

# Glorious Contrast

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Preacher: Kirk van der Swaagh

[ 0 : 00 ] Jesus teaches in parables often, and he says that parables do two things.

They close, for some people, understanding, and for others, it discloses understanding. That is that some parables, for some listening to parables, hear what the parable is meant to convey, and others do not.

But, and another thing he says about parables is that they involve mystery. And by that is not meant something unknowable, but something known to God that is revealed to us.

After he had spoken the parable of the sower, and he's with some people around him, plus his disciples, they ask him about the parables. And he says to them, to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.

So this is the case with the parable we're going to be looking at tonight as well. We're going to gain understanding, I hope, into the nature of the kingdom of God.

[ 1 : 05 ] Something which we would not have known if Jesus had not let us in on the secret. We gain understanding into the nature of God through the parable.

And why is it being revealed? Well, because as we've learned recently in the parable of the sower, that indeed the purpose of hearing what Jesus has to say is that we might produce fruit to his glory. 30, 60, 100 fold. So that is how we want to listen to the parable tonight. That is, we want to have, as we've been hearing recently in the morning, we want to have ears to hear.

We want to have minds that are sharp and ready. We want to have hearts that are fertile ground for the seed that Jesus is sowing to take root. We are to listen with ears opened by the Holy Spirit, who has indeed given us ears to hear.

Now, such hearing is true at any time. But there are times when the word of God speaks to a particular moment. I'm sure you've had that experience before. You know, you've heard a sermon.

[ 2 : 05 ] You're reading something in the Bible. Somebody tells you something about God, about the Lord Jesus. And, you know, it just sits. You've had fear, anxiety, confusion about something.

But at that moment, in that particular moment, that word spoken has brought peace. And indeed, God's peace descends and guards our hearts and mind. Perhaps, by the grace of God, that will prove to be the case tonight.

Let's pray to put that in. Gracious God, we do need the peace that passes understanding to guard our hearts and minds. We do need you to come and bring that particular word that encourages us, that reminds us who you are and what you are about in the world.

And so, Lord, what I have prepared, I put before you and ask through the grace and mercy of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that it might indeed speak to our hearts. Our hearts would be indeed fertile ground for the seed that Jesus sows.

In his name we pray. Amen. Now, hearing is particularly important for the parable we're going to consider this evening. It's important that we hear and believe the mystery that it discloses to us.

[ 3 : 15 ] I think we're at a cultural moment when we in the church recognize, and to be fair, probably many outside the church as well, but they don't have the authority to say it, that the world, and by the world I mean, you know, not everybody who lives and not the universe, but all that is in God's creation that rebel against him.

That's what John means, anyway, overwhelmingly by what he calls the world. It's those outside the family of believers. And they are walking down roads that few would have conceived of not even a generation ago, where the highest authority that determines right and wrong is not an ethic found outside of ourselves.

Some standard known through law, moral teaching, history, tradition. It's not even an ethic that is found within someone in a way that drives or calls upon our reason, upon our logic.

No, the moral standard comes from what people feel. I feel this, and therefore, that's the way it is, and don't tell me otherwise.

Now, this move toward self-defined morality, it has its roots in the first manifestation of it when Adam and Eve decided that they could discount the authority of the one who made them.

[ 4 : 40 ] They could create their own rules. And this is the essence of sin. And this is the impulse for autonomy, or what a writer calls self-legislation.

And it has plagued humanity since the moment we discovered that we were naked, and as a result, overwhelmed with shame. Now, it's a temptation, given our cultural moment.

It's a temptation, and frankly, a mistake for any particular generation of Christians to declare that their generation is the worst that has ever been at self-legislation, at autonomy, or is witnessing something never seen before.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The current use, for instance, of non-binary and binary language regarding sexuality, it has its roots in pagan religions that have been around since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden.

The notion behind various expressions of pagan religion is that the idea that all that manifests itself as otherness, separateness, including binary sexes, is an evil to be overcome.

[ 5 : 43 ] Oneness is the goal because it is believed that everything that is, is one. Barbara and I went to a play called Straight White Men. It was on Broadway.

We knew an actor in it, so we had some comps. We went to see it. It was a terrible play. Not just the content. It was just bad. It was just a bad, bad play.

It was like somebody who'd been through, like, Playwriting 101 and decided they had something to say. Well, the problem with it is that one of the actors, a guy named Ty Defoe, was a member of a native tribe who was one of two characters that would come out and address the audience, explaining why the rest of the characters in the play were behaving as they were.

And he self-identified as Two-Spirit. Now, in an interview, he explained, literally, being Two-Spirit is identifying as native or indigenous, and then your spirit is all-encompassing of gender and sexual orientation at the same time.

The author of the interview explains to the readers that Two-Spirit is a pan-native term used to describe gender fluidity, various from traditional masculine and feminine physicality and performance, or more broadly, queerness.

[ 6 : 59 ] In the play, Ty said someone like him was highly prized among his people. See, it's not that non-binary thinking about sexuality has not been around.

It has. And what's perhaps new is that it receives such ready advocacy from otherwise normally intelligent people. And when that thinking gets coupled with power, it presents a genuine threat. In the state of California, in the United States, a bill has been introduced called the Transgender, Gender Diverse, and Intersex Youth Empowerment Act. The legislation would require courts to consider a parent's acceptance of his or her child's gender identity when deciding custody and visitation cases.

Such a bill, it's a genuine threat to parental authority. And we, particularly within the church, who not only seek to follow the ethics of Jesus as he teaches, but understands that there is, as Peter Jones has helpfully explained, a fundamental binary built into everything that there is.

That is, that there is God and there is creation. How does Paul describe this kind of willful autonomy, this self-legislation?

[ 8 : 18 ] He says, See, when a human being, a creation, worships something else in creation, that one is bought into a fundamental, non-binary worldview, and it's not a far leap to say, you know, I don't even need to pay attention to the binary nature of my biology.

I make up the rules about what my biology is. Not even nature has authority. So, in such a climate, it's understandable that we in the church perceive an existential threat.

If there is any institution, at least in Western society, that is a threat to this self-legislating, non-binary social influencers, it's the church. As long as we remain loyal to God's revealed will, and we remain non-compliant, and a voice that sounds discordant in the current choir of non-binary hallelujahs, we are threatened.

Now, what I hope to encourage us to see tonight, that no matter what those out who live in rebellion to God plot and purpose against reality, is that God is in charge, and God's kingdom is something that inevitably, unstoppably, continues to grow.

See, if we're going to hold fast, hold fast to what God has revealed, even in the case of this particular moment in which we're in, where will we find that motivation?

[ 9 : 58 ] Where will we find that courage? Frankly, where will we find that compassion that allows us to hold fast? It's from the revealed truth itself.

And that's why we're going to look at this parable tonight. This parable comes in the context of three other parables that are closely related. They inform one another. And there's a foundational parable of the sower, scatter seed on various soils of varying receptivity.

And then there's a parable just before this, the seeds that are sown that kind of grow up all by itself, the kind of all by itself nature of God's kingdom. It just grows. We don't know how it happens, but it happens.

And this one, again, I'm going to read again, has to do with how the seed falls into the garden and grows to be the largest branches. With what can we compare the kingdom of God or what parable shall we use for it?

It's like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

[ 11 : 08 ] There's the allusion to Ezekiel. Now, seeds are amazing things, right? Seeds are amazing. I mean, you think about it, you plant this little seed in the ground and up comes squash or cucumbers, wheat, corn, oats, citrus trees, apples.

You know, there are 7,500 varieties of apples on the face of the earth. What do we have in the store? About five. But nonetheless, it's amazing that you can plant a seed, grows an apple tree, creates apples, where are more seeds, and it continues to perpetuate.

You know, in an acorn, there's one seed. And that one seed can grow into an oak tree. In fact, there's one down in Sherwood Forest.

And people think that that's where Robin Hood hung out because it might have. It's about 1,000 years old. And the thing weighs some 23 tons, they gather. And the girth around its trunk is about 10 meters, 33 feet.

And a redwood tree, these things that grow to be 300 feet out on the western coast of the United States, 300 feet tall, they live to be 2,500 years old. The seed is as big as the seed you see in a tomato.

[ 12 : 15 ] Amazing. Seeds are incredible. So much potency packed into them, so much, just a future that is just inherent within that seed as it gets planted and sown.

Now, our parable offers a very helpful analogy because it is the mustard sow. So as is the mustard seed, so is the kingdom of God.

And using that analogy of a mustard seed, we're going to consider four things. One, the potency of the seed, the presence of the seed, the properties of the seed, and the purpose of the seed.

Now, I know you haven't heard me preach that much, and that's probably to your benefit, but people that sat underneath my preaching for the 30-some-odd years that I did in New York, I rarely use alliteration like that.

So this is a real break. This is like new ground we're covering. The potency of the seed, presence of the seed, properties of the seed, and purpose of the seed. Let's first consider the potency of it. See, like the other plant life that we considered, the seed of the kingdom of God has great potency.

[ 13 : 16 ] What does Jesus say? Verse 31, It's the smallest of all the seeds of the earth, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants. And that tiny seed, the tree that actually grows, becomes larger than everything else.

And like all the other seeds that we consider to be potent, so too is the kingdom of God. It's planted as a mustard seed, and yet it has the power, the potential, the potency to be larger than all other plants.

Now how is the seed of the kingdom of God sown? It's done through the preaching of the gospel. Right? And back in the parable of the sower, what we hear about the potency of how it is that when Jesus preaches the word, as it's sown, it can produce 30, 60, 100-fold, astronomical, hyperbolic kind of return on the one seed that's planted.

And we know that when Jesus preached, it was potent. Consider some of the conversions that we have in scripture. Think of Zacchaeus.

Right? Zacchaeus was a man who is defined by greed, and he encounters the word of God, he encounters the word of the kingdom, and now he's defined by generosity. We have the sinful woman in Luke.

[14:29] She is marked by debauchery, and then she's one marked by devotion because of the seed of the kingdom of God. We have Saul of Tarsus, transformed from a persecutor of the kingdom of God into its greatest promoter.

See, these are incredible conversions. They are changed lives, transformed by the message of the kingdom, sown by Jesus, the teller of parables, the revealer of mysteries. And it still has power to convert people, to bring them from darkness into light, to make them citizens of the kingdom of God, from under the lordship of the devil to the lordship of Christ, to save people from hell, hold them fast until they stand before Jesus, seated on his throne in heaven, like a mustard seed. The kingdom of God is packed with potential and power, a potency of divine dimensions. The presence of the seed. What does Jesus say?

When it is sown on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds of the earth. In December, what do we celebrate? We celebrate the arrival of the word of God, Jesus, in the flesh, the incarnate son of God.

And what does his presence signal? It signals the coming of the kingdom. And in due time, he makes his presence known. After his baptism, after his testing in the wilderness, Mark records, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel.

[16:00] The preaching of Jesus, his sowing the word, means that the seed is present in the garden. There's this tiny seed, it's sown in the earth, it's in the midst of the garden, and its presence will be known.

Because what does the parable say? It's sown on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds, yet when it's sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants. You know, the kingdom of God is present today.

It's present in this room. It's present wherever there is a believer in the Lord Jesus, wherever there's a gathering of those believers. The kingdom of God is present because the church exists. Jesus says he will build this church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

The church is because God has purposed that it will be. And where the church is, there is the kingdom of God, present in the midst of the garden. And it's present in ways that the garden doesn't even recognize.

See, despite what those around us think about Christianity, the way they think about life has been shaped by the presence of the kingdom in the garden. Alvin Smit, in his book *How Christianity Changed the World*, reports this.

[17:12] The early Christians saw human beings as the crown of God's creation. They believed that man was made in the image of God. And this embrace of human dignity countered the dominant Roman belief that held human life is cheap and expendable.

And this commitment, the Christians had, it had a transformative effect upon society. George Grant quotes, notes that as missionaries circled the globe, they established hospitals, they founded orphanages, they started rescue missions, they built almshouses, they opened soup kitchens, they incorporated charitable societies, they changed the laws, they demonstrated love, they lived as if people mattered.

See, belief in the inherent worth of human beings led to profound cultural shifts, not just in the treatment of those who were weak or enfeebled, but also in the status of women, the humanizing of slaves, the abolition, eventually of slavery, as well as what we now regularly understand as rights. We have rights. And the freedom of the individual and the right to equal the treatment under the law for each person. That is all the result of the kingdom of God being present in the garden. So even if churches in Scotland, the garden, if you will, are not full, the kingdom of God is present.

It is present in the citizens of God's kingdom as we strive to live out the truth of the kingdom, influencing when and how we can the rest of the garden. So the seed has potency and it is present.

[18:44] But there's also something to consider in the properties of the seed, particularly of the mustard seed. See, given the properties of the mustard seed, Jesus' use of it seems particularly pertinent.

One person observes, the nature of mustard and what an ancient historian and naturalist has to say about this plant open up another possible line of interpretation. According to Pliny the Elder, he was a soldier as well as an author from the first century, Pliny says this, mustard, with its pungent taste and fiery effect, is extremely beneficial for the health.

It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted. 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.

Craig Evans goes on to say, from Pliny's description, we see that the mustard adds an element of spice. It is pungent. It is beneficial. It is like seasoning with salt. With this feature in mind, in the parable of the mustard, coheres to the point Jesus makes when he tells his disciples they are the salt of the earth.

And also, that mustard's tenacity may cohere with Jesus' point about leaven, which leavens the whole lump of dough. See, mustard, once planted, is hard to get rid of, perhaps suggesting that the same is true of the kingdom of God.

[ 20 : 01 ] Once it has taken root, it cannot easily be removed. And in view of these properties of the mustard plant, there may be more to the parable than simply going from small to big. Properties of the very seed that Jesus chose communicates to us about the nature of the kingdom of God having been sown in the garden.

It brings health and you can't get rid of it. And then there's the purpose of the seed. With what can we compare the kingdom of God?

What parables shall we use for it? When this seed is sown, it grows up, becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. See, Old Testament prophets, they occasionally use this image of birds nesting in branches as we read there in Ezekiel chapter 17. And what it alludes to is the inclusion of Gentiles in God's chosen people.

Listen to what Ezekiel says again. I myself, God speaking, will take a sprig on the mountain height of Israel, I will plant it that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar.

[ 21 : 06 ] And under it will dwell every kind of bird in the shade of its branches. Birds of every sort will nest and all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

See, the seed that is sown, that Jesus sows as he goes and he preaches the gospel, as the gospel continues to be preached by those who love Jesus and communicate the gospel to others, both by word and deed, that seed sown has a purpose to bring more and more people into the kingdom.

And will it do it? Jesus says he will build his church. God says, I will build a situation in which all the various nations of the earth will come underneath the rule of my good dominion.

And God's glory, he has invested himself in all of this happening. Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 1 that he predestines us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will to the praise of his glorious grace with which he blessed us in the beloved.

See, God's glory is attached to this purpose that Jesus says is part of the seed of the kingdom of God. So, when we look at the situation, this cultural moment in which we're in, when we think it couldn't get anywhere, how is it that we end up where we are?

[ 22 : 23 ] Well, we end up where we are because we're children of Adam and Eve. We end up self-legislating autonomy, deciding for ourselves what rules we're going to live by. And that's what we see around us.

That's how we live apart from the grace of God. That's how we would live. But when God comes along and he sows the seed that brings the kingdom of God, we see its potency, we see its presence, we see its tenacity.

You can't get rid of it, the properties of it, and indeed, its purpose. when we hear a parable, however meekly and weakly I might have explained it, when we hear a parable like that, we are to hear with ears of faith.

When we look at the cultural moment, we're not to look at that and go, oh, what's happened? What's happened? How, where have we gotten? We're supposed to respond with faith to the parable. What does Jesus say about this? It's sown, it's the smallest of the garden, no one's paying attention to it, it's completely discounted, it's overlooked, but yet it becomes the one that the birds of the nest will make their homes in.

And so when we look at Christianity right now, we feel as though it's been marginalized, it's insignificant, it doesn't mean anything, but listen, how did this all start in the first place? We talked

about Jesus coming, the incarnation.

[ 23 : 42 ] Where is he born? He's born not in Rome, he's born not in Jerusalem, he's born in Bethlehem, and he's born to some nondescript family. There's no power, there's no influence, and what does he do?

He goes out and gathers those men to them, again, not the powerful, fishermen, tax collectors, others. This is who he brings to his closest associates that he might teach them about the kingdom of God.

So something that seems insignificant, easily overlooked, or ignored, like a tiny mustard seed, it becomes something one might not have expected. The church, an entity that is not only greater than all the other plants around it, something that cannot be gotten rid of, and is also something to be desired.

We have to have confidence in that. We have to hear that word with faith. When we preach the gospel, we are bringing people life. We're bringing them hope.

We're bringing them a future. And what we're helping to do is to undermine their confidence in this self-legislating autonomy, to undermine it, so they might not put their hope in themselves, but look only to the one who has created them, that they would abandon this oneness, this non-binary view of the world, and see that indeed, no, there is God who creates, and there is a creation that he made, and they will always be separate from one another.

[ 25 : 08 ] So, in the light of this cultural moment, I think we should be encouraged by the contrast that Jesus presents in this parable. Something, again, that seems insignificant, that's easily overlooked, just like that tiny seed, it cannot be overlooked in the end.

It will be, indeed, the defining reality that everybody will have to acknowledge. You know, before we came here, I had written our minister, Colin, to describe the situation here in Scotland, and he wrote back, I'm going to take the liberty of quoting something that he wrote, Scotland was the cradle of Presbyterianism, the land of John Knox, Thomas Chalmers, Robert Murray McShane, yet Scotland is now one of the most aggressively secular nations in Western Europe.

There's a lot of things that the people of Scotland believe about themselves and the world and the way things ought to be, but they do not believe in the gospel. Evangelical Christians make up 1.5% of the Scottish population.

The gospel flame which once burned so bright in this beloved land is now burning so low. One commentator looks at such a situation and says, it would seem that the kingdom of God has been defeated by the kingdom of this world.

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God. He has already been enthroned in heaven, but it's as though he is a king in exile with few loyal subjects. That's the way it feels, but that's not the way it is.

[ 26 : 39 ] It might feel that way to us, but it's not the way it is. Jesus reigns, and he reigns now, and he will reign for all eternity. And the kingdom of God planted in this garden will indeed prove to be the one that dominates all others.

What are the Romes and Jerusalems of today? Beijing, D.C., New York, London. What are those? Are they any more formidable than Jerusalem or Rome?

Are they any more to be feared than the Christians in the first church had to be fearful of Rome?

No. And yet that's where the gospel seed was planted, and that's where society began to be transformed.

Rome, in its discounting of human life, was transformed by the presence of those who have been brought into and believe in the kingdom of God. So again, we have reason to hope.

Despite how the kingdom may appear small and significant as a mustard seed, it is destined to tower above all the other plants of the garden. This is an experience in history, as I've tried to outline some, and though it feels as if it's waning, it is not without precedent.

[ 28 : 00 ] See, one important thing to note is that it is God who has inaugurated the kingdom and is overseeing all that takes place throughout the history that he is writing. Jesus will build, is building his church.

However, the simile, the analogy, teaches us that it takes time for a seed to germinate and send out its shoot and then grow. So patience is called for.

Patience is called for each generation of Christians as we sit in our cultural moment to not look at it and grow fearful, but to look at it patiently waiting for God to reveal his hand in this moment because there is great potency in the seed.

So a moment such as this demands courage, but it also commands compassion because, as I said, these people that are out believing these things, which we just know when we step back and go, really?

Really? believe. Carl Truman wrote in his book, he talked about his book, *The Rise of the Self*. I've forgotten the exact title, but he talked about how his grandfather, in his generation, if somebody came to him and said, I am a woman trapped in a man's body, he would go, what?

[ 29 : 17 ] But why don't we come to a moment where that's a plausible statement to people? Otherwise, intelligent people believe in that as plausible, that you can be a woman trapped in a man's body or a man trapped in a woman's body.

But the reality is that it's not true, and when we go preaching the gospel, bringing people into the reality revealed to us in God's word, we are actually acting in compassion to draw them out of that way of thinking, that they might know the truth of who they are, what God has made, what his purposes and intentions are, so that in the end they will stand with us on that day when all of that brokenness and foolishness of humanity is put to the side and we stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to worship him.

So, my intent with this parable is to indeed to show how it is that we can have courage in this moment and have confidence in what God is doing and that when we look at this cultural moment, things that we talk about, we just had a conversation last Friday with someone, when we talk about these things, we always kind of get very anxious and wonder, how could it possibly be?

But it just is. It is the reality that we're in because we live in a fallen world, but God's kingdom has been sown. It's in the present, in the garden. It has the properties that says it will never be removed, and its purpose is to bring more and more people into the kingdom.

That's our task. That's where we exercise our faith. That's why we need to have ears to hear what Jesus is teaching. Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that we can have confidence in your word and your purposes.

[ 31 : 00 ] We can have confidence in you because God, when we do look around, at least I will confess, we scratch your head and say, how do we pull back from such a moment as this?

How do we reassert reality? But Lord, you are God. It's your garden. It's your seed. It's your kingdom.

And so Lord, just as the other parable says, it grows all by itself. And we don't know necessarily how it happens, but you do it. And so, give us confidence that as we face this moment, we will not lose heart, that we will not be fearful, but we'll trust, that we'll learn from Jesus this mystery that he discloses to us about the nature of the kingdom of God.

And that though it seems insignificant, though nobody needs to feel like they need to pay attention to it, nonetheless, it is, it is the very thing that will prove that indeed you are God and there is none else.

And it's you who has made all things. And it's you that governs all things. And so, into your hands we commit ourselves and we ask you, God, to hold us up, bear us up, that we might not lose heart.

[ 32 : 15 ] All this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.