

Text: Matthew 13:31-35 // Mark 4:30-34 // Luke 13:18-21

Title: Mustard Seed and Leaven

Truth: The Kingdom of Christ started out small but will fill the earth.

Date/Location: Sunday December 4, 2016 at FBC

Introduction

In the parable of the old and new (Matt. 9:16-17), the Lord indicates that God is in the midst of a change in His program for the world, and some people won't take to it immediately. In the parable of the soils that opens Matthew 13, Christ is inviting people to come into the kingdom through faith, yet He teaches that many will not accept the word of the kingdom. When He spoke about building on a rock (Matt. 7:24-27), He taught us that it is utter foolishness not to listen to His words. In the parable about the wheat and tares (13:24-30), we realize that Satan is building up his own following and kingdom in the world. At judgment, these people will be removed and not permitted to enter the kingdom.

Both the parable of the soils and the wheat/tares show that there is a difficulty in discerning false believers from true ones. The final judgment (pictured as harvest) will tell the tale. Both these parables indicate a preparatory phase for the kingdom, pictured by planting, followed by waiting, growing, and harvesting. The parables of the leaven and mustard seed fit well here, because they also are connected to this preparatory phase for the kingdom.

I. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

A. The Mustard Seed.

1. It is a very small seed. Since v. 32 says it is "the least of all seeds" many have doubted the veracity of the Bible because there are many seeds that are smaller than a mustard seed. I grant that. However, the mustard seed was the smallest that was used by farmers in that era and location. We have to keep in mind that Jesus was speaking locally, not globally, and not at a scientific conference. Historical and geographical context saves us from making sweeping claims about the unreliability of the Bible! (For instance, on a tour of our building, I might say that room 108,

which is used for storage, is the smallest of the rooms in our building. Of course, you can find a bathroom or a utility closet that is smaller, but those aren't "rooms" in the sense that I was talking about, even though they are "rooms.")

2. The farmer plants the small seed and it grows. Think of the marvel of that growth—all the information and mechanisms are included in the genetic information of that seed.
3. It grows "larger than the herbs" and becomes like a tree or bush. Again, Jesus is not making a scientific claim that it turns into a great Redwood or Sequoia. It ends up larger than its herbal competitors in the garden. Depending on which resource you look at, you will find sizes of mustard plants ranging from 8 to 15 feet in height. This is a significant bush that can accommodate birds.
4. Clearly, the point is that the plant starts out very small as a seed and ends up very large as a tall bush. In fact, it ends up much larger than you would expect—it transforms from the size of a seed that a bird could easily swallow to a tree that a bird can nest in.

B. How It is Like the Kingdom of Heaven

1. "The kingdom of heaven is like" in verse 31 tells us that we need to take the big point of the parable and apply the same point to our knowledge about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is NOT like a mustard seed period. It IS like a mustard seed which was planted and grows very large. Do you see the difference between the two statements?
2. The kingdom of heaven starts out small and ends up very large. It did start out small. First there was John the Baptist. Then Jesus. Then the 11. Then 70 disciples in the gospels. And other followers. And 120 in the upper room. Then 500 brothers who saw the resurrected Christ. Then 3,000 that were saved on Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Then 5,000 men (Acts 4:4). Although grievously persecuted, true Christianity grew throughout Rome. Eclipsed by false forms of Christianity in the middle ages, it persisted, and broke out in the Reformation. That growth from

small to great continues today, with wheat and tare forms of "Christianity" (note the quotes). As for the wheat form, the genuine article, God is calling out a people for His name who will be citizens of the future kingdom (Acts 15:14; John 3:3). As for the tare form of it, God has a plan to judge them.

3. The kingdom's growth is "under cover" today in the sense that the kingdom ruler—Jesus—is absent, the government is awaiting inauguration at the king's return, and the citizens are busy with a non-governmental job, which is preparing more citizens for the kingdom. We Christians are not consumed with governance and other physical, earthly matters. We are primarily concerned about converting the souls of men and building them up into mature kingdom citizens ready for the King when He arrives. This is why the social and prosperity gospels are not at all the gospel of Christ. Jesus will take care of social and economic aspects of His kingdom in the future. But those things are not what we preach or work today as a church.
4. The Kingdom will end up large. It will beat out all its kingdom competitors. It will contain a lot of people—far more than you would have expected given its insignificant beginnings. After all, the king was born in a barn and killed on a cross. Many of his early followers were martyred. But no matter—because God does not work the way the world does. What is wisdom with Him seems foolishness to the world.
5. Compare this parable with some Old Testament figures of speech where we see that God often uses large trees to express truth about kingdoms of the world. For example, Ezekiel 17:23 speaks of the raising up of Israel so that its kingdom is like a cedar tree, and in its branches will live many birds. Ezekiel 31 speaks about the kingdom of Assyria as a towering tree in which all the birds made their nests. Egypt, like Assyria, will be brought down. Daniel 4:12 and 4:20-22 refer to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian kingdom as a tree in which, once again, birds dwell. Daniel 2:35 and 2:44-45 explain the vision of Nebuchadnezzar and show how a new kingdom would come and be an eternal and earth-filling kingdom, though it does not speak of it as a

tree. God's kingdom will smash all other kingdoms. It will start as a rock and grow into a mountain. Its growth is supernatural.

- C. How the parable of the mustard seed is not like the Kingdom of Heaven. The birds refer to people connected to or residing in the kingdom. Do not take the negative meaning of birds from one parable and transfer it to this parable. They do not represent the devil or sinners in this parable. They are birds who live in a bush, or people who live in a kingdom. No comment is made about how sinful those people are. I personally take them to be people who are legitimate citizens of the kingdom of Heaven after the sorting process is all done and unbelievers are removed.

II. The Parable of the Leaven

- A. The leaven in the dough is a parallel parable to the prior one. By that, I mean that it has the same main point.
 - 1. A woman baking in her kitchen puts leaven (yeast) in 3 measures of meal. This is about the equivalent of 2 pecks or 19 quarts of dough, so it is a significant baking operation that she is doing.
 - 2. We are to assume that she starts with a sensible amount of yeast, but compared to 19 quarts, she doesn't use much. We also assume that the Lord intends for us to understand that normal means are used to start the leaven—it is mixed into the dough properly and then time is permitted for it to rise.
- B. How the leaven parable is like the Kingdom of Heaven. The result is that "all is leavened." A small amount of yeast affects a large batch of dough. This refers to the multiplying and permeating nature of the kingdom, silent and unseen, started out small, but ending up having a large impact, just like in the prior parable.
- C. How the leaven parable is not like the Kingdom of Heaven. Leaven often refers to sin in the Bible (1 Cor. 5:6-8). That is used by many interpreters to say that this leaven is sin, just like the birds of the prior parable supposedly represent sinners or Satan. That is going too far. The point is "small to large," not "small sin to large sin." Leaven is leaven. The kingdom of Heaven is not leaven and does not harbor the leaven of sin! It is like leaven in that it starts small but has a big effect.

III. How These Parables Relate to the Present Day

- A. Our Lord starts the parables with, "the kingdom of heaven is like." The Lord is conveying a "big picture" truth. But the parable also relates to individuals and Christian work generally.
- B. Do not despise small things. I might be small and despised, but that doesn't take away my faith in God (Psalm 119:141). Even though the second temple started out small, it was not to be despised either (Zechariah 4:10). Our church may be small, some say, but that is not a fatal criticism. I'd rather be small and faithful with a big long-term effect than large and outside of God's will! Your witness may be small, but may it grow!
- C. God's kingdom is working behind the scenes of the world, growing, permeating, and becoming stronger. It will wipe out all opposition and be THE kingdom on the earth when the Lord returns. If you want to be on the winning side, you must be born from above (again) so that you are a citizen of that kingdom. In faith, you will commit yourself to King Jesus. You will turn from sin and turn to Christ as Savior from sin and its awful consequences. Why would you not want to be on God's side? Is it to indulge your death-causing sin? Is it to have a sick pleasure of rebelling against the King of kings? Is it to keep up the charade in which you pretend to be a believer but really are not? Is it to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season? Give it up!

Conclusion

The kingdom of God started out least in size, esteem, influence, citizens, and physical territory. It will end up the greatest in size, and esteem, and influence, and citizens, and territory. Is it growing in your own life?

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