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SUPER SEED AND MUTANT MUSTARD¹

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April 18, 1938 is a date which, I suspect, many collectors wish they could revisit. On that date, the world got its first glimpse of a superhero who has stood for “truth, justice, and the American way” for decades. Many of you are familiar with this hero, known across the globe as “Superman.” As the story goes, Kal-El was the child of a dying planet, Krypton, whose parents sent him to earth for safekeeping. Little Kal-El was found by a rural American family, the Kents, and raised with small-town American values. In order to keep his identity safe, the family gave him a very ordinary name, Clark Kent, and under that name, he acted very mild and ordinary; but whenever duty called, he would change his clothing and use his super powers to preserve peace, rescue the innocent, and bring justice to the vile.

The seed Jesus talks about in Mark 4 is similar in some respects: it is not of this world, it appears to be very mild and ordinary, but it is full of surprising power. Let’s read about this “Super Seed” together in Mark 4:26–29:

²⁶ And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground;

²⁷ And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.

²⁸ For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.

²⁹ But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

I love this parable. It is a great encouragement to me. I want you to imagine a farmer going out to his field. At the beginning of the growing season, there’s a lot of work to do. The soil must be plowed and made ready to receive seed. It’s hard work, hot work; but it must be done! Once the soil is ready, that farmer straps on his bag and walks through the field, flinging seed. Once he’s done with that, he’s done working for a while. There’s nothing more he can do. The growth of the seed is out of his hands entirely. Remember, these are ancient techniques, long before machinery and pesticides.

Would there be any benefit for that farmer to worry night after night about the seeds’ growth? Is there anything humanly possible that he could do to make those seeds grow? Of course not! It’s entirely out of his hands and in God’s hands! It doesn’t matter how often the farmer checks on the seed, or whether or not he digs some up to see if it’s sprouting; nothing the farmer can do will accelerate the growth of that seed.

However, the farmer knows that seeds grow into plants in stages: first the blade comes up; eventually there will be a place for the grain to grow; and then the grain will appear and grow larger until it is ripe for harvesting. When it’s time for harvesting, guess what? Now that farmer can get busy again! The farmer sets up the first stage, and he harvests in the last stage; but everything in the middle is out of his hands.

¹ This sermon is unedited.

And this is just like the kingdom of God! It's just as Paul says in I Cor. 3:6–9a:

⁶ *I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.*

⁷ *So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.*

⁸ *Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.*

⁹ *For we are labourers together with God:*

That last verse is the key: “[W]e are laborers together with God.” Isn’t that wonderful? There’s a partnership between us and God in sowing the seed, seeing growth, and gathering the harvest. We have a part, and God has a part. We don’t know how God’s part works. We don’t know how that little seed of truth grows in the heart of a man or a woman or a child; but when we are to sow the seed and then gather the harvest when the time is right.

The one thing we must be careful of here is the desire for instant growth. We think, “Well, we’re sowing the seed; we’re doing our part; why isn’t there any growth?” On the other hand, we could say, “Well, since I don’t see any growth, that means nobody is sowing any seed!” My friends, neither of those things are the right way to look at this. If we are faithful to sow the seed, God will be faithful to grow the seed—but in His own time and in His own way. We can’t rush Him! Let me read to you a passage from one of my favorite preachers:

One of the most destructive forces at work in the church today is our insistent demand for instant results. We want to have immediate conversions, immediate responses, immediate dedications every time we speak. We tend not to allow time for the Word to take root and grow and come to harvest. But our Lord is teaching us the great truth that we ought to.²

So that’s the Super Seed: it may not look like much, but it has the power to change hearts and lives; yes, it can alter the future!

The next parable is about Mutant Mustard. Just as every super hero needs a super villain, Mutant Mustard plays the part of the villain to our Super Seed. This parable has confused many readers because we simply don’t see a mustard plant like the one Jesus describes here—and that’s the point. This mustard plant is unnatural. It is a freak of nature. Let’s read about it in verses 30–32:

³⁰ *And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?*

³¹ *It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:*

³² *But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.*

Now, at first glance, this sounds as though it would be a great thing: a humble, little seed grows into an enormous plant, providing shade for the little birds; but that’s not what Jesus means. I need you to

² Ray Stedman, “Seed Thoughts.” 10 Nov. 1974. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/seed-thoughts>.

remember two things from the last sermon. First, the parable of the sower is the key to understanding the rest of the parables. Remember that? Jesus said, “If you don’t understand this parable, how will you understand the rest of them?” Second, in that parable, the birds described—what? Satan and his minions! What are they doing lodged in the branches of this overgrown mustard plant? What part do they have in the kingdom of God?

Well, the fact of the matter is that religious systems have a tendency to get “too big for their breeches.” We see that all through Jesus’ dealings with the priests and the Pharisees; but we also see it on a massive scale with the church of the Middle Ages, which governed European politics for centuries. And it can happen in any church, in any time or location. When a church sheds its biblical purpose and grows itself *for the sake of itself*, for its own wealth or prestige or whatever, it’s going to become something it was never intended to be. And guess who moves in and makes a home? That’s right! The birds—the devil and his minions. It’s sad to say, but many of our mainline denominational churches have already grown themselves in just this way.

So what exactly is the church *supposed* to be, if it grows from a mustard seed? Why would Jesus use the mustard plant to describe the kingdom of God (both as it should be and as it should *not* be)? The mustard plant is a short little shrub that doesn’t look like much; yet if you know anything about mustard, you know that’s powerful stuff. That’s the picture of the church as it should be: humble, yet surprisingly potent.

I remember when I was in Bible college visiting different neighborhoods in Pensacola, Florida. One day we met a man who was singularly fixed on the topic of mustard oil. He kept going on about the fact that people with bad intentions could sneak up behind you, put a tube of mustard oil up your nose, and knock you out cold. We never could get him to change the subject. Mustard oil is powerful stuff!

In America, we tend to think of mustard as the yellow stuff in a squeeze bottle that we put on hot dogs. I don’t know about you, but I love a hot dog with nothing but plain yellow mustard! That is mustard, but it is diluted and mixed with other ingredients. Pure mustard is much more like horseradish or wasabi. It will have the effect of painfully clearing one’s sinuses. It burns and stimulates. It’s powerful stuff!

So here’s the deal, as I understand it: the mustard plant is supposed to be lowly and unimpressive, yet have a powerful effect, just as the church is supposed to be lowly and unimpressive, yet have a powerful effect upon society; but there is a false growth in some churches which seek to dominate, to impress, to hold undue influence—and into such churches the forces of Satan will flock. These churches are the Mutant Mustard.

The lessons for us are twofold today: first, we have to realize that we must do our part, and God will do His part in bringing about growth. We must scatter seed near and far. The things that are within our power to do, we must do; but then we must be patient while God does His part. Second, we have to remember our purpose as a church is not to exist for the sake of our own existence. We are called to be humble, unimpressive, and yet surprisingly potent in our society through the loving example of Christ’s love operating in our lives. That is our mission.