

Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

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Date: 30 April 2017

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[0:00] If you'd open up your Bibles to Matthew chapter 13, we're just going to be looking at three verses today. Three verses that have two parables in them. And they're verses 31 through 33.

And I'm going to read them for you. This is the Word of God. These are the very words of Jesus. He put another parable before them saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It's the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree. So that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened. I'll never forget 2003.

I was a teenager. Just kidding. I'm not that old that I can't hear.

[1:09] Well, 2003, if you remember it, the invasion of Iraq. And I remember seeing on the news, sortie after sortie of planes and cruise missiles being launched on Baghdad.

And if you're any way familiar with military doctrine and strategy, that attack, that advance was characterized by what's called shock and awe.

Give them everything you've got. It's also known as overwhelming force. It's rapid dominance. It's fast. It's fierce.

And it is forceful. And the idea behind it is you give them everything they've got so that they think you're invincible and you just wilt them. Shock and awe.

There were a group of Jews in Jesus' day who, when they heard about the Messiah coming, they thought they would come. He would come with shock and awe.

[2:17] He would establish a new kingdom in Israel with power. Exercising dominion. Taken over. But what we learn from the Gospel of Matthew in the first four chapters is that Jesus is anything but shock and awe.

He was born in a manger in Bethlehem out of Nazareth. What good comes out of Nazareth? And then in his inauguration speech, his kingdom manifesto in the Sermon on the Mount, do you remember the first beatitude?

Blessed are the poor in spirit. How's that for shock and awe? And then Jesus demonstrates his authority in chapters 8 and 9.

He doesn't show his authority by regime change. Kicking out the Romans. Setting up a new economic system. He exercises authority to deliver people from the power of sin.

To establish a kingdom of gathering people by his grace from darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son. He sends out his disciples in chapter 12.

[3:29] Or excuse me, chapter 12. That's right. And then we also see in 11-12 this rising tension. Actually sent out his disciples in chapter 10.

But in 11 and 12 there's these rising tensions. John the Baptist even is asking, are you the one, the Messiah? And then the Pharisees push back on him.

And there's at least four conflicts. And tensions are on the rise. Jesus isn't playing according to the rules of the religious establishment.

And they don't like it. And a point of conflict is this. He's claiming to be the Son of Man. That's Messiah language. But the kingdom that he's talking about is in sharp contrast to the kingdom that many Jews were expecting.

He didn't come in shock and awe the first time. His was not a shock and awe campaign. It's more like a sow and grow campaign.

[4:36] More like a hide and knead through the flower campaign. In the two parables we're looking at this morning, he doesn't liken the spread of the kingdom to a military advance.

He likens it to gardening and baking. Now, he came as a suffering servant.

And when a suffering servant sets up a kingdom, it's going to be characterized by him. This morning, I want to ask you this question.

How do you expect the saving reign of God? The active saving reign? God's current working to draw sinners to himself.

How do you expect the active reign of God to spread? To advance? Are you thinking shock and awe? Or are you thinking sow and grow?

[5:41] Jesus definitely clarifies this for us. Instead of a fast, fierce, enforceful, rapid dominance of the kingdom, Jesus is an advocate of a slow, gentle, sacrificial, gradual growth of the kingdom.

That's what we see in these two parables. We're going to look at these two parables this morning. I'm just going to walk us through each one. And then we're going to look to what Jesus is actually saying.

I'm going to try to explain what they mean. And I'm going to bring them to bear in the 21st century for us right now living in the city of Kenosha. So what I want you to see is that the kingdom of heaven, this active saving grace of God, of drawing people from every tribe and nation, it's not a shock and awe growth.

It's gradual. It's pervasive. And so now let's look at the first parable, the parable of the mustard seed in verses 31 and 32.

Now just to clarify, in just a little while in Matthew, he's going to compare a mustard seed to faith.

But that's not what he's making the comparison in this parable. In this parable, he's comparing a mustard seed to the people of God, the new people of God who's been brought into the kingdom by God's grace.

[7:11] And so in the mustard seed, this parable, Jesus likens the active saving reign of God, this drawing in by God's grace of people into under his reign.

He compares it to a guy that takes a mustard seed and drops it into the ground in his field. And so again, it's a comparison of gardening.

And if you want to look quickly at verse 24, the start in verse 31 rings of verse 24. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

And then verse 31, the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. Very similar. A lot of sowing going on. Even the first parable is a parable about sowing, about a seed being hidden in the ground.

In verse 32, Jesus begins to bring out the unique contribution of this particular parable. He's wanting to emphasize something about the growing saving reign of God.

[8:26] He starts by saying in verse 32, it's the smallest of all seeds. He's comparing the start of the kingdom to this mustard seed.

And I'm not sure if you've ever seen any kind of things written about a mustard seed before. We've actually got a picture of it. Randy, are you back there? You want to throw that? Oh, Andy? There it is.

That's a mustard seed. It's about one or two millimeters wide. It's the size of a pinhead. And so Jesus is picking that mustard seed for a reason. He wants you to be thinking it starts really small. It's tiny. And so he's likening the start of the kingdom to this little mustard seed dropped into a hole in the field of a guy. And then in verse 32, it goes on.

We see the word but, which signals some contrast. But when it has grown, it is bigger than all the garden plants. Now, when you hear that word garden plant, you're like, well, what is he talking about?

[9:34] Well, that word garden plant comes from a Greek word that actually means to dig. And so the idea here is it's a plant that needs to be digging in order to plant it.

And so for us, it would be equivalent of saying like a potted plant that you take home from steins or loaves and you've got to dig a hole and drop it in. That's the kind of plants he's talking about. So

we're talking about a cultivated field or garden.

And Jesus is saying that this mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds, the size of a pinhead, when it grows, it grows larger than all the garden plants.

It gets big. It's the smallest of all that grows to be the largest of all. Emphasis.

Jesus is making a point. He's helping you get the scale of the growth of this seed. And he goes on to say that it becomes a tree.

[10:35] Technically, a mustard seed would grow into a tree that's about 8 to 12 feet. I think we got a picture of one, Andy. And this tree, this mustard seed tree is probably about, do we have a picture of that?

There we go. And that one's about 20 feet. But what you need to understand is a mustard tree, it's kind of a bushy tree. And so if it's 8 to 12 feet tall, it's also 8 to 12 feet wide.

It's big. It's prominent. And so what Jesus is saying here is he's making a comparison. He's drawing out scale over time. He says it starts like a pinhead and results in this plant that's 8 to 12 feet high and 8 to 12 feet wide.

It's extraordinary. And so the comparison he's making, he's saying the kingdom of heaven is like this little seed that grows over time into this big tree.

And he's comparing it to the saving reign of God. This is not shock and awe. This is gardening over time.

[11:47] This is cultivation. It's not shock and awe. It's sow and grow. And so the emphasis of the parable is on extraordinary growth of the kingdom.

Now let's move to the parable of the leaven. Oh, and by the way, this kind of parable about the kingdom, for those people who would be expecting messianic shock and awe, they'd be like, huh, what, huh?

Seriously? Now let's look at the leaven. Verse 33, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was leavened.

All leavened. Okay, confession, I am a fan of the great British baking show. I am. I watch it. Last night, Jenny and I watched Paul, this pretty impressive dude.

He made chiabata bread. And part of making the chiabata bread is he took some leaven, which is this dry additive, and he had someone drop it in. And then they mixed it up.

[12:56] And then it grew. But the leaven that Jesus is talking about is not a dry additive. The leaven that Jesus is talking about is more like Amish friendship bread.

Has anybody received Amish friendship bread? We get it. And basically what somebody does is they hand you a zip block bag with like this gooey stuff in it. And it like squishes.

And if you look at it, it's kind of doughy, wet, with bubbles forming in it because this dough is already fermenting. There's already a chemical reaction going on. And so what you do with Amish friendship bread is you get the bag and then you throw it down and you add stuff to it.

And you mix it all up. And then you take a little remnant off that and put it in a zip lock bag for the next batch of Amish friendship bread you make. And then you put that in the oven and you grow it. It rises and you eat it.

And then you have another bag for the next week. That's what's happening here. And so the leaven that's being worked through the dough, it's actually a fermenting remnant of the dough the week before.

[14:09] And it would have been a small piece. And so what Jesus is saying here is that the kingdom, this people that God is drawing in by His grace and gospel into His reign, it starts as this fermenting remnant of dough from last week's bake.

And then what He does is this woman takes that small remnant and she hides it in the dough and then she works it through three measures of flour till it is all leavened.

Now, when you read three measures of flour, I'm guessing you're like thinking, oh yeah, three cups, that would be very interesting. But you've got to understand that word measure for three measures of flour, that word measure is talking about a Hebrew measuring unit called a seah.

And what that is is the equivalent of eight quarts or two gallons. And so three seahs of flour equals six gallons of flour.

Twenty-four quarts of flour. That still doesn't make sense to me. Because when I hear gallon, I think of gasoline. I don't think of flour. But I do get a five-pound bag of flour.

[15:32] Do you know what I'm talking about? Those five-pound packages? You can use them as weights to exercise. So basically, here's the equivalent. Here's what Jesus is saying.

These three measures, it's the equivalent of five five-pound bags of flour. In other words, it's 25 pounds of flour. Now, I'm not a baker.

I watch baking on TV. I know that's a lot of flour. I know that's a lot of kneading through leaven to make the whole thing leavened.

I even know that. And what Jesus is again doing here is He's showing extraordinary scale. That this little leaven, this little fragment, this little fermenting dough gets worked through all 25 pounds of flour.

There's another word that you need to see. Did you catch that? The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour.

[16:39] All throughout these parables, there is a hiddenness theme of the kingdom. It's implied in the dropping of seeds into ground and covering it over. We see it here.

We will also see it in the hidden treasure next week. We're going to see in the pearl of great price, which you don't see, discover until you find it. It's going to show up in the treasure that is unseen but brought out by the master of the house for all to see.

There's a hiddenness theme. Back to the leaven. She hid it. She placed it in it so you couldn't see it. And she leavened the whole dough until it was all leavened.

Jesus is saying this parable is this story is of this woman who works it all the way through the 25 pounds of flour.

So the parable of the mustard seed is about extraordinary growth. The parable of the leaven is about extraordinary permeation, pervasiveness.

[17:48] Similar but different. So the kingdom of heaven is about extraordinary growth and extraordinary pervasiveness in the world.

Now let's move towards asking what all this stuff means. Well, both parables have a few things in common.

And that's why Jesus coupled these. But what you need to know is he doesn't give an explanation for these two. He gave an explanation for the parable of the soils.

He gave an explanation for the parable of the weeds. But here he doesn't give an explanation. And so we need to tread on careful ground here. We don't want to force a meaning on this.

But there are some significant clues from the context that should give us confidence in making some connections. And the first connection I want you to see is this.

[18:47] Did you notice that both in the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven, that there's one actor, there's one person, the man who sows the mustard seed and the woman who takes the leaven and works it through?

If you look back at verse 24, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. That's the parable of the weeds. And when Jesus explains it in verse 37, he says, the one who sows the good seed is the son of man.

It's a big clue. And then we read in verse 34 and 35, and this is that part of these eight parables in which Jesus is making sense of it all.

Or Matthew is, he says, all these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables. Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. Thus was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

It's a fulfillment of Psalm 78 too. That's the quote. And what we're learning here is that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom in parables was him throwing out seed.

[19:56] And those who responded to that, they're the mustard seed. They're the leaven. And so what I'm suggesting is that the one sowing the mustard seed, even the woman working the dough, it's pointing to the son of man, the Lord of the harvest, the baker of the worldwide kingdom.

But it's not just a primary actor we see here. There's this emphasis on smallness and hiddenness. That mustard seed is one to two millimeters.

And that remnant of fermenting dough was small. And so the emphasis is on smallness, starting small and hidden.

That mustard seed was hidden in the ground. And that remnant of dough was hidden in the flour, that leaven. And so there's emphasis on both smallness and hiddenness.

And Jesus is saying the kingdom, the saving reign of God, as I have inaugurated, it starts small and hidden. That's the way of the kingdom.

[21:19] And not only do we see that, it's transformational over time. We have a one to two millimeter seed becoming a tree that's eight to twelve feet tall and wide. We have this small fermenting piece of dough that is worked through 25 pounds of flour.

There's transformation that takes place over time. So it starts small, it starts hidden, and it grows and it spreads, and it becomes something extraordinary.

The smallest of all seeds grows to be the largest of all plants. It's gloriously prominent. The littlest of leaven gets through all 25 pounds of flour.

It's pervasive. And so what Jesus is saying here is that He is causing His people, those who are brought into the kingdom from the very beginning, which started small and hidden, He is growing it and working it through the world.

So that it's growing and growing and growing and it can become like a tree. And it's spreading and spreading and spreading all the way through the flour of every tribe, tongue, and nation. The parable is not about shock and awe.

[22:46] These parables are about sowing and growing. They're about baking. The active, saving reign of God starts small and grows big.

This is a correction for those who are expecting a shock and awe Messiah. He's saying, I don't roll that way. My way is not fast but slow.

My way is not fierce but gentle. My way is not forceful but sacrificial. He gave His life as a ransom for many.

It gives us a sense of direction in our own ministry here, Christ the King Church. It informs the way that we do things.

It informs kind of like the time frame we're on. It informs in terms of our expectations. It informs too, it's like, how do we think about our city? Now to bring this to bear, historically speaking, the kingdom started really small.

[24:01] Jesus, His disciples, maybe 120 altogether, in a podunk town around Galilee, small, concentrated, and over two millennia, the kingdom has grown and grown and grown.

And so today, Christianity has the largest number of adherents worldwide. Now, we can debate whether all people claiming to be Christians are actually Christians.

We can debate that. But I just want to point to the fact that this parable is somehow prophetic. In 2012, there was 2.2 billion people on the planet that claimed to be a follower of Jesus.

Now that's extraordinary growth over two millennia. From 120 to 2.2 billion, Jesus knew what He was talking about.

And what that points to is, He's right on time. He's bringing about His purposes as He said He would. He's grown the kingdom just like He said He would.

[25:18] And what this means for us is this. We live at a specific time of His global harvest. We're not on our time.

We're on His time. Now, if you're here and you're realizing that you're not in the kingdom, that you haven't bowed your knee to King Jesus and by grace received the salvation He alone offers, today is the day of salvation.

The time for you is to repent and believe and come join us in the kingdom of heaven. But let's say you're a follower of Jesus and you're realizing, you know what?

I'm not living on His time. I'm living on my time. The call to you is move on to His time. Be thinking about harvest.

Be thinking about spread in the city. Leaven. Here's what will happen. It will change your priorities. You'll see people differently.

[26:29] You'll want to use your money in different ways. You'll want to spend your time in ways that are advancing kingdom according to the King. Now, there are some of you in here that have been laboring hard.

You've been sharing your faith. You've been knocking on doors. You've been initiating with people. You've been putting out a lot of effort out of a wonderful desire to see people come to Christ, to see people brought into our church, and you may be thinking, you know what?

We're three and a half years old as a church. I thought we would have 700 converts by this time. What's going on? Why isn't this thing happening? Why aren't we this mixed ethnically church that we're so wanting to be?

Why isn't this happening? Well, the answer is Jesus is right on time. He's expanding His kingdom. Ministry's slow.

People changing is hard. It takes time. Just over the last couple weeks, I've talked to two people who've become Christians in the last year, but it was a longer process.

[27:41] It takes time. And so the question is, are we on His time? Are we trusting Him? Now, we pray for outpourings of the Spirit in phenomenal works, but His typical MO is slow, gentle, and sacrificial.

But we're on His time. Now, that should ring a bell in you as well. If the kingdom is spreading like I'm suggesting it is, we're in a different place now than when we were 2,000 years ago, do you know what that means?

We're getting closer to His return. He's coming back. We're one day closer. Not one day farther. He's coming back.

Now, presently speaking, all throughout the globe, God is at work. His active, His active, saving reign is reaching into different people groups all along the planet.

Now, if you're taking notes, I want you to jot down this. The Joshua Project. When you get home today or early this week, Google the Joshua Project. What the Joshua Project does is it tracks the progress of world evangelization.

[29:07] And it tracks it along two lines. Just the number of people who've been reached with the gospel as well as the number of people groups that have been reached with the gospel.

And a people group is a distinct group of people by language, ethnicity, and culture. But, here's what you need to know. According to the Joshua Project, 42% of the world's population, which is 3.11 billion people, have not been reached with the gospel.

And so, is the kingdom spreading? Yes. Has everybody been reached? No. The Joshua Project says that there are 16,584 different people groups around the planet.

Distinct people groups. And it says that 6,733 are presently unreached. And what they mean by unreached is that an unreached people group is dependent on someone from outside of their group to come in and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them.

And so, presently, there's 40% of the world's people groups that don't have a witness to them.

They're waiting for someone to come and tell them about the saving reign of Jesus Christ, about the grace of the Almighty God who offers them their sinners in need of salvation.

[30:40] You know, America is actually listed on the Joshua Project as having its own unreached people groups. And it's very interesting. The unreached people groups in America, Native Americans, immigrants, and when you look at it on the map, the hot spots are in big cities in our nation.

This is why we have missionaries. And this is why, one of the big reasons why we have mission partners as a church. This is why we want to get alongside of Josh and Christy Anderson and the work that they're doing in Asia.

We partner with them so that they can bring the gospel to an unreached people group. That's why we saddle up next to and partner with Chelsea Zeman so that she can go to Nicaragua and share the gospel with people who presently don't know about Jesus.

And that's why we partner up with Kyle Zeman who's working at Bradley University in Illinois. You might, Bradley University, that's in America. Well, it's like a foreign land to us now. There's something else I want to make you aware of.

In some countries around the world, the kingdom of heaven is presently small and hidden because of persecution and suffering. Recently, we received as a family, we get Christianity Today and part of the latest Christianity Today was this magazine by Open Doors.

[32:09] And this, Open Doors is an organization that tracks the persecution of the church around the world. And it shared the top 50 countries that are persecuting Christians around the world.

Do you know what the number one country was? North Korea. And so, in this country of North Korea, there are 24, 25.4 million people.

300,000 are Christians. That's 1% of the population. Now, when you hear me say North Korea, you might instantly go, well, third missile test.

Are they going to get a missile, intercontinental ballistic missile to bring a warhead to the United States? Tension's rising. China's involved. South Korea, Japan, the United States.

Saber rattling going on. But the reality is, there are worshipers in North Korea that don't have a gospel witness. And there's 1% of the population that God has placed there and He is going to leaven that 100,000 through.

[33:12] And it's going to start with them showing up in prisons and sharing with people gospel in prisons and in outhouses. and the gospel's going to spread. God's doing a global work.

He's advancing the gospel, the saving reign of God all over the place. It's an active work. Locally. What about our city?

What about this little section of God's field we call Kenosha? This little segment of the flower? Well, for those of us who have been, by God's grace, brought into the kingdom, we're leaven to the city. We're leaven. You know, leaven has this dynamic additive. You put leaven into flour and what happens is it brings with it a chemical reaction that brings about a change.

It gives rise to the dome. My friends, we're God's leaven. We have been placed in this city and we're being needed through.

[34:39] It's no coincidence. You're in the neighborhood you're in. You're in the school you are. You're in the organizations you're involved with. The businesses. It's all part of God's plan to expand His kingdom.

Wherever you are, the Lord wants to use you. He wants to use you as leaven. Leaven. It's not shock and awe.

It's slow. It's gentle. It's sacrificial. The dynamic that we bring with us into our neighborhoods, it's not of us.

We bring in the gospel dynamic. It's God's divine change agent. And when we share the gospel with people, this catalyst, what happens is God raises dead people to life.

There are a whole lot of dead people in this city. Spiritually dead. And God has spread us like a leaven and located us very specifically. It's about proximity, it's about time, and it's about a dynamic.

[35:55] And we got the dynamic. It's the gospel. We get to tell people about it. This morning, I want to ask, how do you expect the kingdom of heaven, the saving reign of Jesus, to advance around the world or in our city?

Is it shock and awe? No, it's not shock and awe. It's slow. It's gentle. It's sacrificial. It's so ingrowed. Let me urge you to do a couple things. Start prayer walking. It's getting nice out.

Walk around your neighborhood. Start praying for people. Start praying for your neighbors. God will use it for good to help you see as he sees. Last week, the leadership team, we broke into twos and we drove around the city of Kenosha for two hours.

And we drove around saying, who are the people that God has brought to this city? And what does God want to do in this city? Go out on a date. Drive around town.

[37:05] See the neighborhoods and the people waiting. The kingdom of heaven is not shock and awe. It's not fast.

It's slow. It's not fierce. It's gentle. It's not forceful. It's sacrificial. Our king is the suffering servant. And he's right on time.

Let's get on his time. Will you pray with me? Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of the harvest.

We thank you for these parables and we thank you for what you've been doing over the course of the last two millennia. You are the risen Christ who's sovereign over all. You're wanting to gather for yourself a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

We pray, Father, for your gospel to advance. We pray for our brothers and sisters in North Korea who presently suffer, suffer harshly. Would you give them strength?

[38:09] Would you work them through like leaven that country? God, would you bring change? Would you turn that country around from the inside out?

God, we pray for our city. We ask that, God, there would be an outpouring of your spirit that would give us the boldness and the confidence and the perseverance to faithfully proclaim of what Christ has done for sinners.

That, God, would you help us to see where we've been located not as coincidence, but providence. And that we would be a people that are making the most of the time, your time.

Lord, we thank you so much for calling us as a church to be light in a dark place, to be salt in a decaying world, and to be leaven in this big lump of dough called Kenosha.

God, we would ask that you would bring men and women, boys and girls, into our church who are just fresh in terms of coming to Christ. Would you give us the privilege of sharing the gospel with many and seeing many respond?

[39:25] Would you build your kingdom, Lord, we ask? Thank you for your word, Lord Jesus, and it's your name we pray. Amen.