

The parable of the mustard seed in verse 13:18-19 is historically difficult to interpret. Most commentators say it pictures the benevolent growth of Christianity from a small beginning to eventually cover the earth, providing shelter and shade for helpless and dependent birds.

One alternative view is that this parable, along with others concerning the kingdom of God, represents what we might call Christendom. This is the outward face of Christianity, embracing both true believers and those who merely say they are Christians to benefit themselves personally or advance their worldly causes. Here are a couple of reasons to consider this position:

First, no known mustard plant grows large enough to support birds' nests. The tree here then must be the result of unnatural growth — as would be a church that welcomes unbelievers into membership.

Compare this prominent growth to the Lord's words in verse 24.

Second, if you search for the phrase "birds of the air" in a Bible program, you will find that it nearly always refers to carrion birds — vultures and ravens feasting on dead flesh. This changes the image. We now see greedy birds positioning themselves on the branches looking for unclean food to devour. Who can deny that this describes many who have gorged themselves on the church of Christ?

Look ahead to verse 34 where the Lord Jesus again uses birds as an allegory. "*How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*" The birds here are not opportunistically perching on the branches of a tree, but are gathered by the Lord Himself into a place of nearness and protection (Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7). This is the very picture of a sound church.

Questions:

1. Verses 13:10 and 22 tell of Jesus teaching and preaching as He makes His way to Jerusalem. How does this relate to the parable of the fig tree that immediately precedes this passage?
2. Read 13:15. Some strict Pharisees would forbid even untying of knots on the Sabbath but most would allow it to water a thirsty animal. How does that differ from the plight of the unfortunate woman here?

3. The two parables of 13:18-21 present a contrast between a very visible tree and the invisible working of leaven in dough. How do these picture the kingdom of God?
4. When will the “door” of verse 25 be shut?
5. Weeping usually shows sorrow or regret, but gnashing of teeth in scripture is always associated with anger. What do these emotions tell us about the narrative of verses 13:23-29?
6. What do we learn about Jerusalem’s past and future in 13:31-35?
7. Why has the ruler of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dine in verse 14:1?