

Pt 4 No Way to Greatness but by Death

by Alan Redpath

Alan Redpath's sermon emphasizes that true greatness in the Christian life is achieved through humility and service, as illustrated by the parable of the mustard seed.

Duration: 40:26

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 13:1-9, Matthew 13:24-32, Matthew 13:44-46, Matthew 17:20

Topics: "Greatness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of faith as a grain of mustard seed. He references Matthew 17:20, where Jesus tells his disciples that their inability to cast out a devil-possessed child was due to their lack of faith. The speaker emphasizes that mustard seed faith is not a small or insignificant thing, but rather a powerful and mountain-moving faith. He also mentions the parable of the sower and the parable of the tears, highlighting the importance of interpreting these parables to understand the message of the Holy Spirit. The sermon concludes with a personal anecdote about Chuck Smith's church in California, illustrating the idea that true leadership is measured by a willingness to serve rather than a desire to rule.

Transcript

Matthew 13 and verse 31 and 32. I'll just read these verses to you. Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all seeds.

But when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof. Reading from the King James Version. Now this morning we come to the third of the four parables that were told to the crowd.

As I've said to you before, these are teaching us something of the outward progress of the kingdom of God until the Lord's coming. And the second four, the inward secrets of what God is doing, taught to his disciples. Now this morning we need to proceed with some care and dependence upon the teaching of the Holy Spirit in our approach to this parable.

The story of a grain of mustard seed, a tiny grain, which, when sown, became not only the greatest among shrubs, but a tree, in which birds came to shelter. There's a message here for all of us, all our hearts. A message of warning, perhaps, against shallow notions of what is real greatness.

A warning against shallow ideas of what real greatness is. A message to all of us, a challenge to attain to a life which is great, in the deepest sense of the word. So here's a warning, both ways.

Shallowness of what greatness is, and a challenge to attain to real greatness. Now we want to emphasize this morning the need for care in our interpretation of this parable, and each of them all, because the Lord gave no interpretation of it. He gave us the meaning of the parable of the sower and the parable of the tares, but not of any of the others which follow.

So will you just suffer a preliminary word on this point of interpretation, which I trust will help us to get the real message of the Holy Spirit to our hearts. That means, I'm sorry about that, this, I'm going to work you rather hard this morning, but I thought, well, the first lecture is probably the best time to do it, and so I've got rather a lot of writing for you. I'll go fairly slowly.

If I go too quick, holler, shout at me, and I'll slow down. But at the moment, I'll tell you when we stop this, you're going to, I hope, be able to take down everything. So you're ready for it.

Just give your hand a good shake, and your brain a little turning around. You ready? Ready to go, right. In our study of these parables, particularly those of which the Lord gave no interpretation, there are perils of interpretation to avoid.

This is where you begin. There are perils of interpretation to avoid, and principles of interpretation to follow. I'll give it to you again.

There are perils to avoid, and principles to observe. The chief peril is that of accepting the popular opinion of the majority as to what the parable teaches. Say it again.

The chief peril is that of accepting the popular opinion of the majority as to what this parable, a parable, teaches. Right? Remember, it was the popular interpretation of Old Testament scripture which led to the crucifixion of Jesus. They got it all wrong.

It was the popular interpretation, repeating, of Old Testament scripture which led to the crucifixion of the Lord. The opinion of the majority is not always right. Now that's the chief peril to avoid.

Anybody all got that, or anybody not got it? No repetition necessary, or is it? Popular. What do I mean by popular? Popular, yes. That was the girl who had a birthday this morning.

She must be popular. What do you think I said? It doesn't matter. Go on.

Okay. The last sentence. Hold it.

The opinion of the majority is not always right. Okay. The chief principle to observe, the chief principle of interpretation to observe is, ready for it, that we must expect to find harmony of teaching with all other parables, and we ought to be very suspicious, s-u-s-p-i-c-i-o-u-s, I don't know why, but that's how you pronounce it, suspicious, ought to be very suspicious of any interpretation which contradicts another.

Of any interpretation of a parable which contradicts another. We may safely assume that the Lord Jesus was consistent in all his teaching. We may safely assume that the Lord Jesus was consistent in all his teaching.

And in his use of pictures of everyday life, to illustrate his meaning. His use of pictures of everyday life to illustrate his meaning. So we see the value of his explanation of the first two parables.

Come again. Yes, that's right. In his use of different pictures or illustrations from everyday life, to illustrate his meaning.

Any interpretation we place upon the other parables which contradicts his teaching must be untrue. Got that? Any interpretation we place upon the others, that is after the first two, which contradicts his teaching must in necessity be untrue. So whatever picture he uses is used in one sense, always.

That's a principle to observe throughout the Word of God. For example, the sower is found in the first three parables, and must be the same person in each. The seed is used in these parables with the same significance.

The field and the soil are used also, with the same meaning and so on. I'm just stressing that because in order to understand the teaching of these parables, we must carefully watch for consistency in interpretation. Now that's the end of your writing.

So if you get that down, that's a lot. Yes, repeat. Yes, yes, here we are, coming again.

Ready? The field and the soil are used with the same meaning. So, the principle, the point is, in order to have a clear understanding of the teaching of the parable, we must carefully watch consistency in interpretation. Got that? Now if there's anything you haven't quite got, come and ask, and I'll give it to you later.

Ready? Now, bearing all that in mind, let's look at this third parable. That's the end of, you know, what you've been doing. So, I'm going a bit faster now.

You don't need to take word for word. Now the popular idea about the teaching of this parable of the mustard seed is something like this. Our Lord was teaching that outward growth of the kingdom would become so consistent that it would dominate the world.

And from the insignificant beginning of a little mustard seed, it became a great tree, of great magnitude and great authority. Now at once that faces me with a tremendous problem, because the first two parables which we've studied clearly taught that there was apparent outward conflict and failure. Three quarters of the seed in the parable of the sower was ruthless.

The enemy's tares sprang up among the good seed, and separation of the two was to be postponed until the end of the age. At once, therefore, I see that the popular interpretation of the mustard contradicts all that. And therefore, although it be popular, it's not correct.

And I have to look at the parable again. Now notice in these two verses some illustrations which have been used before. Well, there's the seed.

And remember, that the Saviour always spoke of that as being men or people, in whose hearts the Word of God had become alive, incarnate. People who were thrown into the generation in which they lived, to make an impact for the glory of God. That's the seed.

Then there's the sower. And the Saviour taught us that that is Himself. Then there's the soil.

And we heard Him say, the field is the world. And then there are birds. And according to His interpretation, already given in verse four, these birds snatch away the seed, and they hinder rather than help.

They're symbols of evil and not of good. The birds snatch away the seed. And finally, there is the seed which has become a tree.

Now, mustard is not a tree. It's a shrub. If ever you look at the library here, there is a book in it, or there used to be, I think it's still there, called *The Land of the Book* by Dr. Thompson.

Just bear that in mind, *The Land of the Book*. And in it he suggests that there was occasionally, and exceptionally, a mustard seed which grew to be a large tree. But such a growth is abnormal, unnatural, something which is by no means the original intention.

A mustard seed cannot properly and normally produce a magnificent and fast-growing tree. And should it pass out of the stage of being a flowering shrub, and become a great and mighty tree, then the process is entirely abnormal. Now this is exactly what the Saviour is describing.

The mustard seed hasn't had an abnormal growth and become a great tree. Now, if you could collect together in your mind all these pictures, interpreted elsewhere by the Lord, and remember this abnormal growth, what do we find the true teaching of this parable to be? I'm just going a little slower now. I hope.

Slow down. I'm sorry, I'm speaking to myself. Isn't that stupid? Excuse me.

That's what happens when you get to my ancient years. The outward manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth right now has become abnormal in its growth, and it has become a refuge for what is destructive and harmful. The mustard seed suggests lowliness, meekness--long word coming, but I can't think of a short one-- unobtrusiveness, u-n-o-b-t-r-u-s-i-v-e-n-e-s, which simply means not wanting to show yourself, display yourself, being unobtrusive, not pushy.

The mustard seed therefore suggests lowliness, meekness, a willingness not to be a big thing. But it's become a great tree, which is a picture of pride, dominance, and authority. Now, you see that fulfilled today.

In national life we speak of, or do we, Christian countries? There isn't such a thing. The Queen of Britain is on our coinage described as defender of the faith. What faith? In almost every school in the country, you have every kind of faith taught, every kind of religion.

You don't have, these days, a Christian country. The Christianity revealed in national life is poor stuff. The world has never seen a truly Christian nation.

The nearest, the nearest, I'm sure, is Korea. You ought to see someone from Korea here, isn't there? Where is she? Oh, he, yes, bless your heart. Well, I've been there, and a nation of about 38 million people, of whom well over 10 million are Christians.

And it's a thrilling thing to be in a country like that and see what God is doing. That's the nearest, but you don't see it these days. And you see the same thing happening, alas, in the visible church, expressing itself, of course, a long, long time ago, first of all in the time of Constantine, the Roman Emperor, when the church is elevated to a position of worldly authority.

And it's evidenced in lack of real conviction about the message it should preach. Wherever the church has become a worldly power, it's been a refuge for what is unclean and destructive. Long, long, long years ago, I used to go to school at Durham and attended Durham Cathedral twice every Sunday for four years.

A great opportunity to go to sleep, as practically all of us did. You could hardly blame us. It's fantastic to know that at Durham Cathedral, you had bishops like Handelman, Westcott, whose books are really tremendous, and whose ministry was nationwide.

Now you have a bishop who doesn't even believe the resurrection. And he's not sure about anything. And that's the kind of thing that goes on when you have a church that becomes authoritative in worldly power.

It admits that which is unclean. But alas, you see the same thing happening in the lives of Christian people. Sown by the sower into the world, flung out into the world to preach Christ.

Just a tiny grain of mustard seed, but whose lives, instead of being dominated by mustard seed growth, and I'll explain that later this morning, instead of being dominated by that principle, loneliness, meekness, unobtrusiveness, become possessed of a spirit of pride and dominance, authority, and look for power instead of service. For possession instead of sacrifice. Abnormal growth outside of God's intention.

And all the time they're simply giving away that they're sheltering inside their hearts something that is destructive and unclean. That's a tragedy. The principles of loneliness and meekness are forgotten.

The desire to be somebody, have your name in the press every week, be somebody who has a great following, be an important person. Always that is found to be because they're hiding something that is unclean. Don't let me get you to imagine for a moment that that means ultimate failure of Christianity.

The Lord isn't dealing with ultimate issues here, he's tracing its development in the time in which we live. And to the truth of all that I've said, history, present day experience, they are tremendous testimony. Yes, his kingdom shall be set up, and his reign shall be established, the ultimate is sure.

But people have misunderstood true principles of what it is to be great. They've always thought it meant imposing your will on somebody else, dominating a situation. And the outcome has been abnormal growth, without strength, and sheltering sin.

And the result is that some people never get up anyway because they refuse to go down. The way to up in the Christian life is down. Oh, how important that is.

I'll say more about in a moment. Because there's something very personal and wonderful right at the heart of this parable. Let me read.

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed. Now this is you and me in God's mind. And he's taken us and thrown us into the world.

Now what's been the result? Have I, and are you about to, seek greatness along the line of personal self-will? Are you the kind of person, and I speak to myself very much in these lectures, I assure you, are you and I the kind of people, should I say, who seek to lord it over others? You know what I mean? Dominate any situation. You want to be the center, are you? And you can't exercise authority over other people except you do it in a manner which is distasteful to everybody. May I just repeat that? The kind of person who just can't exercise authority except in a way which is distasteful to anybody.

Mark 9, 34. The question was, who's the greatest among us? Who shall sit at the Jesus' right hand in power? Oh, how they wanted to be prominent. That's not greatness.

That kind of thing always is sheltering something destructive. Listen to the Master's reply, telling them where's the secret of real greatness. Listen to it.

Luke 22, 27. I am among you as he that serves. Whoever will be great among you, let him be your servant, your minister, even as the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Matthew 20, verses 7 and 8. In other words, in the Christian life, there's to be no status-seeking. No status or status, S-T-A-T-U-S, no status-seeking. Greatness is measured not by my capacity to rule, but by my willingness to serve.

Just a small picture. Some years ago in the States, in California, I went to see what was happening in Chuck Smith's church. I don't know if some of you may know that name.

What's the name of that place? Come on, Sam, no, not Sam. Sam, pardon? That's it. And it's located at Costa Mita, near California, near LA, Los Angeles.

And at that time, it was a tent packed with people. And people were being converted and blessed and baptized in the sea and all that, very thrilling. And they were building a new church.

And the new church was built, holding, I suppose, about three or four thousand and full. And the Sunday it was opened for the first time, it was crowded with people. And there came in lots of hippies.

It was the days of hippies. And lots of hippies came in, all with bare feet. And they came in and ran up the stairs, and they made the carpets absolutely filthy.

New carpets, of course. And the deacons were furious. And the next Sunday, there was a great big notice on the door, no bare feet allowed.

Chuck Smith saw that, the pastor. And he said publicly, either that notice is removed, or I cease to be your pastor. And the next Sunday, when masses of hippies again came in, what should they find on the doorstep? Chuck Smith.

Kneeling, kneeling at the door with a pail of water, a sponge, and a towel. And he washed all the hippies' feet before they went in. He never had one more argument.

A man who knew what it was to get down and humble himself. And then the authority of the Spirit of God came through. That's just one small example.

But it's the principle of real greatness shining out through the word. A great man is not somebody who has mastered other people, but somebody who has served in loneliness and meekness. Now, we need to ask if in our individual lives we're realizing the purpose of Christ.

Are we turning from false greatness, which he disowns, to true greatness, which he recognizes? Are we concerned about our rights, our authority, our position, our self-importance? If so, we're sheltering something unclean. Or are we ready to pour out our lives in meekness, sacrificial toil, running on his errands, never thinking about ourselves or our greatness? In other words, just being like Jesus. And I read

to you Philippians 2, verse 5 to 9. Let this mind be in you which was in Christ, who, being in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be grasped after, to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, took upon him the form of a servant, made in the likeness of men, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Therefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name. That's greatness. Greatness by calvary.

There's no way to the throne but by the cross. No way to greatness but by death. The greatest menace in the world is religion without a cross, a desire to go up, an unwillingness to go down.

1 Corinthians 1 Peter 5, 6. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time. So you see, I've got to pray that this parable, as it really is interpreted, should never be fulfilled in your life and mine. And it means that I'm willing to say to the Lord, I tell you it's easy to say it, but boy, to live it is different.

Lord, I'm willing to be a doormat that other people may wipe their feet if they want to. The greatest thing that could ever happen to any of us is that we may be a stepping stone to Jesus. And stepping stones are meant to be walked on.

And that hurts when the people who walk on you are your friends. Just one other thing. What time is this lecture supposed to finish? Am I on time yet? Five minutes more? Five? Ten twenty.

Right. Get your pens and get yourself into overdrive. Top gear for the last five minutes.

Ready? I don't know how much to say, how much not to. Um, you remember when Jesus said concerning the devil-possessed child, Matthew 17, 20, why, why, when the disciples asked, why could not we cast him out? You remember the answer of Jesus to that? Because of your little faith. And listen, truly I say to you, if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, I move into another place.

And it will. Nothing will be impossible to you. Did I imagine that mustard seed faith was a little thing? Only a little bit? Only a little faith that wouldn't do very much for me? No, it's mighty faith.

It's a mountain-moving faith. Faith like a grain of mustard seed. Yes, it could move mountains.

Why doesn't it? Have I ever asked myself why doesn't it? Have I ever argued about it? Oh, I've got more faith than a grain of mustard seed. That would never get me anywhere. Sure, you're certain about that? No.

Mustard seed faith is not a little faith. It's mighty because it's governed by the principles of meekness, loneliness, unobtrusiveness, qualities that are only, how do I say this, only evident by the crucifixion of ourselves. Mighty faith.

Because I've learned to die completely to myself and live to Jesus. Be much more concerned about your daily dying than your living rights. Let me just say that again.

Be much more concerned about dying daily, personal crucifixion, dying out to myself rather than my right to live. Maybe, hopefully, if that quality was governing, allies, we'd see mountains be shifting, miracles in the church, the supernatural, the thing that can only be explained because God has done it. And the desert would rejoice and blossom as a rose.

Faith, mighty faith, the promised sees and looks to that alone and laughs at impossibilities and cries, it shall be done. Lord, give you and give me mustard seed faith. Get it? I hope so.

Amen. Lord bless you. Time? 10.20? Coffee? Relax? Another lecture?

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