



The Mustard Seed & The Leaven

The kingdom of God as Jesus was bringing it—through healings and casting out demons and surprising meals and invitations to sinners and outsiders—was not how many people expected the kingdom of God to come. Perhaps this is why Jesus told many parables about the surprising arrival and nature of God’s kingdom. These parables challenged conventional expectations and invited deeper attention to what was going on in the midst of the world. They called people to notice the kingdom that was present from the beginning, yet hiding in the familiar and ordinary. They gave an opportunity to practice the kind of attention required for understanding the person who stood before them, telling these stories.

To this end, the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in Matthew 13:31-33 both draw attention to remarkable growth arising from insignificant beginnings. They describe how the kingdom of heaven emerges from something almost invisible to the eye and grows exponentially. What we see now is potential, but that potential needs to be actualized. The seed has to be planted; and leaven has to be worked into the dough. Even small actions, or hidden actions, have the potential to produce great things.

Both images also point to the ordinary happenings in our everyday lives: the mustard seed parable is set in a garden or field; the leaven parable is set in a kitchen. Thus the kingdom of heaven is found in what today we might call “our own backyard” — whether in our home, our neighborhood, or throughout our daily work.

In these settings we find the challenge of these parables: don’t ask “when” the kingdom comes or “where” it is. The *when* is in its own good time — as long as it takes for seed to sprout and dough to rise. The *where* is that it is already present in the world. Like the mustard seed that grows to shelter the birds or the leaven that produces enough bread to feed the neighborhood, the kingdom is present and growing wherever disciples are working together to do what we were put here to do—to welcome, shelter, nourish, and provide for others, all to the glory of God.

The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Background¹: The mustard seed illustrates the potential of enormous growth resulting even from tiny, inauspicious beginnings. In a scientific age, it's sometimes pointed out that technically the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds. But it certainly was the smallest that Jews in the first century knew about and planted in any of their fields, which is all Jesus can be expected to mean.

A scruffy shrub seems like an odd choice as a metaphor for God's kingdom when one could have chosen a magnificent cedar. Seldom does a mustard plant grow to a height of over four or five feet. You can see them blossoming with bright yellow flowers in the spring on the hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee to this day. But every once in a while, one will grow large enough that you could think of it as a large bush or perhaps a very small tree. And that apparently is what happens to the mustard seed in this little story. It is an ordinary plant with extraordinary potential for growth and function: the plant becomes a small tree, so big that "the birds come and perch in its branches." Jesus' parables call his audience to expect the in-breaking of God's reign into our ordinary daily lives. They also call us to remember that the kingdom of God has its own time and rate of growth.

Interpretation²: Parables address questions, whether the questions are implicit or explicit. The parable of the mustard seed addresses the implicit question about the unimpressive and unexpected nature of the kingdom Jesus claimed was already present. *Could what was happening with Jesus and his disciples really be the establishment of God's kingdom? Wasn't the kingdom supposed to be a mighty display of God's defeat of evil? Where is the rest of the story?* Such questions would have gone through the mind of many of Jesus' hearers, whether friend or foe. The parable of the mustard seed urges that no one should be put off by what appears unimpressive. Like the tiny mustard seed which grows to a large plant, so the kingdom is present, even if hidden, unnoticed, or ignored, and its full revelation with its benefits will come.

The point is that what one sees with Jesus will lead to what one hopes for in the kingdom. The kingdom, which has already begun with Jesus, does not come with a glorious bang and the defeat of Rome; rather, it comes unexpectedly, almost unnoticed. But all that is necessary is already there, and the end is present in the beginning. The focus on the birds dwelling in the branches or shade of the trade should not be lost. In the end, the greatness and benefit of the kingdom will be a pleasant and wonderful reality.

The message is not merely about the certainty of the coming of the final kingdom. Jews, disciples of Jesus or otherwise, did not need to be told the kingdom was coming. What they needed to know was that the future kingdom was already present in Jesus' teaching and work. God's longed-for kingdom has begun. It has started and will come to fulfillment. And that conviction comes hope, confidence, and encouragement. Ultimately, the mustard seed is a challenge to human judgment about smallness and significance. Too often we fail to see and recognize a seed planted by God. We should expect and implement "mustard seed" thinking, neither looking down upon insignificance nor doubting what God can do and does with small beginnings.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to Jesus' Parables*.

The Leaven (Matthew 13:33)

He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about eighteen pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Background³: Like many parables, this too offers a humble image: the kingdom of God is like the leaven that a woman kneaded into a triple recipe until it permeated the whole batch. It takes work to make bread. It takes the force of strong arms that can smash and squeeze and shape the dough. The leaven is distributed throughout the whole amount of flour. In the process the leaven is alive, pervasive, and hidden. After the work of kneading is the rest. The dough rests from the pulling and punching. The evidence of the leaven's power is revealed when the dough rises.

The use of "three measures" of flour represents approximately eight gallons, an impressively large amount that will be influenced by a small addition of leaven. Relative to the larger amount of flour, the leaven is only a small quantity, yet its small presence has big effects. The woman literally "hides" the leaven in the flour. That which seems to be invisible is in fact mysteriously and inevitably performing its leavening work. Jesus says that by means of a time-consuming process, all of the flour "was leavened." The passive voice indicates God's transformative work in the world. The quantity of bread that is produced is enormous in comparison with the small lump of dough with which the baker begins.

Interpretation⁴: Like the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven emphasizes an intentional process with an explicit goal and portrays the surprising large effect of something small or unobservable. In that sense they provide two different pictures of the same reality and make the point more strongly than either could alone.

As with the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven is addressed to the same doubt about the kingdom's presence. The point again is that what you see with Jesus is the beginning of what you hope for in the kingdom and will surely lead to it. The focus is not the contrast of small and large but the hidden beginning which will result in the completion of God's work in the kingdom, the leavening of the whole. Something has happened and will have its full effect. A hidden power, hardly discernible to some, is already working. The kingdom in Jesus' ministry has its beginning and is at work, even if in a hidden and unanticipated way.

The challenge to human perceptions and judgment about smallness and significance is present here too. Many people know insignificant beginnings in their lives that God has brought to completion. That dynamic is part of life and should be savored and protected both for ourselves and others. If people are given over to God's purposes, small beginnings still come to fruition. God seems to be about the business of leavening — magnifying — what seems insignificant.

Following the parable of the leaven, Matthew turns our attention to the parable as the way Jesus "tells" the crowd (13:34-35). In parables, Jesus proclaims what has always been present yet continues to be perceived as hidden. Hidden in the ordinary details of daily life is the truth that we are rooted and grounded in a God that has been with us and for us from the very foundation of creation. Likewise the promised kingdom of heaven is glimpsed in the parables as a kingdom that is **already and not yet** here in the midst of the familiar.

³ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to Jesus' Parables*.

Looking for the Kingdom in Unexpected Places⁵

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? And how will it change our own?

- **Like a growing seed or leavened dough, these parables rise up in us with new perspective.** We are invited to see the world from a different angle. God-transforming moments can be hidden in the simplest of deeds. Yet we may not see the effect of the power of the small and the hidden until there is a rising. The parable of the Mustard Seed fuels our hope that indeed the seemingly insignificant not only matters but makes a difference and contributes in some way to the in-breaking of God's kingdom in our midst. It fuels our hope that God works at least as much through humility as through majesty.

These parables invite us to entertain the possibility that God intends for us not to be filled with big things, but to participate fully in the small yet certain advancement of God's kingdom here and now. Are we totally committed to loving God and neighbor? Do we make our every encounter an opportunity to embody Jesus' love? Are we guided by his example? If we live to embody God's love, God will surely bring the growth.

We live in mustard-seed hope whenever we humbly engage others in Christ's name, doing what may seem to be something really small for our neighbor, rather than something really big for ourselves. Such hope surprises those who seek the seeds of the kingdom of heaven among the grand; such hope challenges impulses to consume, especially at the expense of those among us in need; such hope both humbles and encourages.

- **There is hope too in these parables for those who often feel like tiny seeds in a world that trades only in big, who feel like unseen leaven in a world that trades in glamour and power, who feel like failures in a world that is interested only in success.**

The hope is this: that from God's perspective the kingdom of God does not look only like big glass churches, but like scruffy shrubs here and there—unattractive and unappealing, except to those birds that need shelter and shade. Mustard shrubs may be unwelcome to those cultivating a different kind of field, but they are celebrated by those who need just what they have to offer—room in their branches. Similarly, the leaven reminds us that God has been and continues to work in hidden ways to bring renewal to our lives. Grace continues to leaven *who we are* with *what we may yet be*. It is a parable of hope and encouragement.

- **These parables remind us that the kingdom is manifested in ordinary daily life and how we live it.** A sower of seed and a woman baking bread reflect types easily recognized in the world of the Gospel and today, each individual going about their work. Their ordinary tasks invite us to see signs of the kingdom of heaven in our day-to-day lives; to recognize that it is emerging in our very midst. This becomes an invitation to us to cultivate the practice of seeing God's work among us through questions:

- ▶ What do you expect to see?
- ▶ Where do you expect to find it?
- ▶ Have there been times when your expectations have been overturned or changed?
- ▶ What is God doing around you right now? And how can you join God in that work?

⁵ Portions of this section excerpted from Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

Discussion

1. If the mustard seed represents the “kingdom of heaven” why do you think Jesus would point out it starts out as “the least of all seeds”? What does this mean? What are some ways that you have seen the kingdom of God produce dramatic results from small beginnings?
2. Jesus says the kingdom is like a mustard seed that grows into a shrub/tree and birds come to find shelter and make nests in its branches. How might this be a metaphor for Christians/the church today?
 - What currently makes BHCC a place where others can find shelter and a home? In what ways can we better extend that shelter for others?
3. If you’ve ever made homemade bread, how would you describe the process? What is your role? What is out of your control? What have you learned about waiting?
 - With those things in mind, how do you see the theme of waiting and patience in the parable of the leaven as it describes hidden but certain nature of the coming of God’s kingdom?
4. For followers of Jesus, kingdom living encompasses every aspect of our lives – spiritual, relational, and physical. For each of these areas, what are a few practical “mustard seeds” of faith that you can could plant that have Spirit-filled potential to produce dramatic results? What might be the “yeast” that has the Spirit-filled potential to bring that change?
5. Return to the reflection questions at the end of the previous page. These parables invite us to cultivate the practice of seeing God’s work among us. Where is God at work around you right now and how can you join God in that work?