

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 6: The Parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven

Introduction

Continuing the theme of the Parables of the Kingdom, we now look at what Jesus teaches about *the growth* of the kingdom. The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven are both found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:31–33; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–21). These parables are part of Jesus’ Kingdom parables, illustrating the nature and growth of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 13:31-35 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² 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.”

³³ He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Themes in the Parables

1. The Kingdom's Small Beginning but Great Expansion
2. The Subtle but Transformative Power of the Kingdom
3. The Kingdom’s Unexpected Nature
4. The Inevitability of God's Work Despite Opposition

Background Information

First-Century Jewish Expectations of the Kingdom

Many Jews expected the Kingdom of God to come suddenly, powerfully, and politically—overthrowing Rome and restoring Israel’s national sovereignty. Jesus’ portrayal of the kingdom as starting small and growing gradually challenged these expectations.

Agricultural Imagery in Jewish Thought

Seeds and trees were common metaphors for nations and kingdoms in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:1-9; Daniel 4:10-12). Leaven, or yeast, was often a negative symbol in Jewish thought, representing sin, corruption, or hypocrisy (Exodus 12:15-20; Matthew 16:6). Leaven was associated this way as it involved fermentation (a form of decomposition). This is why during the Passover, unleavened bread was required—symbolizing purity and separation from corruption.

Explaining the Parables

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)

Matthew 13:31-32 NIV “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.”

Mark 4:30-32 NIV “Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Luke 13:18-19 NIV “Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”

Key Observations

This parable is very similar to the prophetic parable about God's restoration of Israel and the establishment of the coming Messianic kingdom:

- *Ezekiel 17:22-24 NIV "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ All the trees of the forest will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.*

1. **The Mustard Seed's Smallness:** The principle here is that the kingdom starts small. The mustard seed was commonly used in Jewish idioms to signify something very small (cf. Matthew 17:20). In both the Jewish and Greco-Roman world mustard seeds were proverbially known for their small size, even though other seeds, such as the orchid or cypress, were known to be smaller. Jesus is not making a botanical statement but emphasizing contrast: the tiny beginning of the kingdom (*smallest of all seeds*) versus its massive future (*largest of all garden plants*).
 - This is showing us that Jesus' mission began with a small group of people in a small area, and even though at first it may have looked insignificant, the message of the Gospel, the church, and ultimately the kingdom would continue its growth and influence until it reached the whole world.
2. **The Unexpected Growth:** Mustard plants normally grow into bushes, but Jesus describes an unnaturally large tree—signifying unexpected expansion. This reflects Old Testament imagery where great trees symbolize powerful kingdoms (Ezekiel 17:22-24; Daniel 4:10-12). This expansion of the kingdom would be one that fills the whole earth:
 - *Daniel 2:34-35 "While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."*
 - *Habakkuk 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*
 - *Isaiah 9:7 Of the greatness [increase] of his government and peace there will be no end.*
3. **The Birds of the Air:** In Old Testament imagery, birds often symbolize nations or Gentiles (Ezekiel 31:6; Daniel 4:21). This suggests that the Kingdom of God will not be an ethnic or national kingdom (just for Israel) but inclusive of all people. This hearkens to several themes in the Bible:
 - **The Abrahamic Covenant:** *Genesis 12:1-3 "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*
 - **The Psalms:** *Psalm 22:27-28 "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations."*
 - **The Prophets:** *Isaiah 2:2-4 "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it."*
 - **The Great Commandment/Commission:** *Matthew 28:18-20 "make disciples of all nations..."*, *Acts 1:8 "You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth"*
 - **Revelation:** *Revelation 11:5 "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."*

The Parable of the Leaven/Yeast (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21)

Matthew 13:33, NIV "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Luke 13:20-21 NIV "Again he asked, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?' ²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Key Observations

1. **Leaven/Yeast as a Metaphor for its Hidden Nature:** The principle here is that the kingdom is 'hidden' or operates in such a way that it's not overtly noticed. The kingdom does not come with pageantry or like other national/political kingdoms. Normally, leaven was a negative symbol (representing sin or hypocrisy, Matthew 16:6). However, Jesus flips the symbolism, using how leaven works as a demonstration of how the kingdom works, showing the kingdom's hidden but influencing nature.
2. **The Vast Amount of Flour:** The yeast (kingdom of God) is hidden within this large batch—just as Jesus plants the gospel in a small way, but it eventually influences all nations. "Three measures of flour" (about 60 pounds) would produce an enormous amount of bread—enough to feed over 100 people. This signifies the immense and pervasive impact of the kingdom. This suggests the Kingdom of God is not just for a few but will spread far and wide. Also it notes that just as a tiny bit of leaven can affect a lot of dough, showing that this small hidden Kingdom will impact the whole world (Habakkuk 2:14). The large quantity of flour suggests a global kingdom, not just for Israel.
3. **Leaven Works On The Inside:** This principle, similar to the kingdom being 'hidden', is it can also allude to the fact that the kingdom starts *internally*. Jesus said, '*the kingdom of God is within you (and among you)*' showing that the work of the kingdom starts on the inside in the heart of a person. Its influence is from the inside-out. The kingdom transforms societies, individuals, and cultures from within rather than conquering through force. The kingdom changes hearts before it changes the world. This can also allude to the new covenant is not about external laws, but an internal transformation by the Holy Spirit.
4. **Leaven Works Powerfully:** The kingdom may be hidden and works quietly, but it is very powerful. Notice the small phrase "*until it worked all through the dough*" this means the kingdom will be powerful and unstoppable. Once leaven is introduced into flour, it will spread and transform the entire batch—and nothing can stop it. This is a perfect metaphor for how God's Kingdom grows and spreads irresistibly, despite opposition. Also, leaven is active it multiplies and transforms and continues to grow until it affects all the dough – everything it touches. Once leaven has entered the dough cannot remain the same and it will reach its intended fulfillment.

Application to the Church Today

1. **Faithfulness in Small Beginnings:** The mustard seed reminds believers that God's work often starts small but grows beyond imagination. Churches, ministries, and personal faith journeys should not be despised for their humble beginnings (Zechariah 4:10).
2. **Kingdom Growth Is Inevitable:** Like leaven, the gospel has permeated the world—transforming cultures, societies, and individuals. Even when Christian influence seems diminished, God's kingdom continues to work.
3. **The Power of Subtle Influence:** The church does not expand through political power but through the transformative power of the Spirit. Kingdom influence is not always loud and visible but is deep, persistent, and world-changing.
4. **The Global and Inclusive Nature of the Kingdom:** Just as birds found shelter in the mustard tree, the church must be a place of refuge for all people. The gospel is not just for one nation or culture but for every tribe and tongue (Revelation 7:9).