

Russell Kelfer

A Gospel of Insignificant Beginnings

#1359-A

Series: The Parables of Scripture



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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THE CONCEPTS OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus seems to be conducting a seminar from a boat on plant growth and agricultural principles. In reality, however, He is teaching men and women how God designed farming to teach spiritual truth.

The kind of soil, the depth of the soil, the tending of the soil, all are seen by the Master as “types” or portraits of spiritual principles. All of His illustrations were hewn out of the rock of human experience and carefully crafted into stories, or parables, that took those experiences and applied them in the realm of eternity.

We have heard Jesus talking to us these past few studies about seed, soil, and fruit-bearing as a means of describing the kingdom that was coming into being right before their eyes. It was to be a spiritual kingdom, and the issues involved would all be spiritual, but it would manifest itself in two ways:

1- It would express itself *outwardly* as the body of Christ came into being and blossomed from a band of inept disciples to an army of saints against which the gates of hell could not prevail, and

2- It would blossom *inwardly* as a kingdom born in the hearts of men and women that would result in changed lives and everlasting life in heaven in the presence of God.

In its initial stages, this kingdom would be characterized by what the world considered weakness and failure, but ultimately it would change the destiny of man and the course of history. It would be a gospel of insignificant beginnings, but of ultimate victory and greatness. The Master’s followers did not yet realize that. They were looking for something grandiose to hitch their wagons to, something of epic proportions to justify leaving everything to follow this unknown carpenter. Thus, it is not surprising that Jesus’ next parable began like this:

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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 becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof. (Matthew 13:31,32)

A grain of mustard seed. Nothing in Jesus' time was considered smaller or of less significance in and of itself. It was not what the seed *was*, however; it was what the seed *became* that was so unusual. The mustard plant of that day in Israel was nothing like the mustard plant familiar to most of us. The seed was so tiny it was used as an example of virtual infinity; of something so small you could barely see it.

Jews would speak of a drop of blood "so small it was as small as a mustard seed". When someone defiled the law in the tiniest of infractions, it was referred to as a defilement "as small as a mustard seed". Jesus Himself referred to it in Luke 17 as an example of the smallest possible amount of faith. It reads:

And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. (Luke 17:5,6)

The mustard seed was the epitome of smallness. Viewed by itself, you could never imagine anything of any magnitude resulting from this seemingly insignificant beginning.

But it was a common sight in those days to see mustard bushes or trees that grew as high as 12 feet tall, and because the birds loved the little black seeds the tree produced, it was common to see flocks of birds nesting in their branches.

Jesus knew that both the size of those seeds and the magnitude of those trees which blossomed from those seeds were well-known to the minds of those who listened. So He continued to teach in parables, and His next agricultural masterpiece centered around that tiny little seed and the corresponding insignificance of the beginnings from which the kingdom would blossom.

It is a lesson we, in our generation, would do well to learn. Today's society is founded on bigness and strength. Bigness is the hallmark of our age. Strength and power are the key words

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that are the motivation for men and women in our society.

God, however, with all of His greatness, takes pleasure in small beginnings. He delights to take that which is insignificant and weak, and by a supernatural process, take the least and turn it into the greatest, thereby accruing glory to His matchless name. It has been so from the beginning, and it is even so today.

THE LOGIC OF THE LEAST

To understand what Jesus was saying in this parable, we have to come to understand “the logic of the least”. It is another one of those principles that proves itself to be of God by running at complete odds with the principles of the world. Look at today’s world. College students who have excelled in their fields and are about to graduate are courted by big companies at an unprecedented pace. They are offered unusually high salaries and ridiculous benefits. One recent article indicated some companies are offering to let them bring their children and even their pets to work if they will consider employment with their firm.

These people are considered prime prospects because they are the “best in their class”. They may not have impeccable credentials, morally. They may not be the epitome of integrity. But they are considered “good at what they do”. In the same way, more and more college athletes who are considered the “cream of the crop” never graduate because professional teams recognize their strengths and want them to sign on a year or two early. Ridiculous bonuses that exceed the average working man’s pay for years, are offered as incentives. They may not be mature. They may be “academically challenged” (that means they’re failing), but they become “instant millionaires” because the world wants to see “the best”.

God has a totally different plan. How often the children of Israel would see themselves as victors in their own strength, and God had to, in essence, *make them weak before He could show Himself strong*. How often, as well, did He have to let them try in their own energy and fail before they would allow the “logic of the least” to run its course.

It was, indeed, why He chose little Israel as His standard-bearer. Remember what He told them in Deuteronomy 7:

... thou *art* an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people

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unto himself, above all people that *are* upon the face of the earth.

The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye *were* the fewest of all people:

But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

(Deuteronomy 7:6-9)

Oh, the logic of the least. God reached down and found the least likely group in the universe to succeed and He called them to be His people. Why? Because He loved them, because He is a faithful God, and because He was looking for a vessel weak enough to allow His incredible strength to shine through. Again and again, He allowed foreign nations to come up against His people. So long as they maintained the logic of the least, He miraculously delivered them. Whenever they attempted in their own power to deliver themselves, however, *He let them fail*. Why? Didn't He love them? Oh, beloved, that's the point. He loved them too much to let them be strong apart from Him. And the same thing is true of us today.

Whenever His people begin to think of themselves as sufficient within themselves, He quietly removes some of their armor to let them see in life's mirror just how needy they really are. We fight it. The children of Israel fought it, as well. Over and over the picture was replayed on the video screen of human history against the backdrop of Scriptural majesty and truth. And over and over the story was the same.

You remember the story of Gideon in Judges, chapters 6 and 7. The Amalekites and the Midianites were encamped in the valley of Jezreel, waiting to attack. Gideon blew the trumpet and he began to gather God's people together for the big battle. He put out the fleece and God answered. Remember verse 2 of chapter 7? It ought to be memorized by all of us:

And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their

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hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying,
Mine own hand hath saved me. (Judges 7:2)

Another translation reads:

...lest Israel claim glory for itself,

So God, you remember, had Gideon go through a process of troop reduction until the 32,000 warriors who stood before him were reduced to 300. Then He proclaimed:

And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the *other* people go every man unto his place. (Judges 7:7)

The key part of that verse is the phrase “I will save you”. Therefore, “let the other people go”. God was trying to demonstrate in living color the miracle of the “logic of the least”. He was going to demonstrate His power through a gospel of insignificant beginnings. He had inept and understaffed troops do ridiculous things that in and of themselves could hardly be classified as successful tactics for winning wars, such as running around a city with pitchers and trumpets, *but when the people simply obeyed and followed His often ridiculous sounding instructions*, God always intervened and the enemy fell, often in its own confusion. The enemy was expecting to be confronted with might. Instead, God took and used

the weak things to confound the mighty that no flesh should glory in His presence. (I Corinthians 1:29)

And so it came time for God Himself to come to earth and save mankind. He had at His disposal the very same power that spoke the worlds into being. He only had to whisper and the earth would have been shattered into millions of pieces and spread throughout the universe like tiny grains of sand. He only had to blink an eye and all mankind would have stood at attention and worshipped. Truly one day He will, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Yet with all of that power at His disposal, He *chose a different way*. He chose to continue to write the gospel of insignificant beginnings. He would send His own Son into the world with absolutely no fanfare or furor.

He chose out a totally unknown woman and placed within

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her the Life of God. He chose an unmarried carpenter, a nobody, to be the child's stepfather. We would have had trumpets blast, armies stand at attention, world leaders look on in awe. We would have readied a palace, placed mankind on notice, and caused all of man's labors to cease while they paid homage to the King.

Not God. He found a smelly stable, the only place man would have available, the only thing God would accept. We read:

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, (Luke 1:26)

Later we read:

Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. (John 1:45,46)

Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Come and see. Can any good thing come out of a stable? Come and see. Can any good thing come of such common people? Come and see. Can this be God? Where is His greatness? Where is the pomp? The awe? The respect? The glory? Where is the King's palace? He what? He had no place to lay His head? Where is the King's royal entourage? He what? He chose out a band of common men?

Why? Why would the Living God come to earth in a stable, live in relative poverty, give His entire legacy to twelve unlikely followers, one of whom was a deceitful traitor? Why would the King of Eternity forfeit the rights of royalty for the robes of a bondsman? Oh, beloved, *study God's word until you know the answer for sure.* It will change your life.

God was not coming to earth to set up an earthly kingdom. That would come later. One day He will. God was coming to earth to set up a heavenly kingdom. He was coming to turn men's hearts from the mindset of power and strength to the reality of internal transformation. To do that, He had to unfold a gospel of insignificant beginnings. He had to reveal the "logic of the least". He had to reveal once more that He was not bringing into being a band of men and women who could, in their own power and wisdom, overcome the world. He was pouring His

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life into a band of men and women who, *apart from Him, could do absolutely nothing*. The problem was (and is) that men and women don't want to be known that way.

To be sure we grasped it, *He Himself gave up all of His own rights to operate apart from the Father, and demonstrated for thirty-three incredible years, what man looks like when all He can do is be an empty vessel*. He gave up the right to make His own decisions, to plan His own agenda, to even choose what to say. Instead, He said:

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me. (John 5:19,30)

God had limited Himself as a man to the role of an image. An image simply obeys. God, as man, would do nothing more, be nothing more than an image. As an image, He would sometimes appear weak, sometimes appear insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Those closest to Him, whose lives had been touched by Him would know the difference. But He wouldn't have much appeal to the world at large. They were looking for a Messiah who would come in great power and deliver them from their earthly trials. They were looking for a kingdom to come that would bring glory to them and honor to their power and wisdom.

This man's gospel was 180 degrees from that. This man spoke of dying to self, of the least becoming the greatest, of a kingdom in which every man would "by love, serve one another", of a church where men and women would "have all things in common". He would be the great equalizer. They were looking for the great terminator. And so the world, by and large, missed the King of Glory.

His message was a stumblingblock, not at all what they wanted to hear. He was not a great Israeli movie star whose physical appearance would draw them to honor Him. In fact, it was written of Him,

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness;

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and when we shall see him, *there is* no beauty that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53:2)

He did not come with placards heralding His qualifications for Kingship, nor was His message what the people longed to hear from a politician or statesman. We read of Him again,

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were *our* faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:3)

Yet this was the beginning of the Kingdom. This was the birth of eternal hope. This was the Deliverer, the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel come to earth. This was God. Wouldn't you describe it as a "gospel of insignificant beginnings"? I would think so. It was as though God was creating an atmosphere of weakness and rejection so that when something supernatural happened through this unlikely, straggly group of men who followed this unappealing carpenter, *no flesh could glory in God's presence*.

And no flesh can (and succeed). God has so arranged His kingdom that the work is done on the inside where man can't see it and man can't claim credit for it, and thus only those with eyes to see and ears to hear can even recognize the true reality of its transforming power. Others can see that something is happening. But the reality of it all is only available to those who, themselves, are in the kingdom.

To further amplify the concept of insignificance, God intentionally chooses out men and women who are often average at best, and sometimes chooses those who, by the world's standards, are absolute failures. Again, He does this "*that no flesh should glory in His presence*".

It is the kingdom of the mustard seed. It is the kingdom of insignificant beginnings. It is made up of nobodies who can do nothing apart from Him. The "least of all the seeds" was His description of the mustard seed. The "least of all the people" was His description of tiny Israel. Yet no word in the vocabulary of earth today carries with it more weight than the word "Israel". When Israel speaks, kings shudder, Prime Ministers rush to their military leaders for answers; Generals shuffle papers as though they had an answer for why such an insignificant people could occupy such an impressive place in history and wield

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such a powerful sword with so few people and such limited geography.

They are either hated or loved, mostly hated; but they are feared. Yet no one can explain why. A few years ago, they didn't even exist. Why not bomb them away? Or attack them and take over their land? Why do the nations that surround them despise them, yet still respect them? There is no answer but God.

Even they do not understand what is happening. Today, as in ages past, the Jews are delightfully puzzled by their own place in current history. Once more, this hated, most persecuted people ever to live have come back together by some kind of divine activity, and they are yet blinded by their own unbelief, and still do not realize that Jehovah will soon send His Son once again and remove the blinders and set them free.

Insignificant Israel. A portrait of the kingdom that will one day be real to them, but is yet hidden except to a few who have seen and believed. It is a kingdom that man cannot understand because it does not display its might in ways the world accepts.

THE LESSONS WE CAN LEARN

Jesus is doing more than simply explaining the concept of insignificant beginnings, however. What He is saying in each of these parables is "The kingdom of heaven is like....." He wants us to see etched in the fabric of these seemingly simple stories, eternal principles that explain what life is like when it is lived in the spirit realm. Both aspects of kingdom living are often pictured in the same illustration: a picture of the church as it endeavors to become God's spiritual beacon to a lost world, and a picture of the believer as God's word comes alive in him or her and they grow progressively into His likeness. Read those few lines of Scripture over and over carefully. There are many lessons we can learn from the parable of the tiny little mustard seed. Let's look at a few of them:

1- First of all, spiritual growth is a process, not an event. It often has small beginnings. God often calls out men and women with what seems to the human eye to be of little potential. Common, ordinary people with little or no credentials are often those He calls to Himself. Growth is often slow and unnoticed. They may labor in the background or they may take two steps

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forward and one and a half steps back for a long time. They may have come from difficult situations, may have backgrounds that do not lend themselves to spiritual discernment. In other words, they are of relatively insignificant beginnings.

They may not be great scholars or have extreme leadership skills. They just become faithful in the little things of life. And what does God say about those who are faithful in the little things? He says He will make them ruler over many things. And often one day you hear about God working through the life of a man or woman no one has ever heard of. He has been years in the making; he has been sowing seeds in the “back forty” of the kingdom, like Moses, tending the Heavenly Father’s sheep. For years, he has just stayed in God’s word and been faithful. Like a mustard seed, there were small expectations at the start, but oh what great things come from small beginnings.

Don’t judge your children’s spiritual potential by what you see today. They may be slow growers. God, however, has His ways. And like a tiny mustard seed, their faith may slowly grow until one day it blossoms into a hearty tree. Pray for them and wait. The kingdom is not an event, beloved, it is a process, and the process does not run on the same timetable for everyone.

2- Don’t limit what God can do with your life. You may see yourself as one of life’s “mustard seeds”; insignificant in the grand scheme of the kingdom of God. That’s good. God loves mustard seeds. When they grow into trees, there will be no sharing of the glory. Remember Isaiah 60:22:

A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation: I the LORD will hasten it in his time.

(Isaiah 60:22)

God is not limited by our potential, but by our availability. It isn’t your talents God is after, but your heart. He would far rather have a one talent guy or gal with a pure heart than the multi-talented star of the show whose eyes are fixed on himself and whose heart is marred with impurity and pride.

You may see yourself as a worthless ornament on the tree of life because you don’t seem to have earned the accolades of the Christian community for your contributions to the kingdom. That may simply be to your credit. It may be because God is saving that “well done my good and faithful servant” for a more appropriate time, when His people are gathered around the

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throne in glory, and the rewards are eternal and the acclaim comes from His dear lips alone. Mustard trees take time to grow, and at times they may look like absolutely nothing. That's not what counts. You may not even bloom into full glory until the Son-light of God's glory sheds its precious light upon you in courts of heaven. Leave it to the Master Gardener. And don't limit what God can do with you.

3- Keep your eyes on Israel. God isn't finished with that little mustard seed just yet. He chose them when they were nothing because they were nothing. In an act of incredible divine intervention, He gathered once more a remnant from the four corners of the earth and placed them again in the land of their inheritance. The little mustard seed is starting to bloom. The nations of the earth are all aware of its presence.

Beloved, that little mustard seed will one day bloom again. The God who called them out of nothing will once more intervene in history and Israel will once more be the focal point of all mankind. Mark it. The fig tree will blossom, and like a mustard seed, will be the vessel of God's choosing.

4- The Kingdom is not built on the efforts of man, but on the power of God. Only God can make a tree. And only God can take a life like yours or mine and through a supernatural process actually transform our character until it so reflects His character that the world looks at us and sees Him.

The Christian world has become a sea of "how to" philosophies where man is saved by grace and then gets busy trying to build a kingdom for God. How easily we forget. God does not need us to build His kingdom. His is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Man's calling is to so surrender to His sovereignty and so yield to His indwelling Spirit that what blossoms on the tree of our lives and what happens to His church becomes His responsibility. Becoming faithfully available becomes ours.

We are a generation that is inspired by results. We want to see growth in the here and now. But since growth in the spirit world is internal and we can't always see it, we create external parameters by which to judge our effectiveness in the kingdom; and sooner or later, we look at those parameters long enough until we forget *they aren't God's measuring sticks at all.*

That mega-church with the great reputation may or may not be great in God's eyes. If their focus is on themselves and what

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they can do for Him, rather than on humbling themselves in awe that a Holy God could use the likes of them, their size and their impact mean little to Him. He resists the proud. If they were once humble and tender when they were small and struggling, God may have been more pleased with them then than He is now.

There may be a little fellowship down the street which is struggling to stay afloat, but whose very heartbeat cries out “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” with everything they do. They may not have fancy facilities, may find it difficult to build programs with the limited help they have, may wonder from one week to the next whether the pastor will get paid. So they pray. They pray a lot. They pray for the grace to be used of God. They pray for the provisions to meet the needs of their people. They pray for the lost, knowing the lost will not be impressed with their church, but they pray that they will be impressed with their God.

With nothing to attract men but God, they lift up the Cross and His life of faith and trust the Master to do the rest. Like a little mustard seed, they are insignificant and seemingly inconsequential. Don't you believe it. Their prayers may bring the sweetest aroma of all into the nostrils of our King. Totally trusting, totally resting, they glorify God with every dollar that comes in, every visitor that comes in, every answered prayer, no matter how small. They are the mustard seed and God is pleased. Give them time. Give them love. Watch God work. He loves to work through mustard seeds.

I believe every so often many of us need to go back to our beginnings, back to the moment of our conversion when a loving God placed a tiny seed called salvation in our heart, a seed of seemingly insignificant beginnings, which will one day blossom into an eternity of glory.

Some of us also need to occasionally revisit the seemingly insignificant beginnings of our families, our ministries, and our churches; back to when we knew we were nothing; back to when we could best be described as nothing more than a mustard seed. Enter God. Enter a miracle. Enter a reason to praise.

That trip back in time might well serve to help us recapture a basic truth in the Christian life. God uses mustard seeds so *He can receive the glory*. That's why He called you. That's why He called me.

And that's why He sent His Son to earth the way He did.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- Reread the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31,32. What are the key elements of the parable? Who are the key characters? What basic truths can you learn just from reading those two verses?

2- Read Luke 17:5,6. How would you describe “the faith of a grain of mustard seed”? What was Jesus saying in this passage?

3- Read Deuteronomy 7:6-9 again. Can you find one key word in verse 6 that captures the essence of the entire passage? What does the contrast in verse 7 mean? List all of the attributes of God that you find revealed in that passage.

A Challenge to Further Application

1- Why does the world glorify and always choose those who already know they can? What is the world looking for? What qualities does this philosophy generate in man?

2- Why do you think God came to earth the way He did? Can you paint a modern-day scenario that would serve as a parable to describe the “Logic of the Least” in the birth of Christ?

3- What does the mustard seed teach us about spiritual growth? How can you liken your own experience to that of a mustard tree?

4- Why do you think God chose Israel? Why do you think they do not understand what is happening today?

5- Take a week and in your time with God go back and review your insignificant beginnings. Thank Him that, as with the mustard seed, God had a plan for that tiny seed of faith.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Deuteronomy 7:6-9

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