

Living the Jesus Way: Simplicity I



AIM

To discuss Jesus' words and cultivate the ideas & attitude behind living simply.

MEDIA

<http://youtu.be/IVmtqp2Tn9w> 'Parables Remix - The Mustard Seed' by Zondervan Publishers.

INTRODUCTION

Watch a YouTube clip about small beginnings to get the conversation started.

- What did this video say about the boy's attitude?
- What behaviours did the video suggest came from his attitude?
- What does this parable remix say about our relationship with God?
- How can these attitudes and behaviours inspire us to be more faithful in our lives?

BODY

The Gospel According to Matthew is a narrative which serves to demonstrate Jesus the Messiah as the fulfillment of prophecy and the healing Son of God who calls his followers to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven to the whole world.

When the author of Matthew was writing, the Roman Empire was an agrarian peasant society ruled by a few powerful men with no middle class. Business people, artisans, farmers, fisherman and other useful tradespeople were all at the bottom of the heap. But there were also 'expendables' people who didn't fit in: the diseased, beggars, prostitutes, bandits, etc. Women were always below men in status and children below women. It is important to understand these strata of society for these structures of power were what Jesus, the Son of King David, was against. For the writer of Matthew, the kingdoms of the world are directly opposed to the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus comes to spread.

In the middle of the book of Matthew, there are five long discourses, perhaps to show the fulfillment of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). The the third discourse contains 8 parables which can all be taken together to show different parts of the kingdom of heaven. Shane Claiborne goes into detail about the parables of the mustard seed and wheat, while not losing the sense of context of the discourse. (

Reference: Dennis C. Duling "Matthew: Introduction" Harper Collins Study Bible, 2006.)

Matthew 13: 31-33

31He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 33He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The Mustard Seed Revolution" excerpt from *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Claiborne

DISCUSSION

- Shane really brings out the revolutionary sense of Jesus' message as portrayed by Matthew. Have you heard the gospel preached like this before?
- Have you ever thought of Christianity as an "impious confederacy"? What are some kinds of things that people today say about Christians? How do you feel about those things?
- What can you do in your daily life that is revolutionary in the way that Jesus is talking about?
- What does all of this have to do with living simply?



- Is living simply giving up everything and moving to India? Or is there something deeper than that?

Quote for the day: ***"I never lose an opportunity of urging a practical beginning, however small, for it is wonderful how often in such matters the mustard-seed germinates and roots itself."***

Florence Nightingale, (1820-1910) mother of modern nursing

PRAYER

God of simplicity, please be with us, opening us to a clear vision of what is real and true, leading us deeply into the mystery of life. And may our dealings with others be marked by simple honesty. Please give us the courage to plant the mustard seed and the strength to give it time to grow in our lives. Amen.

ACTION

What is one simple and practical beginning you can make to help

CLOSING

Become the Change: Shane Claiborne 1:37 <http://youtu.be/PbleETyE3AQ>

The Mustard Seed Revolution

Jesus uses some unlikely metaphors for God's kingdom - like yeast, for instance. Jews were not big fans of yeast. After all, it was the same metaphor he had used to describe the infectious arrogance of the Pharisees that everyone was to beware of. So then, for the folks not digging the yeast imagery, he says God's kingdom is like mustard. And I'm not sure they would have liked that any better. Was Jesus just running out of metaphors? I don't think so. I've heard plenty of cute sermons about the mustard seed parable, talking about how God takes little seeds and makes big trees out of them, but I think there's much more than that going on here.

Matthew strategically places the mustard seed parable in the middle of a story about gardening in which Jesus commands people not to tear up the weeds from the garden but to let the wheat and weeds grow together (*Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43*). Then he tells his listeners that the kingdom of God is like mustard which grows like a wild bush (*Matt. 13:31-35*). I once heard a farmer say it is like kudzu (a wild vine that vigorously takes over an area. Rather unassumingly, it can blanket entire mountainsides, smother trees, and crack cement buildings.) and a city preacher compared it to the wild weeds that grow out of the abandoned houses and crack the sidewalks. The mustard seed's growth would have been familiar to first-century Jews and its symbolic meaning unmistakably clear. It may have even been growing in the wild around them as Jesus spoke.

Jews valued order and had very strict rules about how to keep a tidy garden, and one of the secrets was to keep out mustard. It was notorious for invading the well-trimmed veggies and other plants and for quickly taking over the entire garden. (Kind of like yeast works its way through dough ... hmm.) Then they'd be left with only mustard! Jewish law even forbade planting mustard in the garden (*m. Kil'ayim 3:2; t. Kil'ayim 2:8*) When those first-century peasants heard Jesus' images they would have giggled, or maybe they would have told him to hush before he got killed. Here he is using this infamous plant to describe God's kingdom subtly taking over the world.

Plenty of people had lofty expectations of the kingdom coming in spectacular triumph and were familiar with the well-known "cedars of Lebanon" imagery from the prophets, who described the kingdom as the greatest of all trees, not unlike a giant redwood tree. The cedars of Lebanon imagery would have brought some enthusiastic amens from the crowd, maybe even gotten some people dancing. But Jesus ridiculed this triumphal expectation. After all, even mature mustard plants stand only a few feet high, modest little bushes.

The Jesus revolution is not a frontal attack on the empires of this world. It is a subtle contagion, spreading one little life, one little hospitality house, at a time. Isn't it interesting that Saul of Tarsus went door to door (*Acts 8:3*) trying to tear up the contagion like it was a cancer? But the harder people tried to eradicate it, the faster it spread. And in the end, even Paul caught the contagion. The mustard weed grabbed him.

Another convert I have fallen in love with is a dude named Minucius Felix. Felix, a persecutor of the early Christians, cursed the early followers of the Way as a "profane conspiracy" and an "impious confederacy" that was multiplying all over the world "just like a rank growth of weeds." He went on to say that it should at all costs be exterminated and ripped up from the roots. Years later, Minucius caught the infectious fires of God's love and joined that little mustard seed conspiracy.

Mustard has always been known for its fiery pungency. In the days of the Roman Empire, it was a sign of power. Darius, king of the Persians, invaded Europe and was met by Alexander the Great. Darius sent Alexander a bag of sesame seeds as a taunt, indicating the multitude of soldiers he had. Alexander sent back a bag of mustard seed with the message, "You may be many, but we are powerful. We can handle you." And they did.

So there goes Jesus turning power on its head again. His power was not in crushing but in being crushed, triumphing over the empire's sword with his cross. Mustard must be crushed, ground, broken in order for its power to be released. In John's Gospel, Jesus compares his death and resurrection to a seed that is broken: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (*John 12:24*). This is the crazy mystery that we celebrate, a Christ whose body is torn apart and whose blood is spilled like the grains and grapes of the Eucharist that give us life. Mustard was also known for healing; it was rubbed on the chest to help with breathing, sort of like Vicks vapor rub. Mustard-the official sponsor of the Jesus revolution; a healing balm, a sign of upside-down power, and a good dip for a kosher meal.

As if that weren't enough (and we wonder why people were so angry!), Jesus adds one more thing: "the birds come and perch in its branches" (v. 32). Another aspect of the popular Hebrew imagery of the cedars of Lebanon is that the nations can build nests in the branches of the cedars. But Jesus puts an interesting spin on it when he says the "fowls" can come and rest in the branches of the mustard bush. The word fowls is not a reference to the mighty eagles that dwelt in the cedars but the detestable birds, the ones that ate animal carcasses (*Gen. 1.5:11; Deut. 28:26*). Farmers did not want fowls in their gardens. That's why they put up scarecrows. Bless his heart, Jesus is saying the kingdom of God is "for the birds." The undesirables find a home in this little bush.