

The Mustard Seed

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[0 : 00] This summer we're enjoying the parables of Jesus. And if you've been around this summer, you may remember what a parable is.

A parable is an earthly story which illustrates a spiritual reality. And a spiritual reality that Jesus often wanted to illustrate was that of the kingdom, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. And so the parables often begin with the formula, the kingdom of heaven is like, or in the book of Mark, with what can we compare the kingdom of God? Or what parable shall we use for it? It is like blah, blah, blah. So let's remind ourselves what the kingdom of God is. It's not just where God reigns supreme, because we know that God's been reigning supreme at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances.

The kingdom of God is also where God brings that supremacy, that reign, where he carries it through against all opposing powers. And when he brings people in recognition of this, willing recognition of this, that's the kingdom.

[1 : 12] Although we don't find that definition in the Bible. Jesus doesn't give us a definition. What he actually gives us is art, which is elusive, it's nuanced, it's multifaceted.

A story or a picture can say so much more than a simple definition, and so he gives us parables. The parables are very earthy, using images we can all relate to, and for that reason, you may remember me saying a few weeks back that there's a German pastor that called the parables God's picture book.

So today we're going to look at two pictures, and we're going to ask the questions, how is the kingdom like a mustard seed? That's the first image. The second question is, how is the kingdom like leaven?

That was the second image. And third, we're going to ask how these parables affect our participation in the kingdom. Before we do that, let's pray.

Lord, we need your help to see clearly, to understand. We have all kinds of prejudices that we come with to your word. And there's a certain amount of blindness and deafness that we have that we need you to remove.

[2 : 39] And we need you to soften our hearts. We need you to bring comfort and hope for those of us who need that.

So we're asking you to do a lot. You can do that. Because in your word is power. Help us to experience that right now, that we would not leave this place unchanged.

For the glory of your name. Amen. In Jesus' day, many Jews were expecting the kingdom of God to come.

And they too expected God to carry through this supremacy against all opposing powers. The opposing power they were thinking of was mainly the Roman Empire. And this carrying through of God's supremacy was to be a great, glorious day of the Lord.

And many in Palestine had wondered if this Jesus would be the one to do it. And it started off exciting enough in chapter 9 of Matthew. Matthew writes, Great.

[4 : 12] I mean, that kind of sounds like gathering up an army, doesn't it? But it doesn't go right. It doesn't go at all according to anyone's expectations.

In chapter 10, Jesus says, By the way, you can expect suffering, persecution, and death. That doesn't sound like an overwhelming, glorious day of the Lord to me.

In chapter 11, Jesus faces opposition. He's accused of being possessed. He's called a drunkard and a glutton. What kind of king is that? The upper classes, both intellectual and political, reject him.

Or what is worse, they simply ignore him. The capital city acts as if he doesn't even exist. And the Greek and Roman centers of culture pay absolutely no attention to what's going on in the backwoods of Palestine.

Even John the Baptist, a man of profound faith, the one who would herald the king and his kingdom, seemingly loses all faith.

[5 : 20] And he sends to Jesus a word from jail. He asks Jesus, Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another?

Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? Can you hear the sadness and the despair and the disillusionment in that voice? Shall we look for another?

Every one of us, though, who calls ourselves a Christian eventually asks that question, I think, or something very much like it. For me personally, when the Arab Spring started, there were things happening all over North Africa and in the Middle East, and I decided I would focus on one area. I'd focus on Syria. Things seemed especially bad, and the church had such an historical presence there. And I took a few words of advice that I had heard. The first was, pray and don't bore the angels while you pray.

Pray in such a way as to not bore the angels. Like, okay, so I'm going to pray something bold. And the second bit of advice I took to heart was, pray in such a way that if your prayers were answered, like, the world would notice.

[6 : 39] The whole world would notice. Like, great, that's what I'm going to do. I started praying for Syria. But as you know, as bad as things were, things got worse.

And it seems like the more I prayed, the worse things got. And so my question, similar to John the Baptist, is like, God, what is the use of praying?

What is the use of praying for Syria when my prayers don't seem to make a bit of difference? Are you the king or should I wait for another? You know, I think back to some friends of mine who decided to be foster parents.

They believed what they had learned in church and in the Bible study that I taught that God's kingdom will one day renew and restore all things. And God is already doing that through his church.

He's bringing to the world through his church hope and restoration. So my friends served as foster parents to a beautiful little girl whose mother was in prison and whose father had abandoned her and every single one of her other relatives.

[7 : 46] And so they were, my friends were able to begin the process of adoption. The little girl began to call them mom and dad and really did think of my friends as her mom and dad.

And they thought of her as their own daughter. She was so sweet and beautiful. And as soon as the adoption was about to be finalized, the little girl's father swooped in at the last minute and says, I'll take her.

And there's nothing my friends could do about it. Yes, the girl was with her father but this is the girl who they loved as their daughter and she was taken away and they haven't seen her since.

And my friend, the would-be mother, wrote on her Facebook page simply, wondering where the promised hope and restoration are. And it hit me like really square in the stomach because I'm pretty sure I said something exactly like that in Bible study.

Wondering where the promised hope and restoration are. I think about another good friend of mine from when we lived in Florida. He had never met his grandfather.

[8 : 56] His grandfather and four other men had traveled to a remote part of South America to make contact with a remote tribe who was completely isolated. They did that to tell them about Jesus.

They took very seriously the Great Commission. Go to all the world and make disciples of all nations. The tribe turned on them and killed all of them. My friend's dad was just a little boy when he lost his father.

Where was King Jesus then? And I could go on and on, right? And I'm sure you could too. You've had questions like this. You've been treated unjustly in your job.

You watch helplessly as a loved one struggles and succumbs to addiction. You have a marriage that seems to never be anything more than a total disaster. You personally struggle and seem to lose against institutional and political injustice that tramples on the poor and less fortunate who you care very much about.

Those you love succumb to cancer. You too ask, where is this promised hope and restoration? Jesus, are you really a king?

[10:02] You know, oftentimes, it's not direct opposition that discourages us. It's the mundane. It's the mundane that discourages us.

Being a Christian can often feel like such a downer, especially in D.C. we feel uncool, small, insignificant. Sometimes the work that he gives us feels really mundane.

Tommy and I met a pastor in the Anglican Church back in October. His name is Buzz. And for a large portion of his career, on Sundays, he would just do the 78-mile loop, driving around from church to church, preaching as he goes.

These little, tiny congregations, old, seemingly insignificant, isolated in backwater. How is that world changing?

Like, I know the right answer, but right? How is that world changing? And the church itself, I mean, you know the feeling. Like, there's, there's like really odd people here, right?

[11:11] Not just here, but like go to any church. And Christians are generally an assembly of strangeness. So this is the kingdom.

These people, you know, C.S. Lewis touched on this in the Screwtape letters, this point about the church. It's really cute. Screwtape, he's an experienced demon. And he's mentoring his nephew on how to tempt and entrap his patient.

In one letter, he tells his nephew, one of our great allies at present is the church itself. Sure, it's organized religion. The organized religion is full of misguided liturgies and bad preachers.

We can be surrounded by people who sing off key, really bad breath, like they project dimly lit lyrics and liturgy onto this old-looking screen that sits atop two circular tables with like these weird black cloths.

What is that? That's the kingdom? The church triumphant? What? And if we're really, really honest, we will admit that most often the biggest obstacle to the kingdom is ourselves, right?

[12:23] I mean, I just heard you admit it. You just prayed it. You confessed that you sinned against God in thought, word, and deed by what you've done and by what you've left undone. And that's pretty extreme.

And I was confessing the same stuff. And if you knew what goes on in my heart, the darkness that's there, like the pride, the selfishness, the arrogance, the anger, you would probably give up.

Like, what is this kingdom? That's my ally? And so the whole Christian enterprise can feel just extremely futile, whether it's because of opposition or the brokenness and evil of the world or the mundaneness of it all, by the failings of those around us or our own brokenness and rebellion.

And we ask, like my friend asked, where is this kingdom that is supposed to bring hope and restoration? Those closest to Jesus must have been asking themselves the same thing.

They left everything to follow Jesus. Nothing went as planned and they must have been having deep doubts about Jesus and the kingdom. And in the midst of these doubts, Jesus doesn't get on a horse and give some rousing speech about freedom or glory or even Middle Earth.

[13:43] Jesus gives them a picture. He holds up a picture. This is what the kingdom is. It's a tiny seed and it's so small and it looks insignificant but it becomes this big tree and in the branches of this tree, the birds make their nests.

The kingdom brings healing and rest and life and sanctuary. Jesus is drawing on an image found in the book of Ezekiel which we heard earlier. God would establish a kingdom and Gentiles from every nation of the earth would find rest there and come under God's good, just, and perfect rule.

And so one of the last things Jesus did was to give his disciples the great commission. All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.

And if you look at the history of the church, even to the present day, you can see this is what the Lord has done and is doing. Just in the present day, in 1900, only 1% of Korea was Christian.

In 2012, according to the Pew Research Center, roughly 3 of every 10 South Koreans called themselves Christians. The Gambian scholar Laman Sana of Yale University reports how in 1900, Christians comprised 9% of the African population.

[15:12] Today, Christians comprise 44% of the continent's population. Just on Thursday, I don't know if you read this, The Guardian reported how in China there are more who belong to the Christian church, 100 million, than there are who belong to the Communist Party, which is roughly 70 million, I think.

The Guardian also stated that China is on course over the next 15 years to become the world's most populous Christian nation. Not too shabby, considering the church started as just a handful of semi-literate Galilean hillbillies from the backwoods of the Roman Empire.

So we see the kingdom geographically and numerically expanding. But Jesus doesn't want us to think of this in terms of conquest or domination.

Not at all. That's why he gives us the next parable, the next picture that he holds up to his disciples, that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven. As the dough is slowly and thoroughly leavened, so do Christians slowly over time leavened the societies in which they find themselves.

Consider how it was Christians who led the dismantling of the institution of slavery. It took way too long, but it was Christians who led that dismantling. It was Christians who were the first to organize care for widows, orphans, and the poor generally.

[16:47] The hospital is a Christian invention. That Christians very often cared for victims of plagues at the risk of their own lives, and so on. I mean, look at virtues that we take for granted, like humility.

That would have been immoral and backwards and cowardly to be humble in the Roman Empire. But the church has leavened society.

Now, humility is a chief virtue. Christians have leavened the dough. They've done this by being faithfully present.

The parable of the yeast allows us to think more expansively about the Great Commission. Jesus said to go into all the world. When we consider what the leaven does to dough, we can understand Christ to say to not just to go to every nation, but also to go into every sphere of life with the good news of the gospel.

Go into every place and every neighborhood and every life and every relationship that has been bruised and broken by sin. Enter the mess. Hold out Jesus Christ. Go into every vocation, business, law, the arts, education, homemaking, the sciences, government, and be like salt which seasons and preserves.

[18:10] Be like light shining in dark places. Now how do we be faithfully present in our vocations? We can be faithfully present in our vocations by displaying a contemplative calmness that comes from being intimate with and submissive to the Father much like Jesus was.

We can be faithfully present by not idolizing reputation and status. We can be faithfully present by displaying radical compassion for those around us. The kind of compassion that comes from understanding our own brokenness and our own need of compassion.

We can be faithfully present by understanding and living out our union with Christ. We died with Christ and so we die to our own selfish sinful inclinations and we're raised to new life in his resurrection with a new understanding of morality and virtue that is defined by what God says in the Bible.

We can be faithfully present by using whatever power and influence we do have to serve others not ourselves. We can be faithfully present by understanding our vocations as sacred callings and by simply doing a good job.

I believe it was Dorothy Sayers who said the only Christian work is good work done well unto God. And in doing these things and being faithfully present in these ways Christians leaven culture.

[19:48] But it takes time, right? These parables are about waiting. We don't see results overnight. We're American, we want results but if we're a farmer we just can't go voila, here's a tree and you have to wait for leaven to work through the dough.

God give us patience. Well, what are some concrete examples of faithful presence within vocation? Well, consider the Washington Arts Group which back in the 90s sponsored 30 local artists to paint and sculpt scenes from Anacostia. The show was previewed on the streets of Anacostia which was a very forgotten neighborhood in the 90s.

The show was later exhibited in Union Station. Officials claimed that it was the most successful exhibit ever held in the station with over one and a half million viewers of the collection.

The beauty, history, and humanness of those long forgotten was honored and celebrated. Consider a good friend of mine who went to MIT and studied nuclear engineering not to make money but because he wants to disarm the world.

[20:58] His whole focus was to join the International Atomic Energy Agency and that's where he's serving right now as a nuclear weapons inspector. He has done such good work and his character and virtues have been so upright that he is on track to get a lifelong extension something that rarely

happens to their inspectors.

He likens himself to Joshua and Caleb who viewed he views nuclear weaponry as the giants in the land and like Joshua and Caleb he reports that yes there are giants but God can do this.

God can do this. And lastly consider yourselves. You're deeply embedded in the government and the arts and education and non-profits and the sciences and the media and from all the conversations I've had with you you're committed to being leaven.

Doing your work with excellence caring for those around you caring about justice holding out Christ to people being salt and light. In a moment we'll get to hear from one of our own Lauren Porter about what it means to follow Christ in the sciences.

So we've seen how the kingdom is like a mustard seed and how it's like leaven. what oh not not quite yet I have like two hours still it's fine.

[22 : 29] What other ways can we participate in the life of the kingdom? How can we participate in God carrying through his rule against all opposing powers? Well first I think we need to see that the kingdom is to come into our hearts as well as into all the world.

To use the illustration of the tree a person is both quiet and he's public or she. A person is both quiet and that would be the roots and public and that would be the branches.

To you and to me has been entrusted the seed from which one day are to grow branches which are to spread over the earth and give shelter to the birds of the air. Don't seek these branches but rather nurse the seed.

The seed is nursed in quietness in contemplation of God's word and his love for us. It's nurtured in regular rhythmic prayer.

That's what it means to seek first the kingdom of God. Without that we would be rootless trees. And then we ought to sometime look at our household or the neighborhood we live in or the place where we work and see whether there are even one or two persons who are privileged to dwell under the boughs of that tree which was planted in your heart and mine and whether they are being refreshed and strengthened in its shadow.

[24 : 02] Second, participating in the kingdom means some kind of death. Right? Jesus said, truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Dying means we put to death our sins through confession and repentance. It means we die to our own desires and ambitions and prefer those of the people around us. For some of our brothers and sisters around the world, this literally means dying.

It means getting your head chopped off for the sake of the gospel. And our brothers and sisters around the world need our prayers. So we participate in the kingdom by seeing it move into our own hearts.

By dying, requires a death. And third, by not losing hope. We don't lose hope because we know the end of the story. We know the end of the story.

[25 : 12] The end of the story is the tree. What we see as a mustard seed now becomes a mustard, becomes a mighty tree. As for me and my prayers for Syria, yes, it looks awful now.

And I'm not the first person to pray for Syria. You know, St. Augustine said that the prayers of the church are the prayers of one single man across time and space. people have been praying for Syria for almost 2,000 years now.

I'm not alone. God loves the people of Syria more than I do. So I won't lose hope. I know the rest of the story. My friend who posted on Facebook where's the promised hope and restoration?

That's not the only thing she posted. I edited that. The full post was wondering where the promised hope and restoration are, praying unceasingly.

Even she hasn't lost hope. She knows the rest of the story. The rest of the story about my friend's grandfather? Well, his grandmother and the wives of the other men who died took their families.

[26 : 26] The women and their young children went into the jungle and made contact with that tribe and they forgave them, the murderers of their husbands and fathers.

And then they told them about God's forgiveness. They had never heard about forgiveness. They didn't know what it was. It sounded strange to them. All they knew was killing and revenge.

That's it. But they accepted Christ's forgiveness forgiveness. And they stopped killing, started forgiving. And my friend's father eventually became best friends with the man who had killed his

father.

Let's be specific about what the rest of the big story is. I mean, for you, like, can you see the end of the story? Or do you just see the mustard seed?

Perhaps we need to see the whole story beginning to end. To rescue and restore a broken world, God sent his son to save a people for himself. Jesus, Jesus was the seed that fell and died and bore much fruit, you and me.

[27 : 43] He willingly took upon himself our own sin and the punishment it deserved and we became God's sons and daughters. We became united to Jesus and because he rose from the dead, we too look forward to when we will rise again and be given new resurrection bodies, feasting together with our Lord in the new heavens and the new earth.

That feast is what we look forward to right here when we do this feast. So as you eat the bread and drink the wine, experience God's love for you. Experience the rest of the story.

Let's pray. Lord, we now need you to speak into our lives to affirm the rest of the story, the end of the story, Lord, in the midst of our brokenness and our weakness, in the midst of our communities and neighborhoods and families that are experiencing brokenness, in the midst of our nation that's experiencing brokenness.

We need you to give us hope. Help us keep in mind the end of the story. God, we look forward to celebrating with you one day with our new resurrection bodies in the new heavens and the new earth.

Give us faith and hope and love and patience and endurance until that day. Even now, as we participate in this meal, strengthen us. Communicate to your love and your grace and give us hope.

[29 : 19] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.