

**TEACHINGS OF Jesus (35)**  
**Parables of Jesus (4)**  
**Parables of Growth**  
**Matthew 13:31-33**

We have been studying the parables of Jesus. Thus far we have noted the parables of the Sower and last week, the Wheat and Tares. These are part of the early teaching of parables of Jesus based on context. As we continue our study of the parables of Jesus, today we want to notice a pair of parables. These are parables that are similar in message, but there are also differences. Let us get started with the parables of the mustard seed and leaven.

**I. The parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31-32)**

- a. The kingdom of heaven is like – we know in this parable what Jesus has in mind.
- b. A mustard seed which a man sowed in a field
- c. Described as the least of all seeds – some see this as a discrepancy or contradiction, because we know there are seeds of plants that are smaller. Sources say the smallest seed is an orchid which is so small it can be as fine as dust.  
Answers to such criticisms: 1) It could have reference to seeds among the herbs (see vs. 32) in which case the black mustard seed is the smallest or very close.  
2) As far as the audience was concerned, it was the smallest. Among the plants of that region, the mustard seed would have been the smallest.  
3) Then there is the actual point Jesus is making, which we will get to.
- d. It grew into a tree that was capable of producing branches that birds could come and nest.  
Again, critics will say that a mustard plant is not a tree.  
1) And while true, among herbs it can grow quite large.  
2) In the region of Palestine, it is said that the mustard plant could grow to between 10-15 feet high. And in the fall, it would dry out and be capable of sustaining birds.
- e. In these 2 points we have given PLAUSIBLE answers to supposed contradictions or discrepancies in scripture. There may be other answers, and we may not know the actual answer, BUT if a plausible answer can be presented then the illustration/passage should be considered as valid.
- f. THOUGHT: When critics begin focusing on little details like these, what is their purpose? Are they teachable at all? Are they really interested in even CONSIDERING whether the Bible is the word of God? What about the overall message that is so clearly portrayed? What about the positive case that can be made for the Bible?  
If someone keeps picking apart every little detail, EVEN after you give them plausible answers, there may be a deeper problem than someone simply seeking clarification. There comes a time when you may need to move on.

**II. The parable of Leaven (13:33)**

- a. Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like – yet another point to be considered about this spiritual kingdom.
- b. A woman who hid leaven in 3 measures of meal. Again, this would be a practical process that every Palestinian (and most of the world) could relate to. If you bake, you know what yeast (a leavening agent) will do to a lump of bread. In fact, some leavening agents are so powerful that after the small lump of leaven has been introduced to the dough, you can take a small lump of leavened dough and introduce it to another batch of dough and this can be continued.

Sour dough breads are made with a starter, that after you use some to make your bread, you just add a few ingredients to the starter and wait, it is ready the next time you make that bread again. The sourdough starter from some San Francisco bread makes is well over a century old, and sold commercially.

- c. In our parable, in time the full lump of dough is leavened.

### III. The application –

- a. The Bible addresses both mustard seeds and leaven in other passages
  - i. Mustard seed – Matthew 17:20 – Jesus spoke about the faith of a mustard seed. A little faith can accomplish great things. That helps us understand our parable.
  - ii. Leaven – the Bible speaks about leaven, but typically in a negative way. The warning is against leaven – 1 Corinthians 5:6 – where Paul is warning concerning sinful influences – “a little leaven leavens the whole lump.”  
Similarly, Jesus in Matthew 16:6 – Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. They misunderstood Jesus thinking He was talking about buying their bread. Jesus spoke to get them to understand what He meant and they figured it out – Vs. 12. NOW, in our parable, the leaven is obviously not EVIL influence, but it is about influence. We can influence others for either good or bad – it just depends on what we do.
- b. Both parables address the way that the kingdom of God would grow.
  - i. Both parables introduce products that are VERY small, but in time, they grow into something large and useful.
  - ii. Jesus is addressing how the kingdom of heaven (God), which would begin on Pentecost, was going to start very small, and in relatively short time, grow until has an impact on all the world.
  - iii. It was foretold by the prophets – e.g. Isaiah 11:1 speaks of a rod (or shoot) would come out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch would grow out of his roots. We know this to be a reference to Jesus – who brought the message of the kingdom to the world. Isaiah 53:2 speaks (again of Jesus) of this one growing as a tender plant and a root out of dry ground.  
Daniel 2:34-35 as Daniel describes the dream of Nebuchadnezzar he notes a stone would strike the image and break it in pieces like chaff in the threshing floor. And the stone would become a great mountain that would fill the whole earth.  
Daniel 2:44 describes the result of this interpretation.
- c. The difference
  - i. The mustard seed is addressing its small beginning externally and its growth  
This is how the kingdom of heaven grew.
    1. It began on Pentecost with about 120 gathered (Acts 1:15) and the Holy Spirit falling upon the 12 apostles (Acts 1:26-2:2ff). Later that day we read of 3000 souls (Acts 2:41-42). Acts 2:46, daily disciples were being added to that number.
    2. In just a little time we read the number had reached about 5000 men (Acts 4:4)
    3. Acts records to the continued growth in Jerusalem and actions that cause the gospel to be carried throughout the whole world at that time. Within a few decades, Paul would write in Colossians 1:23 that the gospel had “been preached to every creature under heaven.” This shows the tremendous growth of this kingdom.
    4. Today, some 2000 years later it continues to grow.
  - ii. The leaven is addressing its small beginning, but how its growth will be influence.
    1. Jesus is not advocating a military takeover. He never intended that, even though that is what the disciples and Jews thought! John 18:36 makes it clear the nature of His kingdom. Luke 17:21 Jesus noted the Kingdom of God is within you.

2. BUT how would the kingdom grow? Through the influence of its believers. They would take the word and share it with other, who in turn would share it with others. Consider 2 Timothy 2:2 as an example of this.
  3. Furthermore, Jesus was saying the gospel would permeate society and have an influence on society wherever it went and took hold. For example:
    - In Ephesus, Acts 19:18-20 – as a result of the teaching of Paul, people gave up their witchcraft
    - Acts 17:6 – in Thessalonica, Jews caused trouble saying the Christians “have turned the world upside down”
    - Acts 6:7 - Even in Jerusalem, the Christian faith had great impact in time. Even many of the priests were obedient to the faith.
  4. And this is still true today. Your best teaching tool that you have is your influence. Without it you will get nowhere. That is really the impact of Matthew 5:13 as we are described as salt.
 

FURTHERMORE, let the seed of the word of God be planted into your good and honest heart and let it grow. In so doing, it will influence you for the better. Colossians 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”.

2 Peter 1:8 – concerning the growing character of our faith, if these things abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful...
- d. Are we willing to plant?
- i. One final observation. Whether dealing with a mustard seed or leaven, it first has to be introduced to its receptor – either soil or the lump of dough. We have the responsibility to plant the seed of the word of God – Matthew 28:19-20, 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.
  - ii. Understand that God intends for His kingdom to grow, BUT the method He has chosen for that to happen is through us. Every example of conversion, without exception, involved the teachings of men. God may have had a part in facilitating the meeting, but man always taught. God is counting on us to do our part. Will we?

And thus we see this pair of parables dealing with growth and influence. Let us resolve to plant that seed and be the good influence God intends for us to be. What about you? What type of seed are you planting? What type of leaven are you? Think about it!