



**The Kingdom of God
Luke 13:18-21**

18 Then He said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?"

19 "It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."

20 And again He said, "To what shall I liken the kingdom of God?"

21 "It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

When Jesus spoke these two parables, you will recall that he was standing in a synagogue, preaching on the Sabbath day. He had just miraculously healed a woman who had been afflicted with a spirit of infirmity. For 18 years she had been bent over and unable to straighten up, and Jesus had laid his hands on her and immediately she was healed. Her first act on being able to once again stand up straight was to glorify God, because she knew that it was by His hand that she had been delivered.

But even this action on the part of Christ had brought the scorn of the religious authorities. The ruler of the very synagogue he was preaching in had wrongly condemned it as a desecration of the Sabbath. The authorities are against Jesus and his message, He is going against the grain of their society and their presumptions. Very soon now the three great warring factions of Judean culture – the Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Saducees will put aside their hatred for one another and work together to ensure that this Jesus of Nazareth is put to death.

Jesus knows that, he knows that the time for him to go to Jerusalem and be crucified is almost at hand. He knows that many who have followed him are starting to look at the situation and quite possibly be discouraged.

"Master, you told us to go into the villages and preach that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and we did so because we believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God. But Master, now the leaders are against us, and the nation doesn't seem to be rallying behind us in droves.

Where are the armies that will install you as King in Jerusalem and crush your enemies? Where are the powerful speakers, the men of wealth and education, who will persuade those who are wavering and silence those who argue against you? Where is the money, the pomp, the power? We believe you are Great David's Greater Son, but was there ever a King whose circumstance were so humble – without even a place to lay his head?"

So here Jesus preaches two related parables that address the concerns of the discouraged and doubting and explain how the Kingdom of God really advances.

The first of these parables about a mustard seed teaches how the Kingdom of God advances in the world. The Second about a yeast or leaven, teaches how the Kingdom of God advances in the lives of individuals.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we have a man who sows a seed, a single tiny mustard seed in his garden. But from that tiny seed that is simply cast into the earth, comes a plant so large that it not only produces a harvest of thousands of seeds of its own, but shelter and refuge for the very birds of the air.

Jesus has already spoken of sowing seed in the parable of the sower. That seed is the Gospel. How did the proclamation of the gospel start? It was hopelessly insignificant to begin with by worldly standards wasn't it? Its fountainhead is a desperately poor man in a backwater province of the Roman Empire who goes on to be condemned and executed for treason. Then it is spread largely by uneducated fishermen. It is opposed at every turn. Those who proclaim it are scorned, persecuted, and put to death. And yet no sooner is one of these messengers put to death than 5 more spring up in their place. Eventually, this gospel message that is to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness has turned the world upside down. This Gospel message that started out as a tiny seed, has filled the entire earth.

How was that possible? How did what Jesus said would happen – that the Good News that He was preaching that day in the Synagogue would become so great that it would fill the entire earth – happen? ***How does the kingdom of God advance in this world?***

Well unlike Islam, the gospel did not advance by force. Instead of threatening those who would not convert with death by the sword, the proclaimers of the Gospel *were the ones put to death and yet they overcame their persecutors!*. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:36-37

As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

To this day Christianity has no Mujahedeen, no Hezbollah, no Hamas, no Al Qaeda. When we sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" we are not singing about taking up AK47s and Plastic Explosive and killing the unbelievers.

Yes the saints are a mighty and unstoppable army, but they are not a worldly army:

***2 Cor. 10:3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.
4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds,
5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,***

The kingdom of God advances as the Gospel conquers once implacable enemies heart by heart. As the gospel is preached the seed that Jesus spoke of is being sown and it is the holy spirit that causes that seed to grow. That is why lowly uneducated fishermen could produce such amazing results – results far beyond the ability of the greatest orators Greece or Rome to reproduce. Like Pharaoh's magicians confronted with the miracles done by Moses, they too would have to concede that ***"This is the finger of God"***

The power of the Gospel lies in the fact that it is the *Word of God* and God's appointed and empowered means of spreading the Kingdom. That is why Paul confessed 1 Cor. 3:7 ***So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.***

That is why when churches and denominations abandon the gospel, they inevitably begin to wither and die.

You may not know this but the largest Romanesque Cathedral in the world isn't in Italy or Germany, it isn't even Roman Catholic. It's the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. They started building the Cathedral in the 1890s and they still aren't finished. They estimate it will take 400 million dollars to complete the construction.

Now when you walk into this Cathedral it is awesome, you have this vaulted ceiling that seems to stretch all the way to heaven, at one end you have the worlds largest stained glass window, you literally can't turn in any direction without seeing the most amazing and imposing high church architecture. But in this enormous building, in the middle of one of the most populous cities on earth, the turn-out for regular Sunday morning worship services is often smaller than an average service *in this church*.

Why? Because while they have plenty of messages on social action, and aids awareness, and gay rights, or what ever the cause of the month is, they long ago abandoned the simple preaching of the Gospel. And Jesus warned churches that do that in Revelation, that he would come and take their lampstand. If they cease to be light and salt, if they become merely an arm of the world, then they become salt without savour and despite their money and their pomp they are fit for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men. They are no longer part of that living growing tree that provides a refugee for the nations and all who come laboring and heavy laden seeking real and lasting rest for their souls.

In the parable of the leaven, Jesus speaks of a woman who took a little yeast and put it into a large amount of dough.

Now you know how yeast works. You put in just a little bit of active yeast into a quantity of dough, and those little fungi begin to reproduce like crazy. After a little while they have worked their way through all of that dough and you can see the evidence of that in the way that the CO₂ they produce as they digest the sugars in the dough causes into rise. A little bit of yeast has an amazing effect doesn't it?

The way the Holy Spirit works in individuals is often like that. JC Ryle put it this way: ***"The start of the work of grace in a sinner is usually exceedingly small. It is like adding yeast to a lump of dough. A single sentence or a single verse of Holy Scripture, a word of rebuke from a friend, a casual religious remark overheard, a tract given by a stranger; a trifling act of kindness received from a Christian – any one of these things can be the starting-point for the life of a soul. The first signs of spiritual life are indeed often small in the extreme - so small that for a long time they are not known about except to the person in, whom they are taking place, and even he hardly understands what is going on. A few serious thoughts and a conscience pricked, a desire to pray really and not formally, a determination to read the Bible in private, a gradual drawing toward the means of grace, a growing distaste for evil habits and bad companions - these, or some of them, are often the first signs of grace beginning to move the heart of man. They are symptoms which worldly people do not perceive and ignorant believers may despise and even old Christians may mistake; yet they are often the first steps in the mighty business of conversion. They are often the "yeast" of grace working in a heart."***

Although the starts small, because God is its agent, it progresses working its way through the entire lump and producing visible effects. Just as the dough rises because the yeast is working within it, so to when men and women are added to the kingdom, they too "rise" they produce fruit in keeping with their changed nature.

Jesus gave both these parables to encourage his followers that in the Kingdom of God small beginnings have mighty endings.

Let me therefore leave you with 3 applications:

- 1) ***What impact can our congregation possibly have?*** Small, despised, counter-cultural as we are. The Gospel is that seed, that started small and grows large. But our *true and lasting impact* will be in proportion only to the degree in which we are faithful to the great commission and preach the word of God – for it is God who gives the increase. ***Zec. 4:6 "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' Says the LORD of hosts."*** But if we will but be faithful, there is no end to the potential for true and lasting growth.
- 2) ***With that in mind we must remember that there is no such thing as a living synthetic gospel!*** What do I mean by that? Well you could crush a mustard seed, analyze its component chemicals and attempt to reproduce them and then put them into mustard seed shape. But if you plant that "synthetic mustard seed", will it grow and produce a tree? ***Not at all.*** In the same way, you can dissect the gospel and say well it appears to be a combination of morality and hope and spirituality and obedience and so we can reproduce a synthetic gospel with those ingredients and without all the offenses and stumbling blocks of the original. ***But that isn't the living kingdom seed that will grow and flourish either.*** And while you may be able to get by with that for a while, since it isn't the word of God it too will wither and die. **DON'T DO IT.**

EXAMPLES:

Children - Training them - Morality will never replace the living seed of the Gospel!

Compromise with Culture - 1900s and 2004

- 3) ***Encouragement:*** What of you? Perhaps you are discouraged by the smallness of your faith. Now not all men and women have the same degree of faith and produce the same level of fruit [GURNALL QUOTE] and yet that leaven, if it is indeed the good leaven of the Gospel and not the corrupt leaven of Hypocrisy that Jesus warned of in Luke 12:1 will produce a change. Leaven makes a Small Beginning in Bread, but effects an ENORMOUS CHANGE. Remember that in the parable of the talents, only the servant who did nothing with the grace that he was offered was damned.