

PARABLES OF HOPE: MUSTARD SEED & LEAVEN
MATTHEW 13:31-33
ABC 4/26/20

Ever hear someone tell a story & you find yourself wondering, *What's the point?* Besides Sunday mornings when I'm talking, of course! That may be what we think as we read these 2 short little parables today. But apparently that wasn't the case with the disciples. Their questions were along a different line. After hearing the parables of the sower & of the tares, the disciples were probably wondering how Christ's kingdom could survive if so many people rejected Him & why they were allowed to stay on earth with their evil influence. How could God's people survive, much less thrive, in the midst of such circumstances? Wouldn't the power of Satan & his forces overwhelm & conquer God's saints on earth? The disciples must have despaired at times. Their group was so small & the world so big & hostile. Long before Jesus' arrest it was clear that the Jewish leaders rejected His claims of being the Messiah. Even the multitudes who followed Him didn't understand His true nature or mission. Often, all they wanted was what He could do for them. His disciples were a handful against the whole nation, not to mention the ungodly Roman empire & the world beyond. In addition, the disciples expected His Kingdom to come in glory & power, along with earth-shattering events & the judgment of the evildoers. They anticipated music, horses, triumph, pomp, & displays of majesty & might when the Messiah established His kingdom. In response to these concerns, Jesus used these 2 parables to emphasize that small things can have far-reaching effects. The world's greatest things have had small beginnings. The most famous works of art begin with a few strokes of the brush. All musical works are based on a few notes. In English literature, every book, poem, & play come from the 26 letters of our alphabet. Surprising things & global shut downs can be traced back to a microscopic virus. Small things can do much. In an immeasurably more dramatic & important way, God would demonstrate through the church how a handful of believers, totally weak & inept in themselves, would, in His power, turn the world upside down. God's kingdom would grow & prosper in spite of Satan's opposition & would ultimately influence the whole world. A thing may begin very small, almost without hope, & still succeed mightily when God is in it. God's kingdom would produce results out of all proportion to

its small beginnings. In Mt 16:18 Jesus promised He'd build His church & that not even the gates of hell could withstand it. Certainly there have been times & places throughout church history, & even in today's world, when Christianity has seemed like a struggling, tiny minority in various places around the world. But what may seem small, inadequate, & insignificant for reaching the world will in the end prove to be mighty & powerful as God works out His purposes & His kingdom continues to advance & grow. The twin parables of the mustard seed & leaven each introduce one human character, the man who sows the seed & the woman who leavens the bread. Mark, who records only the mustard-seed parable, doesn't mention a sower but simply uses the passive expression, **when sown** (Mk 4:31). This shows that the man & the woman have no significant role to play in these parables. They are entirely about the mustard seed & leaven & the people are included only because seeds don't plant themselves & bread doesn't leaven itself. The main *character* in both cases is the small seed & the little amount of yeast, but each is shown in 2 contrasting stages. Remarkably small beginnings produce amazingly large results. Only one central point seems intended: *God's kingdom will grow despite its entirely unpromising beginning.*

31-33

1. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED In this **parable** Jesus again uses the picture of planting & compares **the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed** & its growth into a full-grown plant. This parable has been criticized because many seeds are smaller than a mustard seed. But of the plants grown in the gardens & fields of Palestine, mustard had the smallest seeds, just as Jesus said. Because of its tiny size, the mustard seed was commonly used to represent things that were extremely small. Jewish literature contains references to a drop of blood or a blemish on an animal that was the size of a mustard seed. It's reported that Arabs still speak of faith weighing as little as a mustard seed.¹ Jesus probably chose the mustard seed simply because it was proverbial for its smallness. He was using a familiar Jewish figure of speech. The diameter of a mustard seed was viewed as the smallest measurable & the weight of a mustard seed was seen as the smallest amount that could be weighed by using a balance. Jesus was clearly emphasizing a small &

¹<http://unravelingislam.com/the-mustard-seed/>

insignificant beginning. This parable is also criticized for supposedly exaggerating the size of the mustard plant, referring to it as **a tree**. Many mustard plants are small weeds or bushes whose **branches** are too flimsy for **birds** to **nest** in. But the mustard plant of Israel can grow to a height of 12 or 15 feet. Just as Jesus said, **when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, &** from a comparative viewpoint, **becomes a tree** & it can easily support a bird's nest. One author says he has a picture of a mustard plant that year grew in one into a tree 32 feet in height.² But, even though Jesus was speaking accurately here, His purpose wasn't scientific but proverbial. So, what's meant by this parable?

2. THE MEANING OF THE MUSTARD SEED If Jesus explained this parable to the disciples, we don't have a record of it, & in the context of His teaching about the kingdom it wouldn't have been necessary because its meaning was self-evident. The idea of a small mustard seed growing into a large plant was familiar, & the disciples would've immediately understood His point: the kingdom of heaven, though at that time very small & seemingly insignificant, would one day grow into a large body of believers. That is, I believe, the central lesson here. If you take it in the context of the 1st 2 parables, the meaning seems clear. During Jesus' earthly ministry, the kingdom was almost imperceptible, both because of its small numbers & because it was spiritual & invisible. It didn't come **with signs to be observed**, Jesus explained on another occasion, **nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst** (Lk 17:20-21). When Jesus was born, He was put in a manger. Judea, where He was born, & Galilee, where He grew up, were insignificant backwaters of the Roman empire. None of the disciples came from the Jewish religious leadership or were famous or important outside of their relationship with Jesus. They were few in number, uneducated, fearful, weak, slow to understand & believe, & generally unqualified to be leaders of anything. Yet that was the beginning & nucleus of the early church. Eleven men met in the upper room with Christ on the eve of His crucifixion. 120 gathered to pray between His ascension & the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 1:15). From such a small beginning the new form of the kingdom began to spread. In Acts 2 it increased to 3k, & in Acts 4:4 the number was about 5k. At

² Pentecost, J. D. (1998). *The Parables of Jesus: Lessons in Life From the Master Teacher*, pp 52–53

the close of the Book of Acts it could be recorded that the whole world had heard the gospel (Col 1:6). When Jesus died, rose from the dead, & ascended to heaven, His kingdom on earth was, figuratively speaking, much smaller than even a mustard seed. But the kingdom that started very small would quickly become very large, there would be explosive growth. Although the OT writers weren't aware the Messiah would come to earth twice, they knew ultimately He'd **rule from sea to sea, & from the River to the ends of the earth** (Ps 72:8). The desert nomads would bow before Him, the kings of Tarshish & of the islands would bring Him presents, the kings of Sheba & Seba would offer gifts, all kings would bow down before Him, & all nations would serve Him (9-11). In the end, **the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord, & of His Christ; & He will reign forever & ever** (Rev 11:15).

Another possible take away from this parable is that the kingdom of heaven will be a blessing to the rest of the world. Some say the **birds of the air** represent demons or other evil forces, as they do in the parable of the sower (Mt 13:19). But there's no reason to expect a figure to always represent the same thing & the idea of evil doesn't fit the context of this parable. **Birds** making nests may carry the idea of protection, safety, refuge, & sanctuary. Of course, & they may be right, some say the **birds** here are just birds & leave it at that. But in Nebuchadnezzar's dream he saw...

a tree in the midst of the earth & grew large & became strong, & ...reached to the sky... Its foliage was beautiful & its fruit abundant, & in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, & the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, & all living creatures fed themselves from it (Dan 4:10-12).

In his interpretation of this dream, Daniel explains **the tree that you saw ... is you, O king; for you have become great & grown strong, & your majesty has become great & reached to the sky & your dominion to the end of the earth** (20, 22). Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon had brought great advancement in almost every area: agriculture, architecture, education, the arts, literature, economics, & many others. Despite the cost in lives & slave labor, it had brought prosperity to a large part of the world. In his vision, the birds & animals who benefitted from the tree's shade & food were the other nations of the world. In a revelation to Ezekiel, God described Assyria as...

a cedar in Lebanon with beautiful branches & forest shade, & very high... Therefore, its height was loftier than all the trees of the field & its boughs became many & its branches long because of many waters as it spread them out. All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs, & under its branches

all the beasts of the field gave birth, & all great nations lived under its shade (Ezekiel 31:3-6).

Both Jesus & the disciples, as Jews, were familiar with these accounts & the parallel to the parable of the mustard must have been obvious. The kingdom of heaven would grow from tiny beginnings to a great tree & would provide shelter, protection, & benefit to the whole world. How does this happen? As we look around things certainly aren't getting better, are they? No, but when we as Christians live in obedience to the Lord, we're a blessing to those around us. Individual believers become the source of blessing to nations as they live out their faith. It's from the teachings of Scripture through Christian witness that education, justice, the dignity of women, the rights of children, prison reform, abolition of slavery, hospitals, orphanages, & countless other such benefits have come. Whenever the gospel of the kingdom of God is faithfully preached & practiced, all the world benefits. Jesus' point is that, in spite of great opposition, represented by the bad soils & by the tares, His kingdom will start small & spread in power & influence, & one day, when He returns, be absolutely victorious. What may at 1st seem inadequate & small & insignificant as God's means for reaching the world will in the end prove to be mighty & powerful as He works out His purposes & His kingdom advances against all the odds. Easily overlooked & often dismissed is the nature of God's kingdom today. He chose what is low & despised in the world & **the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are** (1 Cor 1:28). God takes His Son & hangs Him on the cross & everyone despises Him & this is the seed that plants the kingdom in the world. & God takes your stammering lips & your faltering prayers & your fragile service & by it the kingdom grows. Appearances can be deceiving. Don't judge the value of your labors in the name of Jesus by your perspective or understanding or by appearances. Learn to judge by His promises instead. His Word will not come back void. He is faithful, always.

In Jn 12:24, Jesus uses a similar image to the mustard seed, this time to speak about His own death. He said, **unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.** Jesus was despised, rejected, crucified, murdered, & buried. But His death, He says, will be like the sowing of a seed & it will bear worldwide fruit. How improbable that cross must have seemed to everyone who saw Jesus hanging there as God's great instrument for

planting the mighty tree of His kingdom into the world. The Roman authorities saw in Jesus nothing but a threat to the rule of Caesar & to the peace & prosperity of the region, & so with a cool & calculated efficiency they put Him down. The crowds delighted in His downfall. They rejected & despised Him & so they laughed as He died in agony among them. Even the disciples, for their part, were altogether overcome with despair at the sight of Jesus at the cross & deserted Him. That's the cross. No one saw it for what it really is, the mustard seed of the kingdom; the dying grain of wheat that would make such progress that the nations would find eternal rest in its embrace. Don't discount the efforts you make. As Paul said, **God has chosen the foolish things of the world that He might shame the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world that He might shame the strong** (1 Cor 1:27).

3. THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN 33

The parable of the leaven moves from the world of farming to the world of baking, from what, in Jesus' day, would've been typically a man's job to what was typically woman's work. As always, the elements of this parable were a common experience to all Jesus' hearers. In every home the **woman** responsible for baking would save a piece of dough from a risen batch just before it was baked. When the next batch of dough was mixed, she **took** that saved piece & put it in the new, in order that its **leaven**, or yeast, could ferment the new batch of dough & make it rise. The fact that the woman **hides** the leaven shouldn't be over interpreted to mean God's kingdom is concealed. This is just a graphic way of picturing the mixing in of the yeast, according to baking practices of the day. The quantity of leaven is so small, compared to the amount of dough, that it seems to disappear when mixed within. Don't make too much of the 3 measures either as some in the past have done, relating it to the 3 sons of Noah or to the body, soul, & spirit of man.³ **3 pecks of flour** was about the same as a modern bushel, enough to feed up to 100 people. But such a large batch wasn't uncommon in most households of the day, because bread was the major food item. It was about the same amount of bread that Abraham asked Sarah to bake for the Lord & his 2 other angelic visitors in Gen 18 & that Gideon prepared before the angel of the Lord in Judges 6. So,

³Such as Augustine, Jerome, & Ambrose according to R.C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of our Lord*, pp 119-120

what's it mean? Much the same as the mustard seed parable. They are twin parables. Much like Hebrew poetry that often said the same thing in different ways in 2 separate lines, these parables teach the same truth in 2 different examples.

4. THE MEANING OF THE LEAVEN It also reminds us the gospel works from the inside, silently, & almost imperceptibly. It reminds us the gospel permeates every experience of life. It's like leaven which influences all the bread & affects every aspect of our lives. Again, we see the power of **the kingdom of heaven** is great, far greater than its initial size & appearance would suggest. The smallest part of **the kingdom** that's placed in the world is sure to have influence, because it contains the power of God's own Spirit. The influence of **the kingdom** is the influence of the King, of His Word, & of His faithful people. & this influence is a good thing. Here's where there's a major difference in interpreting this parable. Because leaven causes fermentation, some say that in Scripture it always signifies evil & corruption. Is the yeast permeating the bread a good thing or a bad thing? To symbolize the break with their former life in Egypt, God told His people to eat only unleavened bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began on Passover evening. They weren't even allowed to have leaven of any sort in the house during the 7 days of the feast (Ex 12:15, 18-19). But the bread they ate the rest of the year was leavened & perfectly acceptable to the Lord. The ancient rabbis often referred to leaven in a favorable way. One of them wrote, *Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as leaven is to the dough.*⁴ But many view this parable as evil permeating either the world or the church. They say this parable is teaching the ever-increasing growth of evil. They take the parable of the mustard seed to refer to the positive growth of the kingdom, while the parable of the yeast is about the equally large growth of opposition to the kingdom. But such a view, I believe, doesn't fit this text. Wherever Jesus tells a pair of closely parallel parables, & He does so several times in the Gospels (i.e. Mt 13:44-46), without exception these parables make basically the same point, rather than opposite points. So we should let the parable of the mustard seed guide our interpretation of the parable of the leaven.⁵ Jesus specifically says that **the kingdom**

⁴ Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism & the Gospels, Volume 1*, p 53

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, pp 123–124

of heaven, the most positive of all influences imaginable, **is like leaven**. To take this **leaven** as representing evil that permeates the kingdom is to twist the obvious meaning of it. Jesus obviously isn't saying His kingdom is evil. Both of these parables illustrate the power of God to overcome the resistance & opposition illustrated in the parables of the sower & of the wheat & tares. Even when leaven is used in relation to something evil, as in Jesus' warning about **the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy** (Lk 12:1), the point isn't that leaven & hypocrisy are both innately evil but that they're both inherently pervasive & powerful in their influence. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses leaven in the same way, not to illustrate the evil of legalism (which is great) but rather to point out its influence: **A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough** (5:9). As Paul condemns the Corinthians for indifference to the immorality of some of the church members, he uses the same common proverb: **Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?** (1 Cor 5:6). He's speaking in the context of demanding that believers remove immoral members from their midst, in order that their evil conduct wouldn't contaminate the rest of the church (2-5). The focus of the analogy isn't on evil but on contamination. In the story of the Exodus it's clear that, after the 7 days without leaven, they were again allowed to make leavened bread, but not from *Egyptian* leaven. At the Feast of Pentecost, in fact, the bread offered to the Lord *had* to be **baked with leaven** (Lev 23:17), which God wouldn't have required if leaven always represented sin or evil. Otherwise that feast would have been an ongoing reminder of God's tolerance of evil rather than of His holiness & goodness (21). So what am I saying? The term *leaven* can represent something that's good, evil, or morally & spiritually neutral, depending on how it's used. But the analogy here has to do with its influence, which is leaven's most obvious & distinctive characteristic. Notice too that the **leaven** must be **hid** in order to have any impact. As I said, the idea isn't that of hiding so Christians aren't seen but rather of hiding in the sense of penetrating deeply, completely permeating the world as leaven completely permeates the dough. We as Christians aren't to be *of* the world, but we're to be *in* the world because that's the only way the gospel can reach & affect the world (Jn 17:14-16). When **the kingdom of heaven** is faithfully reflected in the lives of believers, its influence is pervasive & positive. The life of Christ within us is spiritual & moral leavening in the

world. We don't have to be a national leader, an entertainer, nor a sports figure to influence the world for God. It's the power of His kingdom within us that makes our witness effective. That the meaning of these 2 parables was immediately clear to the disciples is seen in the fact that they didn't ask Jesus to explain them. The obvious purpose of the mustard seed & leaven parables was to encourage the disciples & all believers who follow them. It's possible the mustard seed shows the outward rapid growth of the church while the leaven shows the inward transformation of it.

Don't misunderstand this: Neither parable is teaching there will be world-wide conversion during this present age, but there will be world-wide influence. There's no promise that the kingdom will come in such a way that Jesus' followers will dominate the earth. But it does appear that the end result will be far greater than what anyone observing Jesus & His band of disciples could've imagined. God's kingdom continues to grow daily. Each week, new churches are started throughout the world. In China, which is still closed to most missionary work, it was estimated that 10 years ago there were 75 million evangelical Christians!⁶ Most of the world's people have the Scriptures printed in their own language & more & more languages are added every year. Through radio, literature, the internet, mp3 players, the Jesus Film, & the like, millions are being reached with the gospel who could never personally hear it preached or taught. But evangelism & other work & witness of the church often seem to have no immediate or noticeable effect. Even with the great growth & impact of the church in the world today, from the human perspective, the world seems to be winning the contest for men's souls. As the church grows in numbers, so does the world's population, & by comparison, God's people are still a remnant. As thousands of new converts are won daily in some countries, in others the church is losing membership & influence. If we're discouraged by that, how much more reason did the disciples have for being discouraged about the prospects of Christ's kingdom on earth? The Messiah Himself was meeting more & more opposition & receiving more & more threats against His life. The disciples knew they were totally unprepared to win the world for the Lord. If the Son of God Himself was rejected & put to death, what could a handful of His weak, insignificant followers hope to accomplish after He was gone?

⁶ Jason Mandryk, *Pray For the World*, p 131

But Jesus' purpose in these 2 parables, as in many other teachings, was to assure them, the early church, & every believer in every age since that His kingdom not only won't fail but will continue to grow. There will be great results from small beginnings. In the end, Christianity will win, evil will be destroyed, & Jesus will reign. Christ Himself is building His church, & the very **gates of Hell will not overpower it** (Mt 16:18). To think that God's kingly reign was embodied in Jesus & his motley crew of followers must have seemed absurd to many. But believers, through the Spirit's power, have accomplished incredible good over the centuries; the tiny seed has grown into a remarkably large mustard bush, but it's no majestic cedar tree. Presumably it never will be, because the way into the kingdom is narrow, while the broad way leads to death (Mt 7:13-14).

What's this mean for us today? Are you discouraged that there doesn't seem to be more growth in God's kingdom? As you look at our world, does it depress you? Don't let it! Just try to imagine what it would be like without the past 2,000 years of Christian influence! God's kingdom is still growing, individual by individual. We also need to ask ourselves how we're being a blessing to those around us & what kind of influence we have with them. Are we clearly living the life God wants us to? Are we clearly declaring His truth with our lips & lives? If we're honest with ourselves, there's room for improvement, isn't there? It's encouraging to me when I hear from you how you're living out your faith & sharing it with others. That's a fulfillment of what Jesus is teaching in these 2 little parables. God is teaching us that in spite of the 3 bad soils & the weeds Satan plants, His kingdom will continue to grow. Just because 3 out of 4 soils will reject the gospel & Satan sows tares among the wheat doesn't mean God's kingdom will be overcome by evil. That's the promise Jesus makes in these parables. Those of us who are Christians aren't just a small group of people waiting to be defeated by the world; we're part of a growing kingdom that in the end succeeds. In spite of the coexistence of good & evil & the tremendous power of sin & Satan, the power of God is so great that His kingdom will continue to grow. In spite of the weeds, the birds that snatch the seed, & the scorching sun, there is some good soil. In spite of the fact that the world is over sown with weeds, the wheat is still growing. In the face of evil opposition, the mustard seed grows & the leaven has its influence. Christ is building His kingdom & the day is coming when it will come about

that the seventh angel sounded; & there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord & of His Christ; & He will reign forever & ever" (Rev 11:15). Therefore, we can, & must, pray & work toward, Father, Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6:10).