

Week 4 – The Mustard Seed and the Leaven – Matthew 13:31-33

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:18-21

Introduction

In the mid-1970s two college dropouts got together and started building computers

In the beginning the computers were built only as concepts on paper since neither of them could afford to buy the necessary components to actually produce the real thing

Eventually, though, as technology advanced and prices came down they were able to put their plans into action and received a purchase order for 50 computers at \$500 apiece and armed with that P.O. were able to buy the parts they needed with the promise to pay for them when they completed delivery of the machines and got paid

They built the machines in space borrowed from friends and family and made their delivery date only through sheer determination and hard work and were able to pay off their creditors and have a little money left over

Still, banks were reluctant to loan them money because the idea of regular people owning computers seemed absurd

But within a very few years neither Steve Wozniak or Steve Jobs – the founders of Apple– would ever need to borrow money from anyone and today Apple is a multinational corporation producing some of the world’s most popular consumer electronics

Quite often big things have small beginnings

The parables that we’ll be considering today both deal with very small things that result in surprising growth and how that relates to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven – the two terms refer to the same thing

Matthew tended to use the term “kingdom of heaven” whereas the other gospel writers used “the kingdom of God” possibly because Matthew wrote to a primarily Jewish audience who were reluctant to use God’s name out of reverence for it so he was just being sensitive to their feelings

Or it could have been because of a widespread Jewish misunderstanding of the coming kingdom

Many of the Jews expected it to be a physical kingdom with a theocratic system of governance and with the Jews on top So the term “kingdom of heaven” may have been used by Matthew to redirect them to seeing it as the spiritual kingdom it actually is

The disciples’ understanding of the kingdom

The idea of the coming kingdom of God was a familiar concept for the disciples as it would have been for all Jews

But we see in the gospels that the disciples were also like their countrymen in that they had an errant, earthbound view of the kingdom

We see this in **Mark 10** when John and James asked Jesus for the privilege of sitting in the places of highest honor in the coming kingdom and the reaction of the other disciples who thought they were being presumptuous

For them the kingdom had always meant greatness and glory and power and prestige

No doubt that was because they thought back to the heady days of the reigns of David and Solomon and they knew all too well the prophecy from **Haggai 2:9** which promises:

The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts

Clearly, the disciples had wrong expectations when it came to the kingdom – especially regarding its timing and what it would look like as it began

So Jesus had to reorient their thinking and so he told the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven to help them adjust their perspective and begin focusing on the kingdom as being primarily spiritual in nature

The parable of the mustard seed is found in all three synoptic gospels while the parable of the leaven is found only in Matthew and Luke

But if you would, please join me in Matthew chapter 13 and follow along as I read verses 31-33 (**Matthew 13:31-33**)

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Some preachers take these parables on separately but I have decided to consider them together because I believe they teach a common truth from different angles – in other words, they are **parallel parables**

I. Parallel Parables

A. Both about the growth process

It's easy to see that both parables are about the growth process

In the parable of the mustard seed we see a very small seed become a very large plant and in the parable of the leaven we see something that is barely perceptible permeate a very large quantity of dough

And Jesus uses both of the parables to stress three things –

The parables teach us that something begins small, increases gradually, and that in time it will become quite large

Mustard seed

As a matter of fact, in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus describes the mustard seed as "*the smallest of all seeds*"

This reminds us that **we need to read the parables as parables** which means we need to read them according to their purpose and the truths that they are meant to illustrate

And Jesus' purpose wasn't to describe the mustard seed's size in terms of absolute scientific fact but to show its relative small size as a seed compared to its size when mature

Mustard seed is small but it's not technically the smallest seed and it wasn't the even smallest seed that people were familiar with in Jesus' day

So, while there are seeds that are smaller than a mustard seed and people knew about those seeds, Jesus was speaking in terms of seeds that were used in cultivation in his day – seeds that were planted in fields and gardens

And he was speaking to an audience who would have been familiar with the usage of mustard seed as an illustration because the mustard seed was a commonly used object used in a proverbial sense to indicate smallness

We see the mustard seed used this way elsewhere in Scripture like when Jesus spoke of having faith the size of a mustard seed in **Matthew 17:20** and **Luke 17:6**

And the mustard seed that Jesus was speaking of did grow into a very large plant as we see in this image

As a plant, mustard commonly reaches a height in the range of 10-15 feet and when it's fully mature the branches become rigid and more like a shrub than an herb

So it's easy to see how birds could find shelter in and around the mustard plant

Now the mustard plant could never be confused with a mighty oak tree but it does grow to a very large size relative to the size of its seed and it does so very rapidly; reaching its mature size in just a single season

And teaching the disciples that the kingdom was all about **extreme variation** and **unexpected outcomes**, "the smallest of seeds becoming the largest of the garden plants" was Jesus' reason for using the parable

Leaven or yeast

Now, if you think a mustard seed is small consider just how small leaven or, as we commonly refer to it, yeast is

We are used to seeing yeast come in little packets and when the yeast is poured out the grains look similar in size to a mustard seed

But those little balls actually contain hundreds of yeast cells because yeast is a fungus and its cells are somewhere around 4 microns in diameter meaning that a line of yeast cells an inch long would contain roughly 6,000 yeast cells

In Jesus' day the baker couldn't just go to the local supermarket to buy a package of yeast so what they did was keep back a little lump of dough from the recipe and they would add that lump of dough to the new bread dough

This is the same principle as is still used today when making sourdough bread and bakers refer to that lump of dough as "starter" because it starts the leavening process in the new batch

There are a few aspects of leaven that we want to consider as we progress but in this section we will focus on the power of leaven to spread throughout the dough

Leaven may be small – and in the parable a very small lump of starter dough was being mixed into a very large amount of flour – but it is powerful and it spreads so as to affect the entire batch of dough in spite of its size

Just like with the parable of the mustard seed the parable of the leaven is a parable about small beginnings becoming large realities

B. Two competing views

This brings us to two competing views for what Jesus was intending for his disciples and his followers through the years to understand about the kingdom of heaven

There are those who view these parables as negative and those who view them as positive

Negative view

Those who view them as negative see the mustard seed growing to an unnatural, abnormal size representing earthly power and grandeur and they view the birds that lodge in its branches as representing evil that brings defilement to the church

And when they consider the leaven they point to the fact that leaven is typically spoken of in Scripture as something to be eradicated and avoided

We know that most bread and meal offerings made to God under the law were to be of the unleavened variety and specifically during the Passover the Israelites were told to cleanse their homes of any trace of leaven

In **Matthew 16:6** – Jesus tells his disciples to avoid the leaven (meaning the influential teachings) of the Pharisees and Sadducees

And in **1Corinthians 5:7** the apostle Paul writes about the corrupting influence of "old leaven" and the need for believers to clean it out of their lives

With those images in mind it's easy to see why many people view these parables in a negative light and take them as a warning of corruption that will ultimately come into the church

Interpretive guidelines

But when we looked at the parables of the soils and the parables of the weeds we talked about the danger of applying meaning from other parts of Scripture to a parable and even from one parable to another

You will remember how Jesus changed the meaning of the symbols between those two parables and none of the imagery was the same because his intention in telling them was different with each parable

So we saw that each parable has a message and the images must conform to the meaning of the parable and that it's our job then to figure out what Jesus was trying to teach with each parable

Jesus made our job a bit easier by explaining some of the parables for his disciples and we find those explanations in the Bible but Jesus didn't explain all of the parables

And unfortunately these two are not among those that were explained – so our task is to deduce the meaning by using logic and reason and a great deal of help from the Holy Spirit

Positive view

As I studied these parables I found that I agree with those who see these parables in a positive rather than negative light

Part of the reason I think Jesus was teaching about positive growth is the fact that these parables were told as part of the series of parables that contain the parable of the soils and the parable of the weeds

It seems likely that the disciples would have been at least somewhat concerned to be told that the gospel would not be productive in three out of the four types of soil that make up human hearts and that the entire earthly existence of the church would be alongside and even inter-mingled with satanic weeds

So I think it's likely that Jesus told these two parables so show them that everything was well in hand and would progress according to God's plan and that the church would ultimately thrive regardless of how things might appear at any given time

Then I believe we need to recognize that Jesus could use the symbols in his parable in any way he chose

And it seems to me the best way to interpret the symbols is as symbols of positive growth

Otherwise, we must conclude that Jesus is saying that his church will be totally corrupted in the end – and that just doesn't seem likely in light of his promise to Peter in **Matthew 16:18** that the gates of hell would not overcome the church

In any event, Jesus didn't say the mustard seed grew beyond its natural size – just that it grew to be large

As we've seen mustard naturally gets pretty big – certainly big enough for birds to nest in it and Jesus didn't say the birds shouldn't have been there and he didn't define the symbol of the birds

It seems best to recognize the birds have no symbolism other than to reinforce the illustration of the size of the mustard plant using a common image that the people had probably seen many times

Nothing in Jesus' telling of the parable of the mustard seed would indicate negativity

And in the case of the leaven there is no reason to assume that Jesus used the image of leaven for any reason other than to describe its properties related to growth

Not every aspect of every symbol can be transferred to a parable and the teller is free to use only the aspects he is highlighting

Otherwise we would have some serious questions to ponder concerning the fact that the day of the Lord will come "*like a thief in the night*" as we read in **1Thessalonians 5:2**

Or with Jesus saying he is the "*door of the sheep*" in **John 10:7** and the door that leads to salvation in **John 10:9**

But we know that the day of the Lord won't come with evil intent and Jesus wasn't made of wood hung on hinges and we readily understand which characteristics are transferable and which are not based on the use of the symbol

Likewise, there is no reason to read negativity into the symbols used in the parables before us and we need to be careful not to read into them what Jesus didn't intend

The best way to interpret the parables then seems to be positively and in regards to the growth of the kingdom from small, seemingly insignificant beginnings

II. Two Kinds of Growth

And the two parables illustrate two different kinds of growth

First, we see **outer growth**; that is to say the growth of the church in the world as represented by the mustard seed

A. Outer growth – the church in the world

God's way of doing things is often the opposite way we would naturally do them

The reason Jesus chose fishermen and a tax collector – in general a bunch of nobodies – for his first disciples is so that no one could possibly think that anything of any importance was going on

And Jesus continues to choose people who many would think can't amount to anything and to show that the great things that do happen are because of him

Consider what Paul writes in **1Corinthians 1:26-29** –

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

And God's pattern throughout Scripture is to start small and then accomplish great things

Look at the example of Gideon from Judges 7

He put out the call for warriors to go against the mighty Midianites and 32,000 fighting men showed up

God said, "That's too many" so Gideon whittled the number down to 10,000 and God said, "That's still too many"

And it wasn't until the number was taken all the way down to 300 men that God was satisfied and he used those 300 men to rout the Midianite army!

When Jesus was dying on the cross no one thought that something big was going to come of it – they thought it was the end

And no one gave a second thought when 120 people gathered together to pray and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit

But that's the parable of the mustard seed in action – big things from small beginnings

While the mustard plant will never be mistaken for a giant sequoia or even a cedar of Lebanon so the church will never be grand and glorious in the eyes of the world

Still countless numbers of people have already found refuge there

And the church will continue to have success in the world for as long as God's people are willing to live according to God's principles of growth

Our strategy has to be to remain faithful and let God's processes work to their conclusion

There will often be setbacks and days when nothing seems to be happening but it takes time for spiritual seed to grow and mature and in the parable of the mustard seed Jesus tells us what his church is destined to become

B. Inner growth – the Word in God's People

The parable of the leaven tells us of an altogether different kind of growth

Whereas the parable of the mustard seed is all about outward growth or the visible growth of the church in the world, the parable of the leaven is about inner growth – that is the growth of God's Word in God's people

From the parable we see that leaven is introduced into the flour from without and likewise the leaven of God's Word is introduced into the heart of a believer from without – both are foreign objects that bring about change

But leaven does its work from within the lump of dough and likewise the Word works silently and for the most part, secretly

We also see that leaven once it is incorporated into the dough **continues to spread until it works its way through the entire batch converting it** – after all, bread is made of flour, water, and salt and it isn't until the leaven is introduced that the mixture is transformed into what we know as bread dough

The same is true with God's Word as no part of the believer's heart will remain untouched and like yeast it will keep working until the change is complete

Lastly, while leaven does its work quietly and secretly, there comes a time when its effect becomes evident and undeniable – so too is the effect of the Word in the believer

And eventually the change in the believer becomes evident

But one thing we need to notice is that the yeast had to be worked into the flour – that's what Jesus means when he says the woman "hid" the leaven in the flour

She worked it in until it was well distributed so it could better accomplish its task

I suppose the leaven would eventually work its way through the dough if it was just stuck in there and not mixed but mixing and kneading the leaven into the dough speeds the transformation along

And the same is true with the Word of God – it must be applied in our lives for it to be most effective

Paul writes in **Philippians 2:12-13** that we are to "*work out [our] own salvation*" so that God can do his work in us

Because as we do we will come to realize that the leaven of God's Word is designed by its nature to change everything just as yeast combines with and changes the flour into dough

Flour doesn't become dough by force of will or because of some part of its own nature but because **the little lump of leavening dough transfers its nature to the flour** and it continues the transformation until the entire measure of flour is changed to become just like the leavening lump

And that's a remarkable picture of what the Holy Spirit does in each believer who is open to being influenced by the Word

As the process continues silently and secretly the believer will be transformed to be more like Christ and will eventually begin to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit

And just like the working of leaven in bread creates a unique and pleasing aroma so will the Christian put forth a pleasing and appealing aroma to those around them

III. Lessons to be Learned

A. God loves to use small things

In our world today, bigger is almost always assumed to be better and that anything small must not be very good

That's true in church-world as well as mega churches draw believers from smaller churches and articles and books are written for pastors and church leaders that leave the impression that small is something they need to fix

But what this parable illustrates and brings to mind is that God actually favors starting small

We've already seen how God reduced Gideon's fighting force down to less than 1% of its original size before he could use it to do the seemingly insurmountable task they faced even if their forces had been multiplied rather than reduced

What God did there didn't make sense and any military tactician would scoff at the idea of what God did

But God's economy often runs counter to what we would expect

Just look at Jesus' teachings from **Matthew 23:11-12** –

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

In other words the way to bigness in God's economy is to first become small

What a radical idea! You won't find many self-help books telling you that today!

And in **John 12:24-26** Jesus taught about self-sacrifice for great gain –

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Selflessness for reward – becoming small to be made great – that's God's way of doing things

So these parables speak about size in a surprising way because we are used to things happening instantly and with a bang whereas God seems to prefer to bring things about slowly and more subtly

What God desires are people who are not afraid to start small – and that's what is needed in the church

People who understand and undertake God's vision for his kingdom

People willing to give priority to the kingdom of God

People who abide in Christ in their own lives

And that last one cannot be overstated because

B. Kingdom growth is internal as well as external

We need to be careful not to despise small things because we can never tell what might be going on beneath the surface

God loves to do his work largely out of sight and beneath the radar of the world and then spring it forth in all its glory and grandeur when he determines the time is right

Our job then as members of God's kingdom on this earth is to allow the seed of God's Word to take root in our lives and the leaven of God's Word to permeate throughout every molecule of our lives

We must be patient as God does his work and we might even need to suffer the embarrassment of people misjudging us and scoffing at our smallness

Because we know that God's growth is internal and doing a mighty work before it ever becomes external where people can notice it

In **Zechariah 4:10** God's Word speaks of the person who has despised the day of small things being surprised and overjoyed when God finally revealed what he had been building up to

And when we are faithful during the days of small things I am confident that we will see the day when those around us are astounded by what God has been doing secretly all along

Conclusion

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven outline the inevitable success of God's kingdom and they should serve as an encouragement to us

I don't think Jesus' timing in the telling of these two parables was accidental

After all, he had just shared the parable of the soils where 75% of the soils were unproductive and the parable of the weeds that revealed the hostile conditions that his church was going to have to endure in this world

No doubt those parables could have put a bit of a damper on the disciples' enthusiasm

So Jesus told these two parables to show them that his kingdom would be a huge success in the end and that it would have a positive effect on the world at large as well as within his followers

The disciples had to be heartened to learn that their labors for the kingdom would not be in vain and the enemy would not be able to stop the growth and influence of the kingdom

And it should encourage us to know that Jesus himself guarantees the growth of his kingdom

Especially when we don't see the growth we desire and we begin to wonder if growth will ever occur

But still, these parables show that his followers have a part to play in the growth

As we saw when we looked at the parable of the soils we can determine what kind of soil our hearts are made of

And it's our responsibility to make sure that our hearts are made of the good soil that is ready to receive the good seed of God's Word so as to produce a crop

And we must be faithful to sow the seed of God's Word widely

But once we have taken care of those matters we need to accept that kingdom growth rests with God

It's not our responsibility and we can't control how quickly the growth occurs or how large the growth is

However, we should be encouraged by the parable of the mustard seed because from it we see that God's kingdom will grow and benefit the world beyond anyone's expectations even though it starts out very small

And from the parable of the leaven we see that we can rely on kingdom growth within us as we allow the leaven of God's Word to be worked into our lives so as to permeate them

Again, this growth is guaranteed by God himself and he controls when and how rapidly it occurs but the leaven of his Word can only take hold and change us as we allow it to permeate our lives

But in the parable of the leaven we can read between the lines to recognize that we must be aware of the leaven of the world which can also be worked into our lives to corrupt us if we allow it and take warning

The growth of God's kingdom may be inevitable but let's determine to speed it along by being the best soil we can be for receiving the seed of the Word and by faithfully allowing the leaven of his Word to permeate our lives while purging the negative leaven of the world and so do all we can to assist that growth

Let's pray