

The Kingdom is Like

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February 2, 2025

Text: Matt 13:31-35, 44-52

I've been hinting at kingdom parables for the past several weeks. The last two weeks we looked at parables that began, as most kingdom parables do, "*the kingdom of heaven is like ...*" The parable of the sower is also a kingdom parable, but doesn't begin the same way. With these particular parables, those that begin this way, Jesus is trying to tell us something. Jesus is using comparisons, in some cases to express how the kingdom of God works, and in other cases, what life will be like in the kingdom. He will also use this formula to value the kingdom for us. We have to tread carefully here, and make sure we understand the differences.

But we also have to recall Matthew's theme. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Davidic King, come to redeem Israel and set God's people free. But, because he is the King, he is going to do things his way, which is not always the way we expect them to be. I told you recently that Christianity is inescapably political. We sometimes criticize the Pharisees because they expected the Messiah to restore the ancient kingdom of Israel, and bring back the Golden Age of Solomon when everybody had their own fig tree and their own garden, where they were free and happy and lived in peace. We see that in the disciples' question in Acts 1:6, "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?*" We shake our heads, bewildered that they still didn't get it.

The problem is, we still don't get it. It was indeed political; it was just not limited to that small strip of land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Jesus didn't come to take the throne of one kingdom, but to take the throne over all the earth. He did not come to set up the kingdom of Israel, but to set up the kingdom of God. He came to transform and rule the hearts of all men. He came, Paul wrote, to disarm *the powers and authorities ... triumphing over them by the cross* (Col 2:15). He didn't come merely to dethrone Herod; he came to dethrone Caesar, the Tsar, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and every petty dictator and wanna-be emperor. In fact, he came to dethrone each one of us.

"The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field." I was recently in conversation with my father about how people read or use the Bible. This particular parable illustrates a particular problem that modern folk have with the Bible. We tend to interpret the Scriptures within our own context, culture, and time. We use the bible anachronistically, trying to impose modern virtues and modern understandings on an ancient culture. The reason this parable serves as an example is that we all know that the mustard seed isn't the smallest of all seeds. Carrot seeds are smaller. Banana seeds are smaller. And because we know of smaller seeds, we have to find some "work-around" for Jesus' claim that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds.

Here's the problem: First century Israelites probably did not know about bananas, and may not have known about carrots. Whether Jesus (as the Creator) knew is irrelevant, because he was

speaking into a particular culture at a particular time. If Jesus had used a banana seed as an illustration, it likely would have caused massive confusion. They wouldn't have known what he was talking about. Jesus spoke to their understanding. He spoke about things they knew. His illustrations were pertinent to them.

And remember, it's only an illustration. The mustard seed isn't the point of the parable. The parable is about the kingdom of God, not about mustard seeds. If we get side-tracked by the size of the seed in comparison to other seeds, we will lose focus and miss the meaning of the parable.

"... yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." The plant in question would often grow, as a shrub, to a height of eight to ten feet tall. Birds could perch in its branches and find shade, as well as eat the seeds. It may be of interest to us that this particular plant is a brassica, related to cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, rutabaga, and turnip. It is native to the Mediterranean region and is known in Latin as a *caulus*, or stalk plant for the sturdy main stalk.

So, what is Jesus trying to tell them? Is this a lesson in botany? Or gardening? Let's begin at the beginning: *"The kingdom of heaven is like ..."*

It is planted as a seed, in one receptive heart at a time. This is the good soil of the earlier parable. As that heart understands and grows, it bears fruit, perhaps influencing another to come and believe. It invites partly by its own fragrance. Paul takes up this theme in 2 Corinthians 2, noting that our lives are either *the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved* or the stench of death to those who reject Christ (2 Cor 2:15-16). *God uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere* (2 Cor 2:14). Like the fragrance of Mary's spikenard as she poured it out on Jesus' feet, John says, *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume* (Jn 12:3), so the fragrance of our lives offers either an invitation to life in the kingdom, or an off-putting stench. But the seed grows just as a fragrance spreads, branching, reaching, flowering. It begins small, with one person, with one word, with a seed planted here and a seed planted there.

"... so that the birds come and perch in its branches." We ought to just note in passing that in the parable of the sower, the birds represent the evil ones who come to snatch away the good seed. As the kingdom of God grows and flourishes in the world, there will be those who try to take advantage, who try to dilute and disarm the church, and who try to pervert the word of God.

Let's go on to the second part: *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast ..."* We need to note that Jesus is using yeast in a different way than Jews were familiar with. Yeast had been associated with sin, and Jesus will use it that way. At Passover, Jews are supposed to remove all yeast and yeasty products from their homes to purify their homes for the observance. When Jews left Egyptian slavery, they did not have time for their bread to rise, so they baked bread without yeast. That has become part of the observance today. Yeast is a reminder of Egyptian slavery and of the things that delay obedience to God. But Jesus turns the illustration a different direction.

"... which a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." Sixty pounds is a lot. It would produce enough bread to feed a hundred or more people. Now, here's the conundrum: how much yeast would it take to cause that much flour to rise? I don't know the precise amount, but the answer is, not much. Paul asks a rhetorical

question of the Corinthian church. The problem there was sin in the church: one man in a sexual relationship that was too immoral even for Corinth, and that's going some. Concerned about the influence of that one man, Paul asked, *Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?* (1 Cor 5:6). Wondering who was causing confusion in the churches of Galatia, Paul noted, *"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough"* (Gal. 5:9). It only takes one person to sow confusion in the church. Part of Jesus' point, and Paul's, is that it doesn't take much yeast to leaven a lot of bread dough.

But that little bit of yeast is enough. Add a bit of yeast to a bowl of warm dough, and the yeast will produce enough CO₂ to cause the whole thing to rise. The yeast eats the sugars in the flour, reproduces itself, and exhales CO₂, which is trapped as bubbles in the flour, causing the bread to rise. The baker kneads the dough in order to distribute the yeast and the gas through the whole batch of dough.

So, what does that have to do with the kingdom of heaven? These are among the parables Jesus does not interpret, and Matthew again remarks that, at this point, Jesus did not teach at all except by using parables, fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 78:2, that through parables would hidden things be revealed. Okay, but still, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed and like yeast? How?

I've discovered that there are two kinds of people: manufacturers and farmers. Manufacturers take raw materials and assemble products. The key to manufacturing is speed and quantity – get a lot done in a short time. And there are manufacturers in the church. They want a program that produces quick results. In board meetings, you will hear from them, we need to run the church like a business; what are we getting in return for our expense? Send the pastor to a church growth seminar so that he can bring back a “grow-it-quick” plan with guaranteed results. And those seminars are put on by manufacturers, large church pastors who have been successful with their particular program. The point is, get a lot of results in a short time with minimum effort. They will try to find an assembly line, identify skills, place people in the right position, to assemble church members. I suspect that a lot of our so-called “evangelism” programs were designed by manufacturers. They present a five-minute formula, get a decision, say a prayer, and *violá*, instant Christian. But there's a major problem with that idea, which we'll come back to in a moment.

The farmer, on the other hand, knows that some things take time. Seeds don't just pop into a fruiting plant. It takes time to plow a field and let it rest. It takes time for seeds to germinate. The farmer is endowed with patience because everything he must do is slow and deliberate. He can't make a plant hurry up and grow. There are those who try, but they end up with spindly, weak plants that won't hold up the fruit in it's time. The work of a farmer is measured - just so much water, just so much fertilizer. And when the plant finally flowers, he begins to look for the first signs of fruit. But the fruit doesn't set fully formed. It grows slowly. If you pluck it before it's ready, it will be mealy and bitter. If you wait too long, it will be mushy and sour.

I have apple trees. I watch and wait as they put on their leaves in the spring. I have to prune the tree, dead branches, water sprouts, crossing growth. It's painful for me to cut away parts of the tree that might produce. It's painful to thin the carrots. But it's necessary if I want larger, sweeter

fruit. Everything in a garden takes time, it seems, except the weeds. It takes constant vigilance to get them out before they do damage.

And if you are a baker, you know the same thing about bread. The yeast takes time. You mix the yeast with warm water to give it a little head start, but then you mix it into the dough and let it sit while it does its work. For the best bread, you may have to knead it two or three times and just allow it to sit while the yeast does its magic.

Can you hear Jesus' parables through what I'm telling you? The kingdom of God is not a product to be assembled. It is a seed that needs time to grow. But there's a reason. It's because people are not the work of an assembly line. You can't build a factory that will produce human beings in a few minutes. People grow slowly, too. There may be spurts of growth from time to time, but it takes nine months for a baby to be fully formed and ready for birth. It takes months before a baby has teeth and begins to talk in recognizable words. It takes years for tendons and muscles to work together for fine coordination. A baby crawls, then toddles, then walks, before he is ready to run. People are more the work of a divine farmer than a manufacturer.

And the problem with many of our evangelism programs is that they treat Christianity and people as if faith can be simply manufactured. Much of modern evangelism fails to recognize the need of people to be nurtured into faith. We want instant Christians, but such a thing simply does not exist. We must learn to plant seeds and nurture them. We must learn, too, that the fruit of the Spirit does not appear at the altar. Praying the "sinner's prayer" does not bestow the fruit of the Spirit. If we go in all "bull in a china shop", spouting scripture and demanding instant belief, we are likely to turn people away from Christ. Most people take time to convince and grow into belief.

A quick history lesson before I close: Jesus started with just twelve. He didn't stand on a mountain and call the crowds to follow; he called them one at a time. After Pentecost, the Church grew rapidly, but it grew organically, with Christians telling their friends and neighbors about Jesus. It spread from community to community, from province to province. People saw how Christians treated one another and how they acted in the world and were attracted to join. There was no grand revolution, no imperial army marching through the nations. The Roman Empire fell in AD 476, but by then the yeast had spread to virtually every nation in Europe, the Mediterranean region, North Africa, and India, so that today, nearly 1/3 of all people on earth call themselves Christian.