

The Mustard Seed

By Brad Allison on 3/14/2004

Scripture Reference *Matthew 13:31-33*

In our series on the parables of Jesus, we've come today to two short parables about the growth of God's kingdom. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that starts small and then grows to a size that is so much greater than what it looked to become in seed form. And it is also like a lump of leaven that is put into a huge lump of dough and spreads throughout the whole thing.

Before looking in detail at these parables, I need to say just a word about why this is important. Several months ago, I read a statement by Larry Crabb that I have been thinking of quite a bit. He said that we must "ask what questions God has bothered to answer in the Word. Only He is wise enough to know which questions need answering. Then study His answers for the rest of your life" (*The Safest Place on Earth*, p. 9). What we tend to do instead is to bring our questions to God, and look for answers where none are given. We want to know things like when the world will end, but God doesn't reveal that in his Word. Or we want to know what happens to babies who die, or how God can be sovereign and man still have a will. But God has chosen not to answer such questions. What Crabb is saying is that instead of pressing for answers to our questions, the wiser course would be to look to see what questions God has bothered to answer. Those are the questions we should be asking.

One such question that God answers is probably not one that you woke up with this morning. But it is a question toward which Jesus spends a great deal of effort. It is the question, "What is the kingdom of heaven like?" Both of our parables this morning are an attempt to answer that question. I want to suggest to you that since Jesus spends so much effort answering this question, maybe he knows something we don't. And maybe if we knew what he knows, we too would be asking this question. Why are we supposed to be concerned with what the kingdom of heaven is like? Because there is a grand future in that kingdom, and there is no future in the kingdom we tend to seek, which is our own kingdom.

Illustration: Steve Whitner and I were talking this week, and he reminded me of that cell phone commercial that aired several years ago. I forget which company it was, but it was designed to feature this phone's ability to connect wirelessly with the internet. It showed a man wandering the streets inviting all the people who had been locked away in dark rooms surfing the net to come out into the light of day and become untethered to their wired connection. It was an invitation to liberation. In the same way, Jesus is inviting us to live for a kingdom bigger than our own. When we live for our own kingdom, we tend to get into the rut of living among walls that confine us. Our world gets smaller and smaller.

There is a very real sense in which hell is simply that place where God gives to all those who are seeking their own kingdom what they have always wanted. He gives them their own kingdom. But by then their worlds have shrunk so much that there is only one person left. That's why hell is described as a place of darkness, because all who are there are isolated from others, and it's by their own choice. Jesus calls us to something higher, to live for his kingdom. That's where our glory lies, and Jesus knows it. So he spends a great deal of time teaching about the kingdom and what it's like. In our two parables today, he speaks of the growth and expansion of this kingdom. Let's look now at each parable and see its specific teaching about the kingdom of heaven.

I. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

The point of this parable is the growth of God's kingdom from small to big. The mustard seed was noted for its small size, about one millimeter in diameter. That's about 1/32 of an inch. Think of a sesame seed on top of a hamburger bun. Cut it in half and you've got the approximate size of a mustard seed. Yet, when it grows, it produces quite a large plant. The mustard plant commonly grew to a height of six to eight feet, and in some cases would rise to as high as 12 feet. It would branch out in a manner similar to a tree, so that it became tree-like. And since it's an annual plant, all this growth would take place in only one growing season. The point of Jesus' parable is the great size and growth of the kingdom from a very small beginning.

This parable teaches us a couple of things about the kingdom of God. One is that it is in the process of growing large, even though it started quite small. In Acts 1:15, we learn that right after Jesus' ascension, the church numbered only 120 people. That's not the size of the church just in Jerusalem, but in the entire world. But like the mustard seed, it grew and expanded rapidly, which it is continuing to do to this day. Listen to these statistics on the growth of the church over the past 2000 years. In A.D. 100, the population of the world was 180 million, and the ratio of the number of people in the world per Christian was 360 to 1. That means that there were 360 people for every Christian. In the year A. D. 1000, at the peak of the Middle Ages, the world's population stood at 270 million, and the ratio was 270-1. At the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, in the year 1500, the world's population had swelled to 425 million, and that ratio was 85-1. Just one-hundred years ago, in 1900, the world's population was 1.6 billion, but the ratio continued to drop, to 21-1. In 1970, with a world population of 3.7 billion, the ratio stood at 13-1. The latest figures from the year 2000 show a world population of 6.1 billion and a ratio of one Christian per 9.3 people. So even though the world's population has been rising so quickly, the rate of growth in the church is even higher. We may not witness that growth first hand here in America, but that's because we live in the northern hemisphere. Philip Jenkins has studied the growth of the church over the past 2000 years, and in his latest book, he asserts that by the year 2050 only one Christian in five will be a non-Latino white person, and that the center of gravity of the Christian world will have shifted definitively to the Southern hemisphere.

But this parable shows more than the inevitable growth of God's kingdom. It also speaks of the normal pattern for such growth, likening it to the way a plant grows. The normal pattern in God's kingdom is for things to start out small, like the mustard seed, but in time to produce much fruit. Imagine a person's attitude who for the first time was planting a mustard seed. It's lying there in his hand, so small that it can barely be seen. When told that by the end of the growing season, that little seed will have grown to the largest of all shrubs, it seems too hard to believe. Yet that's exactly what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like.

I was able to give the devotional to the God's House Kindergarten teachers this week, and I spoke about Revelation 3:20, where Jesus said "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me." After the devotional, the music teacher mentioned to me that she had just taught that verse to the children through a song. She went on to say that she had tried to teach them something of its meaning, but she wasn't sure how successful she had been. You know what she was doing? She was sowing a mustard seed, and, from one perspective, it looked like such a foolish thing to do. But I reminded her that God brings much fruit out of just such plantings of his word, even if she will never see it and even if it takes many years. Planting things that seem ridiculously small and insignificant, and then seeing them later grow to enormous influence is the way of God's kingdom.

Illustration: In 1855, an eighteen-year-old young man had just moved to Boston to try to make his fortune. He happened to visit a church where the Bible was believed and taught.

Shortly after that, his Sunday School teacher went to the store where this young man worked and simply and persuasively shared the gospel with him. Years later, his Sunday School teacher said of this young man: I can truly say that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my Sunday school class, and I think the committee of the church seldom met an applicant for membership who seemed more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any space of public or extended usefulness. But God used that mustard seed of his truth, and this young man came to trust in Jesus. But that's not the end of the story, because his name is D. L. Moody, and this young man went on to become one of the greatest evangelists of the 19th century.

Application #1: For those of you who teach in the children's Sunday School program, I hope this truth encourages you. It may seem at times that your efforts are about as powerless as putting a tiny little seed in the ground. You see nothing happening and wonder if you have wasted your time. Please understand that this is the way of God's kingdom, and in God's time much fruit will be born.

Application #2: A second application is a word to those who never experience this phenomenon I just described as being true of Sunday School teachers. I was talking with a friend from Philadelphia this week, and he was mentioning a John Piper quote that spoke to him in a significant way. Piper said something like, "Unless you know the rhythm of desperation and deliverance, you're seeking man's kingdom and not God's." There is an element of desperation in planting a tiny mustard seed in hope of gaining a large plant, but then there is the deliverance as God does indeed produce such a plant. If you're never desperate, you're seeking the wrong kingdom. You're playing it safe and doing only what satisfies you.

So this first parable teaches us about the extent of God's kingdom—that it will grow to mighty proportions—and about the pattern of life in that kingdom. It is a constant starting with what feels small and foolish, and watching God bring great things from such beginnings.

II. The Parable of the Leaven

If the first parable was set in a man's world, the world of the field, this one is set in a woman's world of the first century. There were no bakers in these small villages, so the bread was baked in the homes. Jesus had undoubtedly watched his mother do it many times. She mixes up some flour, water and salt, and then blends it with a lump of dough from last week's bread-making. That dough has the leaven, the yeast, that spreads through the whole lump of clay. The emphasis here is on two things. First, she "hides" the leaven in the dough. It quickly becomes indistinguishable from the rest. Second, the leaven is small, while the dough is large. The measure Jesus mentions is quite large, and three measures would be about fifty pounds. In spite of its great size, one little lump of leaven is all that's needed, because it will spread to the entire batch.

Jesus is teaching here that the kingdom grows quietly as each follower of Jesus mixes in and spreads in a natural way. The normal growth of God's kingdom is not splashy and attention-grabbing, but quiet and steady. This is one of the truths that the younger generation understands better than mine. I am smack dab in the middle of the baby boomer generation, and our generation likes the splashy, organizational way of doing outreach. It was the baby boomers who came up with the plans back in the 80's and 90's to reach the world for Christ. It was probably a baby boomer who called *The Passion of the Christ* movie "the greatest outreach opportunity in the history of the church." My son is 21 years old, and is fairly

representative of his generation. Instead of focusing on big, splashy programs, his generation just wants to reach out to one person and make a difference. Which do you think is closer to Jesus' parable here?

Application: Like the lump of leaven the woman hid in the big batch of dough, God has hidden each one of us where he wants us. Our need is to submit to him wherever we are, and, by his grace, to make a difference in people's lives one by one. We are not to be like the cows in a painting I heard about that showed where four fields came together at the point where the fence crossed. In each field was a cow with his head stuck through the fence eating grass in a field not his own. God has put you like a lump of leaven right where he wants you. Be content to fill that space, no matter how little, and ask God for the grace to make a difference.

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CONCLUSION:

We've been looking at Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God spreads. It is like the mustard seed that grows into this large shrub, and like leaven that spreads even through this large lump of dough. Has it spread to you? Here's how you tell. Where is your home? Jesus said that the birds make their home in this mustard plant. Have you made a nest in the kingdom of God? What is a home? Isn't it that place where your heart is at rest? You can be yourself and you can rest. Home is the place where you rest. Have you learned to rest in the home God provides for you, or is there a restlessness in your heart? Jesus provides the resting place that will be home to us forever. We get that home simply by resting in him. We get it by ceasing from all our labor to be found acceptable, and just resting in Jesus. Every other religion in the world says, "Strive and then, if your strivings are sufficient, you can rest." Christianity says, "Rest, in order that you may strive." So the message of these two parables isn't primarily to live for God's kingdom instead of your own. It's to find your home in Jesus in order that you might live for a purpose higher than your own kingdom. Right now, you can rest in the thought that God accepts you in Christ. There is nothing more you need do in order to be accepted. Jesus has done it all. Now, after being accepted, God gives the added blessing of having a purpose for which to live. You can live for the kingdom of God instead of your own kingdom. Let's close in a prayer of repentance and faith, repenting of seeking our own kingdom and believing that our rest is found in the kingdom provided us by Jesus.