

Valley Bible Church – Parables of Jesus

What is the Kingdom like? It grows.

This week we continue with the last two of three parables that teach us about the growth of the Kingdom of God. Last week we learned that the Kingdom of God in the New Testament refers to the body of Christ, the church, where God rules and His sovereign will is done.

We also learned a humbling and encouraging lesson: Even though we have a vital part to play in the growth of the Kingdom by preparing soil, planting seed, tending and watering, ultimately the Kingdom grows by the work and will of God.

This week we see that the kingdom grows from a small and humble beginning to a gigantic and effective organism and it grows from within as people are infected with the "real disease."

The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Like 13:18-19)

The Leaven (Matthew 13:33)

Introduction:

The disciples of Jesus often seemed to be about ready to give up. Was the sacrifice, the travel, the self-denial, and the persecution really worth it? Would their work really make any difference in a world of Roman rule and Jewish unbelief?

John the Baptist, in prison, had the nerve to voice his concern, "Are you the one (the Messiah), or shall we look for another?"

I once took a two-week wilderness survival course on the upper peninsula of Michigan and in my survival kit along with wire, matches, and first aid materials was a little book entitled *Before You Give Up, Read This.* In it were suggestions for staying alive when all hope seemed gone. These little parables are much like that book.

(Read Matthew 13:31 through 33)

The first parable gives us three things to consider before giving up:

Discover the Might in the Miniscule (Lloyd Ogilvie)

A. We are victimized by bigness . . . "Bigger is Better"

1. Businesses are now measured in billions of dollars in assets and some are richer than many countries.
2. Buildings seem, like the Tower of Babel, to reach to heaven.
3. Cities continue to expand and grow in population and traffic.
4. Churches are now called Mega-churches since many have topped 10,000 members.
5. Science tells us the universe is expanding and we can't even understand its size now.

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B. Most important things start small

1. Great art begins with a concept, vision, paint and brushes.
2. Great Literature starts with a thought, 26 letters, a pen or keyboard.
3. Great music is created from an idea, tiny notes and lines.
4. Revolutions often begin with an ideology, a few words, and slogans.
5. Christianity was born with a baby who became a carpenter and spread His Gospel through a few common men.

Discover the Message in the Metaphor

A. The critics speak

1. The mustard seed isn't the smallest of seeds.

There are seeds that are much smaller, some as small as a grain of ground pepper.

2. Mustard plants are bushes not trees.

They are an herb and have no bark.

B. Figures of speech

1. Metaphors, hyperbole, and other figures of speech were as common in the Palestine as they are today.

We use them all the time: Quiet as a mouse; Smart as a whip.

The use of the mustard seed to proverbially illustrate the smallest of seeds was common throughout the writings of the Rabbis from Jesus' time.

It was a favorite with Old Testament writers to represent growth and beauty and was almost always used to show vast amounts of growth from. This made is a great figure for the expansion of the kingdom.

2. In Palestine the small mustard seed grew into a huge plant.

They were planted in open fields and reached a height of ten, twelve, and even twenty feet and grew wide and full just like a tree. This made them perfect for birds to nest and cast shade just like a tree.

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Discover the Meaning in the Message

A. Two Major Interpretations

1. David Trench/Neil Lightfoot

Mustard seed shows the small, humble beginning of the kingdom. George MacDonald in his poem *The Holy Thing* wrote: "They were looking for a king

To slay their foes and lift them high:

Thou cam'st, a little baby thing

That made a woman cry."

Jesus came: Not as an Emperor but a child; not into a palace but a cave barn; not to a capital but Bethlehem (the least among cities); not teaching philosophy but parables; not with an army but a simple band of men.

The growth to a "tree" indicates maturity and usefulness and the birds of the air refer to men and women flocking to the kingdom for food, shelter and protection.

2. Dr G. Campbell Morgan/Herbert Lockyer

Mustard seed denote small simple beginning of the kingdom (church) 12 to 120 close disciples

Growth of "tree" shows colossal growth of the church from 12 to thousands in few years. Growth includes both positive and negative influences.

The birds of the air in scripture *always* represent Satan and his followers doing their damage.

B. Parabolic Interpretation

1. The kingdom of God started small (humbly--the smallest)

The baby Jesus asleep on the hay, twelve common followers, 120 faithful fighting an uphill battle against the Roman Empire and the Judaic System.

2. The kingdom continues to grow and grow.

"Even today, nearly two thousand years after that afternoon on Capernaum's shore, the kingdom is not yet fully grown. And most of us who serve Him are quite as insignificant in the sight of the world as a grain of mustard seed. Our work in the world is nothing--a prayer, a small kindness, and the monotonous day-to-day business of virtue.

There are times when it is hard to believe that anything we do with and for Christ is of value--here and now, or later."--April Armstrong

But, look around you. It is still here, and it is still growing, and the "gates of hell shall not prevail against it." God's kingdom will not only prevail over all other kingdoms as illustrated by the image in Daniel. It will last forever.

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That brings us to the last parable in this twelve-week series:

The Parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33)

"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened."

The lesson of this parable has puzzled some, mainly because leaven is used in the Scripture primarily as a negative concept. Sin when it gets into the Nation of Israel, or the church, or the life of the believer, like leaven, permeates the whole with its evil influence.

So, therefore, guard against the leaven (false teaching or the rottenness of white washed tombs) of the Pharisees, for instance (Mark 8). Or as Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 5:6 and again in Galatians 5:9, "A little leaven (heresy in the church) leavens the whole lump."

But in the New Testament leaven is used as a symbol of both bad and good. In this parable Jesus speaks of leaven being like the yeast bread starter a woman puts into her meal to keep for her next batch of bread so it will be light, wholesome and tasty.

So, we can understand that the kingdom is like leaven in several ways:

1. The Leaven Works From Within.

It has no effect until it is put inside the dough. Likewise, the true influence that changes men and therefore brings wholesomeness and tang to the church is the working of God in a person's heart.

Christianity is like leaven. It is not an influence on the outside trying to get in, but is a life changing influence trying to get out. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means opening up our innermost being to His control so that it effects our lives.

2. The Leaven Brings Serious Change.

When leaven is put into baking meal it changes the chemical make-up of the ingredients. The changes are substantial and they are noticeable.

Christianity can be an exciting but disturbing thing. Righteousness brings reaction. At Phillipi, it was said of Paul and his friends, *"These men are Jews and they are disturbing the city"* (Acts 16:20). At Thessalonica the same men were accused of, *"turning the world upside-down"* (Acts 17:6).

The growing believer becomes a new person, with new thoughts, deeds, ambitions, service. The leaven of God's kingdom transforms lives and therefore transforms the church.

3. The Leaven Is Contagious.

I had a professor in seminary who used to say that our job as believer is to have contact with as many people as possible so as to "infect them with the real disease of Christianity." I like that!

Leaven is not easily controlled. It works contagiously until *"the whole lump is leavened."*

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The Gospel, the Christian, the church is aggressive. We should not stop until the message is spread throughout our whole circle of influence. The church grows by multiplication, and that is why, even under the strongest persecution it continues to grow.

So, leaven is used in Scripture to represent the rapid spread of bad or good influences in the body, the kingdom:

Jesus said the kingdom grows like a mustard seed with a very small beginning into a large and effective plant.

He also said it is like leaven and spreads contagiously. Isn't it great to be a part of a going, growing, effective and contagious movement that lasts forever.