

“Kingdom Secrets: Mustard Seed & Yeast”
Matthew 13:31-35

January 17, 2021

SI: That’s what Jesus’ parables are the inside scoop about the kingdom of God.

Matthew 13:11 is my touchstone verse for this sermon series on Jesus’ parables. His disciples asked him why he taught in parables to the crowds but only explained the meaning of the parables to them.

Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

So the primary purpose of the parables is to tell followers of Jesus Christ what to expect about God’s kingdom in this world.

What is the reign of God in the world through Jesus Christ going to be like?

How will it progress? What it will become in the future.

INTRO: There's a saying attributed to the famous British banker Baron Rothschild
He was asked: When do you invest? When do you buy?
Rothschild said: I buy when blood is flowing in the streets.

When blood is flowing in the streets, most people are desperately trying to sell.
And then when everybody else is buying, they jump on the bandwagon.
But if you have a bigger perspective of the markets and the economic forces at
work, that enables you to react in ways that are counterintuitive to most people.

The Lord Jesus Christ wants you, his follower, his disciple, to have a bigger
perspective of God's rule in this world.
He wants you to understand the forces at work in the kingdom of heaven so that
when blood is flowing in the streets you confidently hope for great successes
and great returns.

There have been a number of books written recently by Christian scholars
analyzing anti-Christian cultural trends in the United States.
I'm reading one right now called *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*
by Carl Trueman. He's a professor at Grove City College.
The consensus is that a tipping point will be reached so that Christian beliefs and
Christian convictions will no longer be allowed in the public square.

It's not that churches will be closed and Christians arrested, but that for believers
to participate in business or public education and government service, they will be
required to affirm morality codes contrary to the historic Christian faith.
Expressing Christian views, even outside work, will be grounds for firing.
Christian institutions like hospitals, colleges, adoption agencies will be forced to
conform or be marginalized or closed.

At this point, there are still religious liberty protections.
You might remember the case a few years ago of the Christian fire chief in Atlanta,
active in his church, who wrote a book about biblical marriage and sexuality.
His views were considered to be hateful and incompatible with his public office
and he was fired. After a legal battle the city was forced to pay damages.

But the laws of a society are an expression of the values of that society.
So when there is a major shift in values, eventually the laws will change too.
One of the major value shifts in America is that religious liberty and freedom of
conscience are increasingly viewed as sources of bigotry, hatred, and oppression.
That's hard to imagine in little old Bible Belt Cullman, but in the cultural and

political centers of our nation, this is very much the case. We're no longer living in the America of our grandparents or even our parents and that will increasingly affect the church in negative ways. As tempting as it might be to wring our hands and moan about how bad it is, that's not right for us to do, because we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. We live under the reign of King Jesus. His kingdom is in this world. It's here to stay. It's growing, nothing will stop it, and its future is wonderful.

This may seem like a strange introduction to these parables, but I think the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast are intended to encourage us. Jesus had just told his disciples the parable of the weeds, a parable about evil. It's about how the devil's kingdom is growing in this present age along side the kingdom of God.

That's one perspective he wants us to have, a realistic view of evil. But he also wants us to have another perspective—that contrary to expectations and against all odds, the kingdom of God is growing and there will be great returns.

Let's ponder three things Christ wants us to know about his kingdom.

1. Its unimpressive beginnings
2. Its inevitable growth
3. Its glorious maturity

MP#1 The kingdom's unimpressive beginnings

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed.

He calls it the smallest of all seeds. A man plants a tiny seed in a field.

Jesus next compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast or leaven.

This would have been a piece of fermented dough from the previous batch.

A woman takes this piece of leavened dough and hides it, that's the actual word, in a large batch of flour. She kneads it in and it disappears.

You can't even see it any more.

The impression that Christ is making is not just something small, but something unimpressive, something apparently insignificant.

That's how the kingdom of God on earth begins.

The primary example of this is Jesus himself. Here's how one writer put it.

He grew up in a despised province; he did not appear in public until his 30th year; then taught for two or three years in neighboring villages, and occasionally in Jerusalem; made few converts, chiefly among the poor and unlearned; and then falling into the hand of his enemies; died the shameful death of the cross, such was the commencement of the universal kingdom of God.

That's oversimplifying it a little bit.

He also did amazing miracles and he rose from the dead.

But he never leveraged those miracles to take center stage and even after he rose, he only showed himself to believers. He didn't, for example, appear before in Rome before Caesar and make a big splash.

There remained a hiddenness to the way he began his kingdom.

The reason is that's the way God likes to work.

He chooses the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, the lowly and despised things, the things that are not to shame the things that are so that no one can boast before him.

One of my Christian heroes is Mary Slessor. I taught a Sunday school lesson on her life a few years ago and I've shared a number of stories about her.

She was a mill girl from Dundee, Scotland, raised in poverty.

She loved Jesus and people. The reverberations of her life are still felt today.

In 1876, when she was 28 years old, she went to Nigeria with the Scottish Presbyterian mission. After 12 years of working in a missionary station on the coast, she finally got permission to go to the inland tribes of Nigeria.

No missionary had ever gone there. These tribal people were so violent that the British would only go upriver with their gunboats.

Mary went by herself, without a missionary partner. No one else would go.

But she wasn't totally alone, because she had adopted five orphaned children. She packed all she and the children could carry and took a boat up river.

It was raining when they landed and getting dark.

The people on the boat begged her to reconsider.

But she gathered all their stuff and set out walking on a jungle path in the unknown.

Here's how her biographer describes the scene:

Surely no stranger procession had footed it through the African forest. First came a boy, about eleven years of age, tired and afraid, a box containing tea, sugar, and bread upon his head, his garments soaked with the rain, clinging to his body, his feet slipping in the black mud. Behind him was another boy, eight years old, in tears, bearing a kettle and pots. With these a little fellow of three, weeping loudly, tried hard to keep up, and close at his heels trotted a maiden of five, also shaken with sobs. Their white mother formed the rear. On one arm was slung a bundle, and astride her shoulders sat a baby girl . . . She was singing . . . to lighten the way for the little ones, but the tears were perilously near her own eyes. Had ever such a company marched out against the entrenched forces of evil? Surely God had made a mistake in going to [Nigeria] in such a guise? And yet He often chooses the weakest things of this world to confound and defeat the mighty.

That's the point I think these parables are making.

God often works through unimpressive, apparently insignificant people, churches, ministries to build his kingdom. This is especially the case at the beginning of new chapters and new seasons.

There are also times and places where God allows opposition to grow strong and the Devil has his way for a while. God's people are knocked down.

They are marginalized. They do become unimpressive and insignificant.

But that's how the Lord sometimes builds new things.

On a more personal, individual level, this should encourage you.

When the Holy Spirit prompts you to do something good, to grow or change in some way, to love the people in your life more, to serve them more willingly—if you take that step of obedience, no matter how small, it's a real beginning.

I once was talking to a dad in our church. He had started having family devotions.

After supper they would read a short devotion and pray together.

He had no personal model for this, his parents never did it.

The kids weren't very enthusiastic. Schedules interrupted. But he was doing it.

I told him to be encouraged and to press on because it is through these sorts of little things, done faithfully, that the Lord likes to work.

He would have to trust for spiritual dividends in the lives of his children.

MP#2 The kingdom's inevitable growth

Both the seed and the yeast have a life force within them, so they grow.

The mustard seed sprouts, it takes root, it begins to grow into large plant.
The yeast is not visible in the same way, you can't see it grow like you can see the plant, but you see its effects as the dough begins to rise.

One commentator said Jesus used two parables, one about farming and one about baking because in one he relates to men and in the other he relates to women. That may be right, but it seems more likely that told two parables to teach us to expect the growth of his kingdom in two different ways.

The first way is through external growth.

That's the mustard seed growing into the largest garden plant.
By external growth I mean physical things we can see and measure.
Baptisms. People professing faith and joining the church.
Churches being planted. Christian institutions and ministries.
Missionary expansion to new fields and nations.
I'm talking about numbers.

Sometimes people think it's spiritual to say numbers don't matter, but there's a whole of the Bible called Numbers! If you've ever read it, then you know that it starts with a census of Israel and the number of people in every tribe. In Ezra and Nehemiah there are also a lot of numbers, people, objects used in temple worship, numbers related to the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. The book of Acts makes a point of recording that after Peter's Pentecost sermon 3,000 people were baptized and added to the number of the church. Then two chapters later it records that the number of believers grew to 5,000.

Obviously, numbers don't tell the whole story.

Wikipedia says 65% of Americans identify as Christians and that worldwide 2.3 billion people identify as Christians, one out of every three people.

But remember the parable last week, the wheat and the tares.

One of the Devil's evil strategies is planting false disciples in the church.
There are individuals and even whole churches that are false and heretical.

Even so, the Bible itself shows us that numbers like this are one aspect of the growth of the kingdom of God in the world that believers should notice. They are encouraging because they remind us that whenever the church shrinks in one place, there are other places where it is growing.

I mentioned a few Sundays ago the remarkable growth of the church among the Quechua people in the mountains of Peru.

When the Communist insurgency started in 1980 there were very few Christians

and churches were small. By the end of that brutal civil war in 1990, the majority of Quechua people had become Christians. Three decades later church thriving and shaping that society in profoundly good ways.

About a year ago I shared with you accounts of widespread Christian conversions in Iran that are even being reported by some secular news agencies.

The particular article I cited was produced by NPR.

Numbers are hard to nail down but it's generally agreed that in 1979, at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, there were only 500 Christian converts in all of Iran. Now everybody agrees there are at least 500,000 and perhaps as many as a million Christians. It's a tiny fraction of the population, but real growth. So many of them are fleeing to Turkey and starting churches, that it's making the Turkish officials nervous. Jesus says the mustard seed will grow.

What about the yeast?

It's interesting that for the Jews, yeast was most often a metaphor for sin because it illustrates the way sin works its way into every crevice of our beings.

Even Jesus at times used it that way. He warned about the leaven of the Pharisees. But here he uses it to speak of the growth of the kingdom of heaven.

And I think the point is the growth of the kingdom of God within us.

The yeast works and the bread rises.

In a similar way, the reign of Jesus Christ permeates the lives of individuals.

It starts small. Young Christians can be rough as a cob.

But as more and more aspects of being are brought into submission, lives are transformed, attitudes change, and people become beautiful.

One more thought about this growth.

It ought to make us confident in the means of grace God had given the church.

In other words, the tools he has given us for growth actually work.

The preaching of the Word of God on the Lord's Day.

Compared to Twitter and Instagram and TikTok, preaching seems irrelevant.

What a dated format. But for generations, God has used it to build his church.

Corporate worship, baptism, the Lord's Supper. Same thing. It seems they would be hopelessly outdated and weird, but God continues to use them.

Church officers, elders and deacons, shepherding and serving the church.

Through these offices Christ himself works and builds.

MP#3 The kingdom's glorious maturity

That's the last thing Jesus emphasizes, the maturity of the kingdom of heaven.

The mustard seed becomes a tree.

Such a big tree that birds of all kinds nest in its branches.

And the leaven works through the dough so that there comes a time when it can rise no more—it is ready for baking.

One day the kingdom of heaven will be mature too.

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk 2:14

The rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

Daniel 2:35

And as Jesus Christ himself says later in Matthew 24:14

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

There is a day when the Gospel will have been preached to all nations—and birds of every kind, in other words, people of all sorts will come to nest in the branches of the kingdom of heaven.

And when that happens, Jesus will return in glory, he will judge all wickedness, restore broken creation, and glorify his people.

That’s one reason we support missionaries.

We are hastening the day of Christ’s coming by cooperating with and doing what we can to grow the kingdom of God to maturity.

And not only is this true in the big sense—

it’s true of the kingdom of heaven within you.

The Lord has a goal for you—and that goal is maturity.

He wants you to be a tree that is a blessing to other people, where they can come and rest because you know the truth.

He wants you to be that dough, risen and ready for baking, ready to feed other people with the hope of Jesus Christ.

There is a sense in which Christians are always growing and will be till we die.

But in another sense, we grow into maturity.

In John’s first letter he addresses three classes of Christians—

little children, young men, fathers—he talking about stages of Christian life.

The final stage is to be a father in the faith. This is obviously not limited to men.

This is a metaphor. Christian women become fathers too.

So what characterizes fathers in the faith? It’s their calmness, their confidence.

Fathers are Christians who have come to a place where nothing can shake them because of their confident hope in God.

Wouldn’t that be wonderful? To be unshakable because of your hope in God?

That can be you.

The writer of Hebrews says we are to leave elementary teachings behind and to move on to maturity.

Are there things in your life that trouble you?

Weaknesses, besetting sins, old habits and bad attitudes?

Listen to Jesus' parables and take them to heart.

Jesus is saying that everywhere the kingdom of heaven is present, it's not just growing, it will one day be mature.

That's what God has promised as you cooperate with the Holy Spirit and his sanctification. He's getting you ready for the day when you meet Jesus and arrive at your home in the new creation.

Jesus has spoken these two lovely parables to encourage you.

Yes, there is always sin to contend with in your own heart and mind.

And yes, sometimes, in God's providence the church as a whole goes through times and seasons when there may be blood in the streets.

But the destiny Jesus commands for his kingdom is not regression—but from unimpressive beginnings, growth to glorious maturity.

So this week, if you get discouraged about where things are with your country or your children and the people you love, or your own heart, remember the mustard seed, remember the leaven, put yourself at Jesus' feet and listen to his parables and be encouraged.