



A Lesson About Lessons

Parables use imaginary scenarios involving mundane things to make a point about something else—something spiritual and unseen.

What is the smallest seed in the world? If you said, “The mustard seed,” you wouldn’t be alone. That’s a pretty common belief among Christian Bible readers. But, as surprising as it may seem, it’s not true.

“Wait just a minute,” you might be tempted to say. “Doesn’t the Bible say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world?” No, it doesn’t. I used to think it did, just as many people still do.

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world. Poppy seeds, for example, are smaller than mustard seeds. For some people those are fighting words, because they think it means that someone is calling Jesus a liar. But Jesus did not say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world. In Mark 4:30-34, Jesus was giving a parable, and as it’s always been with his parables, the typical human response is to miss the point.

The point of the parable is not mustard seeds; the point is the kingdom of God. Parables use imaginary scenarios involving mundane things to make a point about something else—something spiritual and unseen.

Parables are not literal, historical stories. They are imaginary stories created to help listeners or readers understand a deeper concept about something else. The teller expects his listeners to know that parables should be understood as beginning with: “Imagine this.”

Jesus told parables to give insight into the kingdom of God. In the parable of the mustard seed, he asks listeners to imagine a seed that is smaller than all other seeds, but then that tiny, insignificant seed grows into something so big that it can provide shelter for the birds.

Jesus was not saying that mustard seeds are the smallest seeds in the world. He was saying that the kingdom of God can be likened to a mustard seed, an imaginary one (remember, it’s a parable), that is the smallest seed you could possibly plant, but then it grows to become the largest plant in the

whole garden. He was talking about the kingdom of God, not giving a science lesson.

Jesus wanted us to know that the advance of the kingdom of God begins in a small, practically unnoticed way with a baby born in a stable to a poor woman in an occupied country. That baby grows up to be despised by the leaders of his own people and crucified like a criminal on a Roman cross. But despite that weak, apparently insignificant beginning, he was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God the Father as Savior and Lord, both Creator and Redeemer of all the universe (compare Colossians 1:15-20).

Look for the Lesson

Jesus built his parables around common, ordinary things people knew about. But parables have a point, a lesson, that goes beyond the mere details of the story. And the lesson is usually made through a surprising twist, an unusual aspect that lifts the details of the story from the ordinary to the amazing.

No wonder Jesus used parables. The kingdom of God and the grace of God are amazing. But if we spend our time trying to turn the details of Jesus’ parables into science and history textbooks, we will miss the lesson.

After reading *Animal Farm*, would we argue over whether pigs could really talk? After reading *Les Misérables*, would we scurry to French prison records to find whether there really was a Prisoner 24601? Do we get hung up on whether it was scientifically possible for things to turn to gold when King Midas touched them? Or do we simply ponder the analogies and learn the lessons?

Jesus told stories, good ones, that illustrated important aspects of the kingdom of God. Truth has to do with communicating a true message, and often that is done with creative stories, analogies, metaphors, similes, poems and songs. And Jesus was a master at it.

Imagine that! □

—J. Michael Feazell