

# The Parables of the Mustard Seed & Leaven

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

If you'll flip with me in your Bible to Luke 13. Luke 13. We are continuing our study of the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Luke's gospel. So we've seen a couple great ones, and this one this morning is great as well. You know, one of the most unlike words in our vocabulary is ordinary. When I was young, there was nothing I wanted less than an ordinary life.

I was filled with passion. As you probably noticed, still am in many ways. Filled with passion to see and learn and know. I resonated with Jack Kerouac, the beatnik writer, who said, the only people for me are the mad ones.

[ 1 : 09 ] Now, he didn't mean mad in an angry sort of way, but the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, desirous of everything at the same time. The ones who never yawn. But burn, burn, burn.

And when I became a Christian at 21 years old, not much changed in that area. I burned with passion to take the gospel to the nations. I began listening to Rich Mullins.

Now, some of you may be old enough to remember Rich Mullins, and not just Lord, I lift your name on high, but many of his other tunes. I wanted to sell my possessions like St. Francis.

I loved reading about missionaries who avoided the drudgery of an ordinary life and gave it all away. Right? He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot earn, Jim Elliott, the missionary said.

And I wanted to be like him. But 17 years later, my life, it often seems, is nothing but ordinary.

[ 2 : 16 ] Work, eat, maybe a little more work, eat, sleep, work, eat, maybe some family time, sleep. You know, this, the rhythm of my life just is so monotonous in so many ways.

And my guess is you probably feel a bit the same way. Well, you find it hard to face ordinary days. One writer who chased after a radical life and mission tells about the challenge she now feels daily to face an ordinary life with courage. She writes, She writes, Now, I'm a 30-something with two kids living a more or less ordinary life.

And what I'm slowly realizing is that for me, being in the house all day with a baby and a two-year-old is a lot more scary and a lot harder than being in an African village.

Maybe that's overstated. But what I need is courage for the ordinary, the daily everydayness of life. Caring for a homeless kid is a lot more thrilling to me than listening well to the people in my house.

[ 3 : 33 ] Giving away clothes to the poor requires less of me than being kind to my husband on an average Wednesday morning or calling my mother back when I don't feel like it.

Have you ever felt like that? You ever had a hard time facing the ordinary days, being patient with the children, being carefree when the neighbors drop in right before you're about to head out, or being on time and just working hard week in, week out in ways that very few people ever notice?

This morning, we're going to study two parables that in many ways are altogether ordinary. But they teach us how to live through days like these for the kingdom.

So let's look down in verse 18, chapter 13 of Luke's gospel. Our Lord says, This is the word of God. You know, in our text, Jesus tells two parables about ordinary things that uncover the surprising way of the kingdom. You know, there are few things more ordinary in that day, and perhaps even in our own, than farming and baking.

[ 5 : 23 ] Anyone who's heard these parables, and you know, as we've said, Jesus told parables about common things, so that people would immediately understand what he's talking about. And anyone who heard these parables would have immediately understood that.

Both of the parables are trying to tell us something. They're trying to tell us about something, about the kingdom of God that starts small, yet grows large and reaches far.

Now, the first parable is about a mustard seed. It's one of the smallest seeds of all. Mark's gospel says that. Usually, it's one to two millimeters.

That's .03 and a bunch of other numbers, inches. That's tiny. Now, man sowed the mustard seed in his garden.

It grew into a big tree, perhaps reaching 10 feet tall, scholars say. Big enough for the birds to come in and nest on this tree that came from a mustard seed.

[ 6 : 21 ] The second parable is about 11. And you see, if you look down there, this parable is about a woman who took and hid the leaven in her lump. As I said several weeks ago, that Jesus treated women with tremendous respect, dignity, and invited them to receive salvation.

So it's not surprising that Jesus tells a parable about a man and then about a woman. But leaven is kind of saying, or this parable is kind of saying the same thing that the other parable did. Leaven is a small substance that's used to make bread rise.

So this woman would take a bit of leaven, hide it in three measures of flour, and the little bit would permeate all the flour until the dough rises.

Similar to the mustard seed that grows into a big tree. So this leaven leavens or permeates a big lump. Three measures of flour is about 50 pounds.

Way more than a family would need. Perhaps she's cooking for the neighborhood. Perhaps she's cooking for the whole town. We don't know. The point is, a little leaven permeates it all.

[ 7 : 28 ] And Jesus is saying the same thing through these parables, that the kingdom of God is something that starts small, yet grows massive. Now, that's all well and good.

But I think we have to dig a little deeper here to understand how shocking these parables would have been in Jesus' day. Now, folks listening to Jesus tell these parables were Jewish people, the people of Israel.

They were steeped in the promises of God, steeped in the stories of the Old Testament. Almost immediately after the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, God began promising that he would send a king who would rescue his people and bring them back under God's rule.

But the line between the promise and the fulfillment, if you've read the Old Testament, gets a little crazy at times. I remember reading through the Old Testament for the very first time after becoming a Christian.

I took a semester off, a gap semester, whatever you want to call it. I just didn't want to go to school. And I was working at Walmart, working through Kings, which is just wild, and just blow your hair back.

[ 8 : 42 ] And was explaining it to a guy that was working with me. He was like, that's no way. That's in the Bible? Are you kidding me? And that's the way the Old Testament is. And in many ways, the story begins to develop into a pattern where the people of God, they kind of stumble along and they fall under a wicked person, wicked king of something.

And the people begin to suffer under that king. Maybe poverty, maybe just making bricks out of straw. And then a hero comes. There's a little bit of a buildup.

The hero comes and delivers them. There's a battle. Then God is back with them for a little bit. You know, they're able to serve the Lord. And we see that pattern with David. David, the people are being pestered by the Philistines.

You remember Goliath? He's up there taunting all the people and nobody would come up to fight him. David goes. There's a showdown. David takes him down. And David takes all the Philistines down over his life.

He brings peace back. Remember that point where he's dancing in the city because the Ark of the Covenant is brought back. And the idea is they're back in the good graces with the Lord.

[ 9 : 50 ] They're back under his rule, free to serving. We see this pattern in Nehemiah too. The people were in exile. And God brings them back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

And they're trying to rebuild the walls. And wicked people, Sambalot and his crews, start opposing them. So they build with one hand. And they fight with a sword in the other. Trial in one, a sword in the other.

That was Charles Spurgeon's newsletter. That's a great little title. And so Nehemiah prepares for this big fight. The Lord delivers them. The wall is finished.

And they're able to worship God. It's an incredible moment. Nehemiah 8. The joy of the Lord is our strength. That's exactly where it comes from.

Because God's back in his temple. This has even happened in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Heroes came. One of them was Jacob Maccabeus.

[10:45] Otherwise known as Judah Maccabeus. Otherwise known as Judah the Hammer. I mean that sounds like a WWF name. Not one that comes from our history.

About 200 years before Christ came, Israel was being pestered again by Syria. They defiled the temple. Which means they just put in idols in there. They forced the Jews to break their holy law and eat pork and different things.

And the one family leads the resistance. The Maccabeans. With Judah the Hammer. He carries out a three-year underground war. And at the end of it, Judah cleanses the temple again.

He runs all that stuff out. Throws all the idols out. And frees the people to worship the Lord again.

For a little while. Now I'm telling you all this because when Jesus came, it seemed to fall right in line with what everyone expected.

You know, he did all the things that made it look like God was finally in charge again. He healed the sick. He gave forgiveness. He ran the bad people out of the temple.

[11:51] You remember that? John's Gospel said he picked up a whip and runs them out. Not the meek and mild Jesus that fits on our felt boards. You know, it seemed that the stage was ready for a big battle to finally run the Romans out of Jerusalem and set the people free.

The idea is that the people expected that the kingdom would come in a way that all would see that would be immediate. In which Jesus would display God's power and deliverance. In which he would ascend Herod's throne and throw Herod down.

It makes perfect sense. You know, sometimes from our vantage point, we can look down our nose and think, oh, it's a spiritual kingdom. But that's not where they were at all. Look just before our text right here.

In verse 17, Jesus heals this person. And as he said these things afterwards, all the adversaries were put to shame. And all the people rejoice at the glorious things that were done by him.

They assume this is the way it's going to be. The wicked are going to be shamed. And God is going to be exalted. I can't wait. Get me some popcorn. Let's enjoy this battle in which Jesus is victorious and all the wicked are shamed.

[13:01] And yet Jesus tells these two parables to stop them in their tracks. To say, it will be great.

It will grow strong and powerful. The kingdom of God will sweep throughout the world so that all the earth knows about the Lord.

But it will come small. In so doing, these parables were strengthened. We're given hope.

And these words, these parables are designed to strengthen us too. To, in a word, plod forward with solid hope for God's coming kingdom in ordinary days.

Plod forward in solid hope with solid hope of God's coming kingdom in ordinary days. We're going to pull apart these parables in three points.

[14:03] The first one is, don't be afraid of small. Do not be afraid of small. The kingdom of God is what Jesus is saying.

The kingdom of God is not just big. It's small. You know, the kingdom does announce massive realities. Reconciliation with God. Forgiveness. Deliverance from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of his son is what Paul tells us in Colossians 1.

Yet it's not just big. It's small. The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed. Almost invisible. I mean, we would all have to get down to our fingers to see it. The kingdom of God is like a few pinches of leaven in 50 pounds of flour.

The kingdom of God is outnumbered. And overwhelmed. In fact, the kingdom of God could not have come in a smaller way.

[15:04] If you think about this, Jesus came as a baby. He didn't ride in on the clouds. He didn't command the attention of all. Unlike Prince Harry's kids, his birth wasn't announced in the papers.

Nor did it attract the attention of the elite. It did attract Herod's attention, but only because he wanted to kill him. He could have come in any way. He chose it. He came in this way.

And get this. Except for occasional trips to Jerusalem, Jesus stayed small. Jesus lived with his folks for 30 years in the backwoods nowhere town of Nazareth.

He was off the grid. I just find that so fascinating. The king of the universe comes to rescue us, and he spends 30 years building tables.

He knew why he came. And yet he stayed low.

[16:03] And when he did let others know why he came, he didn't lose the emphasis on smallness. Jesus was focused on smallness in so many ways his whole ministry. He didn't try to reach every person he could.

He didn't try to heal every person he could. Often when the crowds came, he went the other way. If you think about that, it's amazing. You know, yesterday or a couple days ago, I watched this Inside Edition with Kenneth Copeland.

Kenneth Copeland and I have a number of disagreements. Not that he knows who I am. But Kenneth Copeland recently hit the headlines because he bought Tyler Perry's Gulfstream 5 jet. Now, I have a number of concerns with buying a jet like that with raised money. But he said in explaining, Inside Edition kind of caught him walking from the hangar into a car that was prepared for him.

They caught him and stuck a microphone in his mouth and started asking him questions about the legitimacy of buying this jet. And one thing he said struck me.

[17:07] There's a number of things that struck me, but one thing really struck me. He said, I had to have it because of all the ministry we're doing. We've saved 120 million people is what he said.

And I'm going from this place to this place or this place to this place. And I've got to have this jet so I can recover quickly so that I can keep preaching. And I just want to say, Jesus didn't approach ministry that way.

And I find that interesting. There was no desperation in our Lord's ministry. In fact, he mainly just disciplined 12 men.

The kingdom of God for Jesus stayed small. He knew it could be no other way. He said that the kingdom of God that will one day rule over this world will not come through a throne in Rome or any other throne, but through the ordinary faithfulness to preach the gospel of men and women.

You know, in so many ways, the work God wants to do in our life will often start small. And we hate small in most things. You know, we want big.

[18:20] Nearly everything on McDonald's menu has doubled in size since 1955. I was arguing with this with Riley before the meeting. But, you know, and we just supersize me to everything.

We want an exciting, a powerful life. We want adventure. We want to be known. We want a life that can be measured, managed, and maintained for all the world to see. That one of the things we fear most is the thought of being small and ordinary.

But in so many ways, what God cares about and what God wants us to focus on is small. Over the years, when we lived in Knoxville, we had a number of college students that would babysit for us. We have three kids, and we enjoyed some time out. And when graduation came, I would pull aside that babysitter.

Maybe we'd have her over for a meal, give her a gift. And I would give my stump speech, my graduation stump speech. I would tell them, things are about to change.

[19:31] Next year, you won't go from exciting party to exciting party. No one will clap when you reach a work goal. And no one will give you an award at the end of the year.

Most nights, you'll be exhausted and fall asleep early so you can be ready for tomorrow. When someone asks you what you did last week, you won't remember because it wasn't memorable. And in the end, your life won't be measured by success or income or applause, but for how faithful you were in mostly smaller things. Welcome to the rest of your life. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Some of that's tongue-in-cheek, but you get the point. Most of what God cares about are small things, and most of what God calls us to do and devote ourselves to are small things.

Zach Eswine puts it this way. He says, Almost anything that truly matters will require you to do small, mostly overlooked things over a long period of time for Him.

[20:35] Think about it. How do you love your spouse? How do you train up your children? How do you love your neighbor? How do you focus on others and faithfully show kindness and hospitality to them?

How do you play your part in passing on the gospel to the next generations?

None of those things unfold in big moments. But mostly small, overlooked acts over a long period of time.

Patience with your spouse after they've had a hard day and are being distant. Slowly explaining to your children once again the truth of the gospel and how it's better to give than to receive. Or doing another load of laundry. Checking on the neighbor during an afternoon walk. Teaching another week of children's ministry. And so much more. Most of the Christian life is thoroughly small.

[ 21 : 46 ] In so many ways, the adage is right. Think global. Start local. We don't want to be afraid of small. In many ways, the kingdom of God advances in bite-sized moments.

This principle comes out in other places in Scripture. One who's faithful in a little will have a chance to be faithful over more. One who sows will reap. Zachariah says, don't despise the day of small beginnings.

And this transforms so many things. It transforms the way we view our work. And it helps us enjoy the familiar, routine, common pleasures of life.

In fact, last night we took the kids out to eat. And my youngest son, who's just kind of learning to talk well.

Or talk. Wanted to pray. You know, me pray, me pray, me pray. You know, and so we let him pray. And we tried to help him a little bit, you know. But he said, thank you for this pizza place.

[ 22 : 48 ] The drink, the plate, and the fork. And I thought, man, that is great. He's just enamored with the routine, familiar, common pleasures of life.

He's not caught up running around. His face is all engaged with yours. And he's all engaged with these routine things. I just love that.

That's the way we should be. Point two, don't judge what God is doing by what you see. Don't judge what God is doing by what you see. The kingdom of God will one day be visible.

But for now, it's basically invisible. The idea is, that's the point of these parables in so many ways. You know, there's no span of time mentioned in the growth of this mustard seed.

But the assumption is that it took a while. Just like anything, it grows. How does a seed look after week one? How does that tomato seed look after week one? You don't see anything, you know?

[ 23 : 52 ] Or week three or a few months. How long does it take for it to become full? When does the branch emerge? When do they become visible? The idea just takes time. Same thing with 11.

The only thing needed for 11 to 11, the whole lump, is time. And at first and along the way, it looks basically pointless.

I think that's Jesus' point. It looks absurd. What Jesus is doing by preaching the gospel and not climbing a throne looks absurd. Just what he said to Pilate, my kingdom is not of this world.

Yes, I'm a king, but not of this world. And that's the way the kingdom of God looks. It starts small, almost invisible, and takes time to grow. And the same thing's going on in our lives.

The work God does in our lives starts small and grows slowly. Many of the biblical metaphors, I just love it, many of the biblical metaphors for the Christian life emphasize small starts and slow growth.

[ 24 : 57 ] The Christian life's like a child growing into adulthood, one in which we begin with spiritual milk and later move on to solid food.

And if you have a toddler, you know the separation of those days. We often go back to baby steps. We gradually grow beyond the emotional roller coasters, temper tantrums, and impulsiveness of childhood.

And if we're honest, we do that very gradually until we become adults. The Christian life is like a seed, just like this parable he's talking about, that falls in the ground and slowly bears fruit.

The idea is that life and the work God does in our lives in this world includes no cheap fixes, no life hacks. No shortcuts.

There's no microwaves or instapots. It's a slow cooker. A Christian life begins small and grows slow. And knowing this is liberating.

[ 25 : 58 ] We don't have to act like we are further along than we are. We don't have to put our best face forward or our best foot forward.

In so many ways, the goal is not a certain status. The goal is just to grow. So, if the kingdom of God starts small and grows slowly, one of the main takeaways for us is don't judge what God's doing right now by what you see.

And the scriptures just push that truth into our hearts all throughout the Old Testament. Do you remember the story of Naomi and Ruth?

One of my favorite stories. Naomi went with her husbands and two sons to a new land. And there they were both married. And we can assume met some prosperity.

Several years later, Naomi's husband died. Ten years after that, both her sons died. She moved back to the land of Israel with nothing to show for herself.

[ 27 : 13 ] Except one daughter-in-law. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was in a stir. It's literally what it says. It's just Naomi who's come home.

Is this the one who left in the famine and has returned with wealth and provision? And she says, Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara.

For the Almighty has dealt bitterly, very bitterly with me. I went away full. And the Lord has brought me back empty. It's the beginning.

She just changed her name. And little did she know, the Lord was working for good. She had concluded he was done.

And he unfolds his purposes and even unfolds her family into the very line of Jesus Christ. And often, like Naomi, we can conclude the same thing.

[ 28 : 22 ] Now, you may be thinking, I know what the Lord has done. I know what the Lord's doing. Because he's already done it. He's already snatched my dream away.

My hope for a long married life is dashed. My longing for children is gone because I've passed the age of childbearing years.

Maybe you think, my children have already wandered from the faith. It's not if. It's already happened. How can they come back now? My desires for opportunities have worked, have just sat there unchanged for years.

What do you mean don't judge? That would be living in denial. Now, the facts are in. Right? But this parable whispers, the story is not over.

In so many ways, we stand at a better vantage point because our certainty that there is no, our certainty that God is not done is tied to a time in history when folks concluded that the Lord was done too soon.

[ 29 : 30 ] And that was at the cross of Jesus Christ. I'm sure you remember this, that Pilate nailed a name tag above his head, King of the Jews. The crowds jeered and mocked. If you are the king, climb down from that cross.

Show us how strong and powerful and great you are. Look at him. He saved others. Why can't he save himself? And the hours ticked by.

And the light grew dark. And Jesus hung there. The kingdom of God isn't advancing. It's dying on a tree. And Jesus breathed his last.

And the disciples waffled. If we know the story, they thought it was over too. Many others have stumbled at the foolishness of the cross. But three days later, he rose again, proving that his most foolish moment was his finest moment, securing our salvation and ensuring that nothing is wasted in the advance of his kingdom and the lives of his people.

So these points in this parable ask us, are we still believing? Are we still hoping? Are we still thinking the Lord is at work?

[ 30 : 50 ] Point three, do not give up. Do not give up. Do not give up. The kingdom of God will not stop until the knowledge of God's salvation covers the earth.

These two parables, in so many ways, they start small, but they don't end there. Far from the foolishness of the kingdom of God appears at times. It is, in fact, the wisdom and perfect plan of God.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree. This puny seed grows into a large, healthy tree. We're just meant to be shocked. The seed is a tree.

I mean, how can birds hide in the branches of something that was one millimeter in size? The kingdom of God is like a pinch of leaven that leavens the whole lump.

The whole bit of leaven permeates the whole batch. The kingdom of God, while advancing and starting small and growing slowly, is headed to an unfathomable size.

[ 31 : 48 ] I think in many ways what the final size of these is meant to try to say is that it will be big enough to shelter anyone who comes near. Look at what it says.

And the birds of the air made nest in its branches. As many say, that's a reference to Ezekiel 17, where the Lord says that he'll plant a tree where every kind of bird can dwell in the shelter of its branches.

The high trees he'll bring low. This low tree he'll bring high. So many ways. The idea is that the kingdom is so large that anyone and everyone who draws near will find shelter and shade in its branches.

Isaiah 25 puts it like this. For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in its distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.

And everybody needs shade from the heat right now. But what Isaiah is talking about and what this kingdom is pointing to, if we need shade and shelter in the heat of God's salvation, we need rescue.

[ 33 : 05 ] In so many ways, that's just the way it feels like. When we draw near to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it's so large that anyone can come.

Praise God, it's so large that it doesn't just accept the ones who got it together. It doesn't just accept those who got the best face and the best foot and the good life and the successful thing.

It's the kingdom of God that's so large that any bird can hide in its branches. From the grandest to the puniest can come and find shelter in its wings or in its branches.

Secondly, it will be broad enough to reach anyone who is scattered far. Look at what it says about the flower. It was like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

Until every bit was leavened. Where the kingdom of God is going, it's not something that's kind of a side project of what the Lord's doing in this world. It's going everywhere. That's where it's going.

[ 34 : 10 ] That's where it's headed. The kingdom of God, the kingdom that we worship is not intimidated by the kingdom of Rome or Russia or the Mongols or the British or the Ottomans. The kingdom of God is the kingdom before whom every king will bow and every kingdom will fall.

And the spreading of this kingdom will not stop until it goes from shore to shore. Till every nation hears. Till every nation hears. And the kingdom of God is great enough to reach anyone who's been scattered far.

And because of this, the work God's doing in our lives, the work God wants us to look to will outlast us and shape generations.

This is what we're a part of. And there's a story about two masons laying stone for a magnificent cathedral.

I mean, think about it. Some of these cathedrals just took 100 years to build. Got a couple of generations laying stone at the same cathedral.

[ 35 : 22 ] And the story goes that a person approached him and said, what are you doing? And one said, I'm cutting this stone into a perfectly square shape. The other said, I'm building a cathedral.

You imagine the first Mason probably paused for a second and said, that's right. I forgot. We are building a cathedral. You know, God is calling us in these little ways to lift our gaze beyond our work so that we can see what he is doing in building his kingdom in our puny small acts that will one day reveal a cathedral beyond imagining.

It's precisely here that we live a life worth living. We chase a legacy worth pursuing and find an inheritance worth leaving. So many ways with these eyes we plod forward with the solid hope of God's coming kingdom.

You know, often in altogether ordinary days. Let us pray. Father in heaven, Thank you for these few minutes to consider your word.

We humble ourselves before you, God. So many ways to exalt you and extol you. To confess that you are the Lord and King of all.

[ 36 : 51 ] We are merely your creatures and we want to cling to you. We want to know you. God, we pray that you would help us. These little parables would help us to press forward, to know you more, to know Jesus Christ more, and to live for him in every moment.

Father, we need you. We cast ourselves upon you. In Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, Lead Pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at [trinitygraceathens.com](http://trinitygraceathens.com).