

## PLANTS OF THE BIBLE

### Mint, Dill, and Cumin

An older pastor once remarked, “I’ve been studying the Bible for 45 years now; I’ve preached thousands of sermons on Biblical texts; and I can still find something new every time I open its pages.” God’s Word is like that. It has a way of “surprising” us with details, thoughts, and insights that we hadn’t noticed before.

In this series of studies we will be looking at some of the Bible’s smaller details in the area of— gardening. We might be surprised at how often the Scriptures refer to the things we see growing in our own backyards from year to year. The Bible mentions hundreds of different kinds of flowering plants, herbs, and weeds. Some of them have names we’ve heard of, others are not so familiar. It is interesting to see *when*, *where*, and *why* the Holy Spirit chooses to mention creation’s flora. May that same Spirit bless us as we enjoy a **Walk Through God’s Biblical Garden**.



It was the last week of Jesus’ life and He was very busy preaching and teaching. He hardly took a break as He spoke on a variety of topics such as marriage, paying taxes to Caesar, His authority as the Son of God, His resurrection from the dead, and His second coming. In Matthew 23 He leveled strong condemnation toward the *Pharisees* and the *teachers of the law* by showing them that their religion was just a sham— they tried to make themselves look good on the outside by insisting on even the most obscure of their regulations, but they neglected to pay attention to the things God was really concerned about.

We are generally familiar with who the Pharisees were. They were Jews who insisted on following the religious laws and ordinances of the Old Testament to the letter. Now there is nothing wrong with desiring and striving to do God’s will, but the Pharisees had carried their teaching beyond the Scriptures. They taught that one not only ought to keep all the regulations God had prescribed for the Jews, but that in keeping them, one would gain favor in the eyes of the Almighty. The more they kept the law of God, the more holy and pure they thought they were. They even made laws for themselves that went beyond what God had originally said, thinking that by doing so they would gain even more.



#### Scripture Search

Romans 8:1-4

Galatians 3:1-14

This idea of keeping the law to gain favor with God and earn heaven flew right in the face of everything Jesus was teaching. Jesus came saying that people do *not* get to heaven or gain favor with God by the things that they do. Instead, Jesus lived a perfect life and paid a perfect sacrifice to God through His death on the cross for the sins of the world. Favor with God comes through what Jesus did for us, not through our puny efforts at keeping God’s law. We are holy in God’s eyes because Jesus has given us *His* righteousness, not because we are so perfect by ourselves.

But the Pharisees would not give in. Instead they would make a big show of their “holiness” by praying on the street corners and fasting in public. They wanted everyone to see how well they were doing at keeping the law of God. They wanted everyone to think that they were at the “top” of the spiritual ladder.

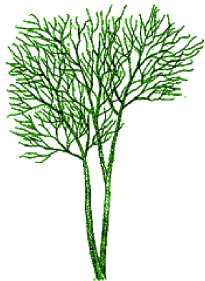
Although there were only about 6,000 who were members of the strictest group of Pharisees, there were many who followed their general principals. “The object of the association [of Pharisees] was twofold: To observe in the strictest manner, and according to traditional law, all the ordinances concerning Levitical purity, and to be extremely punctilious in all connected with religious dues (tithes and all other dues).” Pay particular attention to the second object of the Pharisees listed above: “To be extremely punctilious in all connected with religious dues . . .” They were very concerned about *tithing*. Tithing was the practice of giving 10% of one’s goods to the Lord as an offering. It was directed by God to the Israelites in Lev 27:30, “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.” The Pharisees latched onto this and made tithing a large part of their “outward show” of religion.

**Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former** (Mt 23:23).

Here are mentioned the first plants in our Biblical garden. *Mint*, *dill*, and *cumin* were common kitchen spices. The Pharisees were so insistent with their tithing that they gave even a tenth of these small things. Jesus reveals their religious hypocrisy by mentioning these seemingly insignificant plants. He show them how they were so careful about this aspect of their “religious life” but they did not care about anything else God wanted from them. They did not carry out justice. They did not show mercy toward one another. They made a show of the little things, but did not do the obvious things that flow from a heart that trusts in the Lord.

**Mint** — There are many varieties of this common herb mentioned by Jesus, but three basic ones are common to the area around Israel. They are garden mint, peppermint, and pennyroyal. Generally mint was served with meat dishes, especially at the spring Paschal Feast. Mint grows wild throughout the Holy Land. It can be found in ditches and on hillsides. Today, it is grown for its medicinal uses (to sooth upset stomach) as much as its use in the kitchen. It is extremely popular in Vietnam where it is eaten fresh. Menthol (an ingredient in many cough drops) and menthyl acetate are responsible for the odor given off by many plants in the mint family (although there are some that do not smell like the “traditional” mints). The Jews would strew the floors of their synagogues with mint so that whenever they would walk, their place of worship would be pleasantly scented. Often, different mint plants are crossed to create other varieties such as peppermint, which originated in England.

**Dill** — Some Bible translations read *Anise* in this verse where Jesus addresses the Pharisees. Anise is closely related to dill, but it is most likely here that dill is meant based on the Greek word given in Matthew.



Dill is a sweet and aromatic herb. It is popular worldwide and especially used with bread, vegetables (especially cucumber for pickles), and fish. Like mint, dill also has medicinal uses. To brew a stomach-soothing tea, use two teaspoons of mashed dill seeds per cup of boiling water. Steep for ten minutes, and drink up to three cups per day. It also helps relieve stomach gas and herbalists recommend combining dill and fennel

to ease colic in infants.

**Cumin** — Cumin is a flowering plant, but it is the seeds that are used frequently in cooking. Cumin seeds are strongly aromatic and have been cultivated since Biblical times. Today, most come from India, Iran, Indonesia, China, and the South Mediterranean. Cumin is one of the most commonly used spices in India (especially southern India). They use it to flavor lentil dishes and as a primary ingredient in their curry powders. In South India, it is part of a popular spice mixture called *sambaar podi*. Cumin is also used frequently in the Holy Land, finding its way into many spice combinations.

Mint, dill, and cumin; very common plants mentioned by Jesus to make a very important point—that the external works of the Pharisees were worthless because in their hearts they did not love God or trust in His Son Jesus. They gave evidence of their unbelief by neglecting the things God had said about justice and mercy and concentrating only on the particular aspects of the law that they wanted.



Cumin Seed

- # How often do we neglect the “weightier matters” of the law like the Pharisees did? Do we ever honor God with one aspect of our lives while dishonoring Him in other areas? See how Mt 7:3-5 takes this one step further.
- # What does the Bible say about tithing (Lev 27:30; Num 18:26-32)? When the Pharisees tithed their mint, dill, and cumin, was this wrong in and of itself? What was wrong about their tithing? What about tithing now? What does the New Testament say about Christian giving? (hint: start with 1 Cor 16:2).
- # Next time you prepare a recipe or eat food containing these ingredients, think about the time Jesus mentioned them. Pray to God that we would never be as thoughtless about our religion as those Pharisees. Thank God that for Jesus sake He forgives us when we *are* thoughtless!