

## Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven

Matt. 13:31-35

**Main Idea:** God's kingdom will continue to grow, permeating the whole earth.

It's easy to fear that Christianity is being extinguished and that Christ's kingdom is diminishing daily. Many of you older folks can remember the days when China was completely opposed to Christianity. I recently read that the Chinese government that seemingly had started to tolerate Christianity over the last 20-30 years, was again cracking down on those who do not hold to communistic atheism. It is even forcing Christian pastors to conduct burials of their church members in a state prescribed secular mold.

In the Muslim world of N. Africa, Indonesia, some parts of Asia, and the Middle East, Christians are often oppressed and even slaughtered. It seems that in Europe, the church of Jesus Christ is highly unpopular, with the cynicism of agnosticism and the secularism of atheism gripping entire nations. Even in Mexico on the Yucatan Peninsula, Christians are suffering for their faith. In Canada, our neighbor to the north, the government increasingly seems to restrict pastors from the free expression of adherence to God's standards.

And in our own nation, it seems that we Christians and the God we serve are increasingly scorned. In fact, it often seems as if our nation has become like an irrational mob, led by highly skilled and manipulative demagogues whose ideology has fatally infected every aspect of our culture. We certainly see, even in our own culture, the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, that in the last days, things will get worse and worse.

Though we profess to rest in the sovereignty of God, fear often erupts in our hearts and minds. We earnestly pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" Yet when we look at the world around us, we see little evidence that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is on the throne! And so our thoughts are dominated by dread of impending darkness.

This morning I'd like to invite you to take a look at two parables that the Lord gave in Matt. 13:31-35 so that we can go from this place, back into the world, looking at what is happening from God's perspective. You see these parables speak of the irresistible power of the kingdom of God. When God's sets His kingdom in motion, there is no one who can stand in its way! The power of the kingdom of heaven is unstoppable!

*Matt. 13:31-35 He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES."*

*He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened."*

*All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:*

*"I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES;  
I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD."*

The introductory words, "Jesus presented another parable to them..." found in verses 31 & 33 make it appear that these two parables were spoken from the boat just as were the previous two parables that Pastor Stan taught on. Again Jesus uses the parables we are looking at this morning to describe the kingdom of heaven. Remember that the disciples of the Lord were desperately waiting for the kingdom of heaven to be established. At this point in Jesus' ministry, it was their understanding that the kingdom was to come soon but at a yet future date.

John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of heaven was at hand and Jesus repeated that theme. The disciples and John the Baptist were looking for evidence that God was on the throne and that His dominion extended over the earth. They thought that the first evidences of that kingdom arriving on earth would be the overthrow of the oppressors of God's people and the imposition of justice in the world.

Imagine the consternation that the disciples must have felt when they heard Jesus say, "My kingdom is not of this world." How could that be consistent with the prophecy of Psalm 2 that says of Messiah's reign, *"I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord; He said to me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your Possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, you shall shatter them like earthenware..."* I'm sure they clung to that prophecy as they chafed under the yoke of the Romans.

Let me assure you that the day is going to come when God's reign will be in its absolute form here on this earth. Messiah will come and reign with that rod of iron. No evil will be able to withstand His authority. But it wasn't yet God's time for that to happen when Jesus told these parables. Jesus was explaining something about the kingdom of heaven that was going on behind the scenes and is still going on behind the scenes today!

A simple way of understanding these two parables is that they illustrate the growth of the kingdom, the mustard seed predicting the external growth of the kingdom and the leaven speaking of the kingdom's growing influence. Let's look at these two parables individually then.

The parable of the mustard seed is really simple. A man planted a tiny mustard seed in a field and it grew into such a big tree that the birds were attracted to nest in its branches. It's always important to identify the one main point that the parable teaches. Jesus was predicting that from an insignificant beginning, the kingdom of God would grow large.

The second of the parables is also a very simple parable but its interpretation over the years has caused much more controversy. This parable compares the kingdom of heaven to leaven. Leaven described in the Bible was a small lump of old dough in a high state of fermentation. The baker would mix it into the mass of fresh dough being prepared for baking. Jesus' parable speaks of the leaven which a woman hid in three measures of flour. After a time, the little bit of leaven permeated the three measures of flour, raising the whole bunch of dough. The three measures (a *sáton* in Greek) of flour would be around a bushel of flour. A bushel of flour is about 149 cups. It takes somewhere around 4 cups flour to make a loaf of bread, so a bushel of flour would make about 37 loaves of bread! That little bit of leaven that the woman put into the dough influenced the whole bushel of flour. It made the dough from the whole bushel to rise.

Many people make the assumption that the leaven referred to here, speaks to an evil corrupting influence in the kingdom of heaven. I've heard people many times say, "Every time the Bible speaks of leaven, it speaks of evil of a corrupting influence. This parable cannot be the only exception. You must let Scripture interpret Scripture."

While there is no doubt that the Scriptures do interpret Scripture, it is important to consider all of the Scriptures before making a dogmatic assertion about what the Scripture says. Leaven is used different ways in Scripture, and so it seems that one should consider leaven to merely be a neutral substance with inherent properties of infiltrating and changing any amount of dough into which it is placed. The significance of leaven, used metaphorically to represent an evil or a good influence, can only be determined from the immediate context. I'd like to give you a few examples of the way it is used in Scripture.

In the Old Testament, leaven can be interpreted as representing evil. For instance, leaven was prohibited from being offered directly on the altar (Lev. 2:11; 6:17). Recognizing that to be true, it is still important to notice that prohibition might possibly have been commanded only because yeast is made of living fungi reproducing through budding and aeciospores so that it ferments carbohydrates. There was an absolute prohibition from offering any living thing on the altar. For instance it was commanded that the blood of a sacrificial animal be poured out on the altar before body was burned.

And in the New Testament, it is also used metaphorically in a negative way. For instance, Jesus warned of the leaven of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:11). And the Apostle

Paul applies the metaphor of leaven to sin that is tolerated in the fellowship of believers (I Cor. 5:6-8). The significance of the metaphor becomes obvious from the context.

Yet leaven is also used in a neutral sense. The prohibition of leavened bread during the Passover celebration was not because leaven was a symbol of evil, but rather the prohibition was designed by God to be a physical reminder of the haste in which Israel left Egypt (Ex. 12:34-39, Deut. 16:3). Listen to Deut. 16:3 where Moses was giving instruction about the Passover meal. *"You shall not eat leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat with it the unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), so that you may remember all the days of your life the day when you came out of the land of Egypt."*

Unleavened bread is also mentioned in Gen 19:3 and I Sam 28:24. In the narrative in both cases, that of the angels visiting Lot and that of Saul at the house of the witch of Endor, someone unexpectedly had to quickly bake and serve bread, so there was no time for leaven to act on the dough. Because the bread was served right away, it made no sense to add leaven.

Interestingly enough, unleavened bread is also commanded by God for use in Jewish religious ritual in a positive sense. Leavened bread was to be presented with the peace offering (Leviticus 7:13, Amos 4:5), and two loaves of first fruits with leaven were to be given in the wave offering (Lev. 23:17). It is instructive that God did not prohibit the use of leaven as unclean but rather prescribed it for those rituals. Also rather than being strictly prohibited by God for Jewish use as were certain other foods, it is a fact that leavened bread seemed to be the norm for daily Jewish use. The exception was unleavened bread.

How then does the fact that leaven is used in different ways in Scripture affect the way that we interpret the leaven in this parable? Especially because in its context, this parable is so closely tied to that of the mustard seed, it seems that we shouldn't just assume that the leaven is used in a metaphorical sense to represent an evil influence. Rather, the leaven should be interpreted as a neutral substance with that inherent property of permeating and causing a transformation in any amount of dough into which it is placed.

Notice again the emphasis in the parable. First the leaven is hidden and after a time, it spreads to every part of the dough. What then is the essence of what Jesus is saying in this parable? Just as yeast or leaven, hidden in the dough, spreads throughout an entire loaf, there is a substance about the kingdom which is imperceptibly working true transformation as it extends everywhere.

Now that we have looked at the meaning of these two parables, it is important to ask, is it possible to observe their fulfillment? Out in the wilderness, John the Baptist

preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The kingdom was ushered in with the coming of the King of kings and the Lord of lords to this earth.

But Jesus came as a helpless little baby even though He was worshiped by the eastern kings who were guided by a star. As Jesus grew to become a man with followers, His disciples stumbled over the idea that His kingdom was not an earthly kingdom. They didn't understand what He was about, and it seems that His disciples today have that same problem.

Ever since the day Jesus taught His disciples to pray, those who have put their faith in Him have prayed, "*Thy kingdom come.*" That prayer will ultimately be answered the day that Jesus returns to earth to "rule with a rod of iron." All the earth will be subject to Him at that time. It will start with Satan, the prince of this world, being thrown into the bottomless pit for a thousand years.

But in those early days as Jesus walked with His disciples on Roman roads in Israel, the kingdom was like a mustard seed. For sure it wasn't any more impressive than the mustard seed that a man planted in the ground. The kingdom didn't start with a big splash, with a conqueror arriving on the scene to throw off Roman oppression. Jesus and His small band of followers didn't give much visual evidence of a great kingdom.

Jesus said to the Pharisees who were questioning when the kingdom of God would come, "*The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.*" (LK. 17:20b-21.) And indeed, the mustard seed was there!

It seemed at that time that the followers of Satan, the god of this world, were much more impressive than Jesus' following. But Jesus revealed that on that truth that Peter confessed, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus Christ would build His church and that the gates of Hell would not prevail against it (Matt 16:16-18).

That the gates of Hell would not prevail against the church seems to be a curious statement to me! Gates are defensive, not offensive. There have been some curious offensive weapons in Scripture like slingshots and donkey jawbones that have prevailed over impossible odds. But you're not likely to go aggressively running at the enemy with a gate held over your head. What was Jesus saying? He was saying that the gates would not prevail, but rather the church would prevail over the best defense that Satan and this world system can mount. This world has been given over to Satan's rule and so the world system bows to Satan's authority. But as Christ's church starts from a mustard seed to become a big tree, it invades Satan's territory and Satan can do nothing about it. He was defeated at the cross and it is just a matter of time until Jesus will take away all his dominion.

The Apostle Paul explains in Col. 1:13 that Jesus has rescued those of us who trust in Him *"...from the domain (kingdom) of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* Soon after the day of Pentecost, there were about 5000 subjects of King Jesus, primarily from the Jewish community. The Good News spread under the ministry of the Apostles even to the Gentiles so that at the time of Paul's last days, the whole known world had a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even some of Caesar's household and the Praetorian Guard had heard and put their trust in Him! Throughout church history and into the modern missionary era, in spite of tremendous persecution, the Lord's kingdom has continued to invade the enemy territory throughout the earth. No gate of religious or civil persecution or prohibition that the enemy could erect has been able to keep the church out.

But remember also that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman hid in the dough. It started with something that no one took notice of, something that was seemingly unimportant, something that was hidden. In an insignificant town, to an unwed mother, a baby was born who brought life and light to a world dying in darkness. As the risen Christ lives in His subjects, His life continues that transformation in everything they touch. His subjects are indeed the salt and light God uses for good in the world because they have the life of Jesus in them.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this in II Cor. 2:14-17 when he says that Christians have *"...the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ in every place, and are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life."* God's church made up of those who have His life in them. Christians have been agents for good all through history because they have the light of Christ in their lives. Christians have influence wherever they go.

For example, think of the rise of scientific inquiry by Christians like Newton, Pasteur, Kepler, Paschal, and Fleming who discerned a sense of order in the universe ruled by God and recognized the mandate given by God to man to exercise dominion in the physical world.

So many positive social movements have their roots in the Christian regard for the dignity of each person as created by God. Education is an example, with the Puritans having 95% literacy, something unheard of at a time when peasants certainly wouldn't be worth educating. One hundred of the first 110 universities founded in America were founded to train students to propagate Christianity. Christian missionaries founded the educational systems of China, Korea, and Japan and a number of other nations.

Christians have had a tremendous influence in music, through composers like Handel and Bach. But church musicians who have learned to play instruments and sing well to

enhance worship of God, much as we have seen in our service this morning, have also added to our musical heritage.

The abolition of slavery came about through the efforts of Christians of conscience like Wilberforce and Lincoln. History tells us that the early Christians stood in opposition to infanticide, degradation of women, gladiatorial combats, slavery, etc. Prison reform, labor reform, reform in treatment of orphans have all been led by Christians.

But the most dramatic change comes when a Christian shares the Good News of life in Jesus Christ, and a wandering sinner comes to faith in Christ!

My wife Cheryl's parents started a small Bible study in a farming community, Llano Grande, 11,000 ft. up in the Venezuelan Andes. In a few years, some of their fellow missionaries, the VanKampens arrived to continue this church plant.

When John and Annabelle VanKampen arrived in Llano Grande, it was a dark place. Ambushes were fairly common, with murder the intent and the inevitable result. Cheryl's dad, in fact, was ambushed three times by people who hated his Gospel witness, and God miraculously delivered him from harm each time. But that's a story for another time!

It was almost as if everyone in the community was a Hatfield or a McCoy, or one of their cousins. Drunkenness and immorality were the main sources of entertainment on the cold foggy nights. But people would not go home after the partying. No one wanted to go out at night because it was far too dangerous. They could likely get killed!

As the Gospel was preached and people came to faith in Christ, the leaven of the kingdom started to permeate the whole community. But Jesus was working in an almost hidden way that most would not notice at first. Just one more person came to faith in Christ and then one more! Starting one at a time, lives were changed by the Spirit indwelling the believers! So it wasn't too many years before the Christians built a meeting place and started walking in groups to be able to meet at night after the day's work!

II Cor. 5:17 says that, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold new things have come."* And the Christians' testimony in Llano Grande was potent proof of the power of the Gospel to change a life completely. Where one constantly sees drunkenness, anger, lust, malice, vengeance, and murder, virtues like forgiveness, restitution, peace and Christian love are hard to resist. Soon the whole community was going out at night – to the church to be with their brothers and sisters in Christ. I remember one time when I was visiting the church, seeing a murderer and the victim's family sitting on the same bench, singing and praising the Lord together! And nobody in church thought it was unusual. The leaven's influence

was felt by everyone! This is exactly what is to be expected when Christ's life, when His kingdom permeates a community!

Let's go to the "So what?" factor. What difference should this make in our lives? How does seeing things today from God's perspective change our lives? I'd like to suggest two ways:

1. We can live fearless, faith filled lives when we understand that Jesus' kingdom is unstoppable. We don't have to lose sleep over the evil generation around us. We don't have to cower before our corrupt culture. Jesus kingdom will grow because He has said that Satan and this world system are defenseless against the power of God in Jesus' followers. Don't you love it that because your faith is in Jesus, you can fully enter into the song that Jan Mathis sang from Psalm 27? *"The Lord is my light and my salvation! Whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid?"*
2. The second thing I'd like to suggest is that we not neglect the Gospel presentation undergirded by prayer. As we share the Good News of life in Jesus Christ at home, at work, and at school, Jesus answers our prayer as His power is released. The Spirit of God opens the hearers' ears and eyes, gives them the gifts of repentance and faith. God rescues them from the domain of darkness and transfers them to the kingdom of Jesus, His beloved Son! Jesus kingdom that started out like a mustard seed continues to grow and like leaven, it has influence everywhere!