

Overall Goal: The overall goal for all the lessons by Fig Tree Ministries is to help people deepen their understanding of the biblical text.

Class Learning Objectives: Understanding the concept of the Kingdom of God through Jesus’ parable of the Mustard Seed.

Cultural Background: Jesus, like his 1st-century Rabbinic counterparts, used parables to enhance their teaching about the Bible. The ancient Near Eastern culture - within which Jesus and his disciples lived - was a *storytelling* culture. Storytelling was the preferred method to communicate difficult topics. Both the teacher and their audience were familiar with this style of communication. Ancient Near Easterners expect meaning in communication to be deeply layered throughout the message.

1. **Homework** – This review of parables is leading up to the parable in **Mark 12: 1-12**, known as the *Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen* or the *Wicked Tenants*. The parable is based on **Isaiah 5** and finishes with a quote from **Psalms 118**. This is a complex parable. Based on the reaction of the priests to whom Jesus presents, it is evident that they immediately get the point.

2. **Review of the Characteristics of a Parable:**

1. Story – stories captivate, inspire, and can transform us.
2. Fiction – not intended to relate a set of historical events
3. Carry Truth – the story itself carries the truth inside of it – even though it is fictional
4. Jesus adds twist/shock – Jesus often shocks his listeners by adding a twist for emphasis

3 **Mixing Metaphor** - A metaphor understands one thing in terms of another. The Kingdom of God – a challenging abstract idea – is best understood using metaphor.

Last week we looked at the kingdom as “yeast” in bread: a little is all you need, it takes over, it moves mysteriously throughout the entire loaf.

When Jesus tells parables, he often draws on several metaphors and mixes them to express his point fully. In this lesson, I will refer to this as mixing metaphors.

Notes:

4. Common Parable topics and comparisons

Unknown / Difficult	Known
Kingdom of God	King
God/Humanity relationship	Shepherd
Human / Human Relationship	Father
Commandment	Farmer

5. Matthew 13:31-32

Unknown / Difficult	Known
Kingdom of God	Mustard Seed
	A man planted
	Smallest seed
	Birds in branches/shade (Mk. 4:32)

6. Which “Mustard Seed?”

- a. **Black Mustard** (*Brassica Nigra*) is the more common for cultivation and for producing spice and condiment. The issue is that the sees are not the smallest of seeds.

- b. (*Brassica Elongata*) - this plant is in the mustard family and grows in Israel but is considered a “noxious weed” and an “invasive species.” Farmers do not want it in their garden. The plant has a seed pod that contains the seeds. The seeds are exceedingly small. Literally, the smallest of seeds.

Jesus uses “twists” or something shocking to get the audiences attention.
Why would someone plant a noxious weed that will take over the garden?

7. **Pliny the Elder** (23 – 79 AD) – Pliny the Elder was a first century scientist and naturalist. Concerning how the mustard seed spreads he wrote:

“but on the other hand, when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.” *Nat. Hist.* 19:54 §170

8. To ‘parable’ is to cast alongside something in comparison.

Unknown / Difficult	Known “Mustard Seed”
Kingdom of God	Invasive Species
	Smallest Seed
	Spreads Unstoppable
	Will take over your garden

The parable is not a “literal” telling as we often think of them. Jesus is using the story to help us understand something about the **kingdom of God**. How is the kingdom of God like the seed of the *Brassica Elongata*?

1. The **smallest seed** (of the kingdom of God) can spread and take over.
2. The kingdom of God is like an invasive species. When you introduce it into a community of people, it begins to **spread unstoppably**.
3. Like a farmer trying to remove an invasive weed – so the world will react to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God spreading implies that it overturns the ways of the world. The world does not like it and tries to get rid of it.

Notes:

9. Who is the “man” who planted and what is the reference to “birds in branches/shade” of a tree?

The Cosmic Tree (or World Tree):



The ancient mind would always associate the cosmos with something in their physical world – like a mountain reaching the heavens.

In many cultures, they viewed the cosmos as a tree – a “cosmic tree.” The “cosmic tree” provided for life just as real trees provided for a microcosm of the world. It was used as a metaphor to help them understand the complexities of their existence.

10. The Bible also contains examples of the metaphor for the cosmic tree. When this metaphor is used in the biblical text, it is always used concerning a kingdom.

- Daniel 4 – King Nebuchadnezzar.

“Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, **and the birds lived in its branches**; from it every creature was fed.

Daniel 4:12

- Ezekiel 31 – the Assyrian Empire.

“All **the birds of the sky nested in its boughs**, all the animals of the wild gave birth under its branches; all the great nations lived in its shade.

Ezekiel 31:6

- Ezekiel 17 – God plants a kingdom.

“On the mountain heights of Israel, I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. **Birds of every kind will nest in it**; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.

Ezekiel 17:23

11. Mixing Metaphors: Jesus weaves together the metaphor of a Mustard plant (*Brassica Elongata*), with “a man” – God – growing in the “cosmic tree.”

12. The kingdom of heaven is like...

A mustard seed – the kingdom of God, is like an invasive weed. If you introduce even the smallest of seeds into a community, it becomes a living and active force that can advance unstoppable and take over the garden.

A “man planted” – the “man” is likely God. God planted the tree in Ezekiel 17. We are made in the image of God. Therefore, we should be out planting seeds for the kingdom of God.

“cosmic tree” – When the kingdom of God advances, it grows into a “cosmic tree” which provides for all the world. What the world sees as a weed – will become the cosmic tree.

Faith Principle: When you spread even the smallest seed of the Kingdom of God into a community, it spreads unseen and unstoppable.

When we plant “seeds” for the kingdom of God, we are not responsible for the end result or even how the kingdom grows. That is God’s business. Our role is to plant. We are to be the delivery mechanism that unleashes the Spirit of God into the world.

Jesus tells several parables about planting, growing, or the mysterious growth of the kingdom of God. Below is Mark 4:26-29 – called the Parable of the Growing Seed:

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”