know absolutely nothing about the new birth through the Spirit of God."

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