

The Hidden Kingdom

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[0:00] How do you win a baseball game? This is not a trick question. How do you win a baseball game? You score runs, right? And how do you score runs? You get on base. And when most people think about getting on base, about scoring runs in baseball, they think about big hits, right? Home runs, slugging.

And it's true that in baseball, the biggest stars, the most highly paid players are typically flashy big hitters or left-handed pitchers that can throw 102 miles an hour. Guys with obvious talent. Probably not guys like Scott Hattaberg.

Hattaberg, whose story is told in the movie and the book Moneyball, played catcher for the Red Sox for a few pretty good seasons before he ruptured a nerve in his elbow. And that could have been the end of his career because who wants a catcher that can't throw? But Hattaberg had a hidden talent.

He knew how to draw walks. And that meant he got on base a lot. Because when you walk to first base, that's the same as getting a hit and going to first base. It's a good thing in baseball. So he was really valuable as a player. But he was overlooked by most teams because he wasn't a big slugger.

But he was overlooked by Billy Bean, general manager of the Oakland Athletics. What Bean did was he correlated Hattaberg's high on base percentage with run production. And he signed Hattaberg to the Oakland A's, a move that most people would have laughed at if they noticed at all.

[1:40] It was unexpected. It was unexpected. But Hattaberg ended up delivering. He helped the A's finish in first place and win 20 games in a row, where he actually did hit a walk-off homer in one of those games. Pretty flashy.

But he was not the guy anyone expected to make a glorious comeback. So most teams rejected him. He was unnoticed. He was overlooked. He was unexpected and undervalued.

And there was a similar phenomenon happening with Jesus' message as he preached and ministered in first century Judea. He was not what most people expected. And he was actually facing widespread rejection.

And so he told these parables that we heard this morning in response to that rejection. And what these parables underscore is that the kingdom of heaven is unexpected.

It's infinitely valuable. And it's available for all those who have eyes to see. So let's begin with the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven.

[2:51] Our first two parables are parables of contrast. They highlight the unexpected nature of the kingdom of heaven. And I think it's important to note here that Jesus was funny.

I don't think people give him credit for being funny enough. But these parables definitely have a humorous edge. First, the mustard seed. The mustard seed can get really big. It can get like 10 feet tall.

But it's not like some awe-inspiring majestic redwood. It's pretty common. It would have been everywhere in Jesus' region. It was quick-growing. It was hardy. It was used for a lot of remedies and spice and that kind of thing.

Very, very common. And the seed is just this tiny little black pellet. Not impressive. It's kind of like a story, you know, this contrast kind of story.

This kind of funny contrast. It's like Kung Fu Panda. You know, the idea that a dumpling-eating panda could be a graceful Kung Fu master is meant to be so unexpected. It's funny, right?

[3:48] It's like not what you're expecting. Lots of ink has been spilled on the mustard seed and the kind of tree and all of that. Like, what do they mean?

Did Jesus know that the mustard seed wasn't actually the smallest kind of seed? But Jesus isn't giving a science lesson, right? He's telling a story. And the point was the contrast.

And so I imagine that Jesus was probably outside teaching, like he was most of the time. And he looked over and he saw a mustard plant. And he gestured to it. And he said, this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

A small little seed. He probably laughed during his voice. But the point here is that these tiny little seeds that you wouldn't even notice transform into something huge.

Big enough for birds to nest in. Jesus is saying, hey, this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It starts as a small thing.

[4:47] And it grows so big. So far beyond what you would expect or imagine. And the parable of the leaven is similarly humorous.

This woman is baking with 60 pounds of flour. So I brought up a bag of flour. This is five pounds. Okay, so she had like 12 of these.

That's a lot of flour. And so unless you're doing like industrial baking, you're probably not using that much flour, right? So it probably would have made like 72 loaves of bread.

Tons of bread. Depending on the recipe. And so people, again, they're kind of chuckling here. As Jesus is like, the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. It's like this process.

And the kind of yeast that Jesus talks about. It's not like dry yeast. You know, we have those little foil packets. This is sourdough starter. And if you know anything about sourdough starter, it's actually kind of like unappealing by itself.

[5:46] You know, it sits on your counter and it glugs around in this jar. And it just kind of, it kind of oozes, right? And that's the kind of leaven that people used back then.

And so, you know, they make amazing baked goods though, right? And so this woman is using a little bit of sourdough starter. And she's working it into the dough.

And most English translations use the word mixed here. But the Greek word actually means hidden. So she hid some leaven in the dough.

And this hidden thing, this small thing, gets worked all throughout the dough. And it transforms it into something delicious, something fruitful.

Again, something you wouldn't expect. So we have these two kind of funny images. A little black seed, a sourdough starter.

[6:45] And people are like, huh, I thought the kingdom of heaven was going to be something glorious. Something worth following. Something inspiring.

They're confused. But that's the point. The parables are meant to make us think, right? They are unexpected. That image that you can connect to is why Jesus told these stories.

Because it immediately makes you think, wait, if the kingdom of heaven is like this, what does that mean? And you ruminate on it. And you think about it. You can almost see Jesus saying, like watching people confused and saying, yes, the kingdom of heaven is something glorious.

Something worth following. Something inspiring. But this is how it starts. In an unlikely way. The kingdom of heaven is this whole story, this whole process from this small beginning to this glorious end.

It's the seed that becomes a tree and a sourdough starter that becomes enough bread to feed hundreds. And what these parables show is that the in-breaking kingdom wasn't coming with a bang, but with small and humble and hidden beginnings.

[7:56] Easy to overlook beginnings. Think about Jesus' own incarnation. A helpless infant born in a stable to a virgin peasant girl.

Humble beginnings. So the question for us is, is the kingdom of heaven right in front of us? And do we see it?

Are we willing to acknowledge that it might not look the way that we thought it would? And do we have the humility to acknowledge that? Because in Jesus' own time period, the people who had it together, the powerful, the wealthy, the educated, a lot of times they missed it.

Not always, but often. It takes humility to acknowledge that this small thing could be something great. We have to be willing to acknowledge our own smallness.

To say with Mary, he has looked with mercy on my lowliness. To become like children, the way Jesus asked us to. So to come back to the whole baseball metaphor for a minute, because baseball metaphors are endless.

[9:10] The reason Billy Bean was even willing to look at a player like Scott Hatterberg was because the Oakland A's had no money. They were not the New York Yankees. They were not the L.A. Dodgers. They were desperate.

And we see that in a much bigger way with Jesus' early followers too. People that were desperate, that were marginalized, that were poor, had eyes to see something incredibly valuable and to receive what Jesus was offering.

Like Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will see the kingdom of God. The next two parables, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, also highlight this hidden nature of the kingdom.

But they add another characteristic. The kingdom of heaven is infinitely valuable. So we all love a good buried treasure story, right? They've always been popular.

And that was true in Jesus' time period too. And when people did have anything valuable back then, they would put it in a locked box and they would bury it typically. And so the idea that you could actually find treasure in a field was one that was compelling.

[10:22] It probably would have been about like the same odds as winning the lottery today. But it could happen, right? And so to Jesus' listeners who were living in poverty, this was like a really compelling image.

And the idea of a merchant dealing in pearls was similarly riveting because pearls were actually the most valuable gemstone of that time period. They were incredibly rare, almost mythologically rare. Most people would have never seen one in person. Only the fabulously wealthy would even have had a single pearl. So let's notice something about this parable.

Both these men are looking for something. They're seeking. And because they're seeking, because they have that posture, they find it. And when they do, they recognize its value.

And they give up all they have to possess it. And it's important to note that the focus in both of these parables is not the wealth now that they have this thing.

[11:25] Or the men selling all that they have. But the focus is on the unimaginable worth of the kingdom of heaven and the posture, the heart posture it demands.

And the question for us is really the reality of the kingdom of heaven demands a response from us, doesn't it? It demands a complete reorientation of our hearts.

Whatever that looks like. It could look different for different people. So will we respond with joy by reorienting our hearts? By making the kingdom of heaven the center of our lives?

Or do we treat it as an add-on? As kind of like another layer just off over here? Rather than, again, coming back to that bread dough image? You can't work sourdough starter into just part of the dough.

It's either all the way in it or it's not in it at all. And that's what Jesus is saying. The kingdom of heaven permeates every aspect of our being, of our lives.

[12:30] So we get to this parable about the net. People might be thinking at this point, okay, Jesus, we get the small hidden thing, the unexpected thing. We understand the infinite value of the kingdom of heaven.

But if all that's really true, then why do things still look so bad around us? We have all this evil and sin and grief in the world.

So what does that mean? How is that possible? Because most of Jesus' listeners expected the final judgment and the coming of the kingdom of heaven to be a single act.

But Jesus is making the point here with this parable of the dragnet and the fish being all together in the net that the kingdom has come. It will exist together with evil for a while.

And then the final judgment will come. Then the sorting will happen. And I know a lot of us balk at that language of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[13:34] But Jesus is trying to show us that how we respond and what we do matters to God. And we have to be willing to ask ourselves, do we need saving?

What do we need saving from? So to answer that, let's just come back to the mustard seed for a little bit. So remember how Jesus talks about this little seed becoming a tall tree with birds perching on the branches.

Well, in the ancient Near East, there was a common motif of the majestic tree. And this was a tree whose branches scraped the heavens, whose roots were fed by the ocean.

A tree that held everything together. It was like a mythological cosmic tree. A tree that had branches big enough for birds to perch on, to shelter animals, to provide fruit and food for the world. And Assyrian and Mesopotamian and Egyptian and Sumerian cultures all have versions of this image. And the rulers of these cultures, of these people groups, were seen as the human personification of this great cosmic tree in godlike proportions.

[14:51] Both the prophets, Ezekiel and Daniel, have visions of trees like this being dashed to pieces or cut down. Foreshadowing the fall of rulers and empires.

Foreshadowing the fall of rulers and rulers. And we see similar language of being cut down, cut off, dashed to pieces to describe the sinful people of Israel. And this shows us that when people set themselves up against or over God, when they try to do things apart from him, they will be humbled. And guys, a lot of us read these stories from ancient cultures. Even these scriptures from the Old Testament. And we think, could never be me. These people are so stiff-necked and narcissistic. Or we're already thinking, I'm good. I don't need help. Well, with all due respect, that sounds a lot like the ancient rulers whose kingdoms got dashed to pieces because of their pride.

I mean, can we truly look at ourselves and our impulses and the world around us and think, this is how it should be?

[16:03] We need a savior. How many of us pursue our own agendas, no matter how destructive they might be? Not considering the consequences for ourselves or for those around us, even when those consequences are disastrous.

We may not have the power that Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon did. But I think a lot of us might have similar impulses if we were in that position of authority.

And how many of us, when something hard or unexpected happens, out of our control, how many of us respond by over-functioning, by over-managing, hyper-managing, by freaking out, or by withdrawing and isolating ourselves?

We are in desperate need of a savior. So I want you to hold this majestic tree image next to Jesus' mustard tree illustration.

And think about the humility of our savior. He doesn't come in the flesh with power and great might. He comes as a servant. And this mustard seed parable takes all of our exalted expectations of what authority should look like and it reverses them.

[17:17] Instead of a great tree that eventually gets cut down, never to rise, there's a little seed. Hidden in soil, taking root and growing far beyond what anyone could imagine.

Instead of some exalted earthly ruler sitting on a gigantic throne in a palace made from cedars, we have an exalted heavenly ruler who empties himself, who comes in humility and is nailed to another kind of tree.

Dying the most painful, shameful death imaginable to save us, to save you, to save me. But that wasn't the end of the story. He didn't stay in the tomb.

Jesus Christ the righteous rose again on the third day and now he is seated on the throne far above all ruler and authorities. King of kings and lord of lords.

And one day he will come back this time in power and glory, not as a humble infant. And he will bring all his people to a holy city where he will dwell with them.

[18:24] Where he will make everything new and where he will plant new trees of life. Majestic trees meant not to exalt himself, but trees meant to heal all the hurt and the evil of the world.

To make all things new. Planted for the healing of the world and for our healing. And in this heavenly city, he will reign forever.

And his people will reign with him. And one day, the good work that he has begun with these small beginnings will be fully completed. And it will be glorious beyond anything we could ask or think or imagine.

Do we want this kingdom, friends? I just want to leave you with two more questions to ponder this week. Sit with the Lord and ask him.

Will you give me eyes to see where your kingdom is breaking and around me? And how are you asking me to respond? And? Oh Jesus.

[19:43] Thank you for coming for us. For saving us. Thank you for the precious jewel of your word. Would you continue to nourish us with it?

Would you give us eyes to see where your kingdom is breaking and around us? Ears to hear from you. And would you give us courage to follow you the way that you're calling us to?

We pray these things in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.
Thank you.