

“The Mustard Seed and the Tree”
Matthew 13:31-33
February 15, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

As we prepare for our missions conference that begins this Friday, I want to direct our attention to these 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 years ago, I read a statement by Larry Crabb that I thought was very significant. 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 or smaller, individual concerns like three steps to financial security. But God has chosen not to answer such questions. Instead of pressing for answers to our questions, the wiser course is 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. As we look at both the mustard seed parable and the parable of the leaven, I would like for us to consider first the small beginnings of the kingdom of heaven, and then the bigness of that same kingdom.

I. The Small 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. Some people are bothered by the fact that Jesus says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, when in fact it is not. This shouldn't trouble anyone. Jesus created all seeds, and he certainly knows which is the smallest. He wasn't intending here to give a botany lesson, but a spiritual lesson. He was speaking in accordance with common knowledge of his day, and his point is quite clear. The point is that this small seed 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.

What did Jesus mean when he said that the kingdom is like a small mustard seed? He meant first that it was small when it started. The book of Acts records the early history of the church, and it started with only about 120 followers of Christ, none of them powerful or influential people. But it quickly grew and spread throughout much of the Roman Empire in only about a century.

Several years ago, I ran across some interesting statistics on the growth of the church throughout its history. 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. In other words, 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. World population at the turn of the millennium was 6.1 billion, and there was a ratio of one Christian per 9.3 people. The current world population stands at 7.2 billion, among whom are 2.2 billion Christians, for a ratio of 3.3 to 1. So even though the world's population has been rising 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 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.

It is not just the church as a whole that began small, but works of God in general that begin small. A friend of mine has been a missionary with MTW in Japan for almost thirty years. He had not a single convert during his first four years in Japan. Now, he has seen God raise up an entire presbytery of

Japanese churches. I was struck by this reality of small beginnings while reading a prayer letter from another missionary supported by our church, John Lehn in Croatia. He mentioned that his church had an attendance of only about 20 people, and he longs for conversions.

The kingdom of heaven is also little in the way it starts with individual Christians. It begins with a very simple message. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and whoever trusts in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. It is such a simple message that even a five-year old can understand it. It is so simple that many reject it as being too simple. Many are like the Syrian commander, Naaman, who came to the prophet Elisha seeking healing for his leprosy. But he was offended at the simplicity of Elisha's solution, washing himself in the Jordan River. Elisha wouldn't even accept any of the large sum of money Naaman had brought with him. He did eventually do as Elisha had said, and **“his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child”** (2 Kings 5:14). Such a large result from a small measure! That's the gospel way, the simplest of messages and the largest of results.

The kingdom of heaven is also little in the way it moves forward. Like the mustard seed, it must be planted. If you take a whole sack full of mustard seeds and put them in a warehouse somewhere, nothing will happen. It is only when that seed is buried in the ground that its life is activated and it produces such results. Unless you know something about farming, burying something in the ground is a type of death. This is the way of the kingdom. We “bury” the message of the gospel in hearts and trust that God will use it in time. I think this has great application for those ministering to children. Anyone doing so has wondered if any good is being done. Children can often appear to be disinterested in spiritual things. But I can tell you that I have heard many stories of the good done by a Sunday School teacher or youth leader, in which the child or young person says that the teacher probably never knew of the good they had done in speaking of Jesus. It's a small thing, but something with great results.

One final way in which the kingdom is little is that its progress is such that it requires patience. It is like a plant growing. Even a fast-growing plant like the mustard plant doesn't grow so fast that you see it growing. To see the effects of growth requires going back after a certain amount of time has passed. Growth in the kingdom of heaven is like that too. Therefore, it requires patience, which is not a strength of our culture. We want instant results. We want a formula that will produce the fruit of the Spirit overnight. But Christian growth is more like that seen in the world of plants. It is as we labor as a church to teach our children over the decades that we see results.

II. The Large Tree

The kingdom of heaven may start small, but it doesn't stay small. The small mustard seed grows to a size that seems completely unrelated to the small seed it was at the beginning. The large lump of dough seemed so much bigger than the little bit of leaven, yet the leaven spread throughout the whole thing. In both of these parables, something small and seemingly inconsequential ends up big and influential.

When you sow the seed of the gospel in someone's heart, surprisingly great things can happen. A life can be transformed for eternity. More than that, this transformed person can be the source of much good to others. A tree providing a shelter for the birds results from the little seed that was planted. 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.

Both of these parables in our passage portray the growth of the kingdom of heaven. The first parable speaks of the extent of that growth, while the second of the nature of that growth. The kingdom will grow like yeast spreading through a lump of dough. If the first parable was set in a man's world, the world of the field, the second 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. We do not grab for power and influence or attempt to force others to believe like us.

We simply declare the truth and live the truth. 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.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with two applications. First, choose wisely where you invest yourself, for there is only one enterprise with a future in it, and that's the kingdom of heaven. Living for the kingdom of heaven is a good investment. Consider what it takes to make a good financial investment. You find a company that is currently small and not viewed as significant, but one that will one day be quite large. Buy stock in the company when it is small and then wait for it to grow large. The initial public offering price of Apple stock was \$22 per share at its IPO in December of 1980. If you had invested \$5000 in Apple stock at that time and then waited through its troubling times, reinvesting all dividends, your \$5000 investment would have been worth \$1,646,244 at last Friday's closing price. The trick is in knowing which company has a future in it. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven has such a future. Our giving of ourselves and our money toward that kingdom today is an investment in something that will grow and outlast everything else.

Second, are you part of this kingdom? Has the mustard seed of that simple gospel truth that Jesus came to save sinners been received into the soil of your heart? 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. 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.