

Parable of the Mustard Seed and Leaven

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Date: 14 July 2024

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[0 : 00] Last week we started a short summer series on some of the parables of Jesus, Jesus. So we're going to carry on with that for a few weeks. And parables are short stories that Jesus told in the Gospels that are both trying to reveal truth about the kingdom of God, but also conceal truth about the kingdom of God.

So Jesus uses similes and metaphors and allegory and symbol to try to communicate about something that's so deep and so mysterious and has so many dimensions to it.

And so one of the main points of the parables is to say something to us about the kingdom of heaven. So you see that right there in the first verse, he tells us that he told the disciples, he told them a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

And so sometimes the commentators will talk about the kingdom parables because most of the parables are about the kingdom, this idea of the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are synonyms across the gospel.

And so we learned something here about the kingdom, the kingdom of God. And these can be really tricky to interpret. One of the things you'll catch is that in the parables, Jesus is always taking the very ordinary things of normal day-to-day life to tell a story with a deep meaning.

[1 : 19] And for us, we're pretty distant from a lot of the things that he was talking about at the time, like sowing mustard seeds. Maybe some of you have done that. I've never done that. So we've got to connect to the context a little bit.

But one of the big keys is to see that there is a simplicity and ordinariness about the parables. And yet there's a real complexity about them. And so some commentators will talk about how did the parables just have one point?

Did they have two points, they have three points, did they have 10 points? Is every single character, every single aspect of the parable a symbol for something? Or are you just looking for one big idea? And really, the answer is yes. It's that you just have to read and just be a normal reader and try to think through and digest what is Jesus saying to us here when he gives us these couple little stories, these couple little parables.

But the thing I think that's important to say is I think that the reason Jesus uses parables, the reason that he doesn't ever in any of the gospels give you a 10-word, one sentence definition of the kingdom.

[2 : 27] Boy, I wish, we wish maybe that was there. But that's never there. There's never a time where Jesus says this is what the kingdom of God is. Here's the definition. And instead he gives you stories.

And I think that's because the kingdom is so deep, so rich, so multifaceted. It's got so many dimensions that it's only story that can really get across its meaning.

It's got so much depth to it. And that's why he gives it to us. There are all these words in Christianity. I wonder if this has happened to you where somebody says, what is grace?

What is sin? What is love? Can you give me a definition of love and you say, it's one of those words that you say so often in Christianity, but it's so difficult to actually define off the cuff.

What is the kingdom? What is the kingdom of God? I have a really difficult time trying to come up with a single sentence definition to say, this is what the kingdom of God is.

[3 : 26] And maybe you've had an experience like that. And yet the very first thing Jesus says in the gospel is the kingdom is at hand. And Patrick Shreiner, he read a helpful little book on the kingdom a past couple years, and he says the kingdom is the idea that stitches the whole Bible together.

The kingdom of God is the idea that stitches the whole of human history together. And while Jesus never gives us a direct definition, the theologians will tell you that you've got to have a kingdom concept, an idea of the kingdom of God to really understand the depths of the gospel and what Jesus is saying throughout the gospels.

Gordon Fee, one US commentator, he says something really extreme about it. I think it's probably a little too much, but this is what he says. He says, you cannot know anything about Jesus.

And I mean anything if you miss the kingdom of God. And I think that there's something to that I think it's probably better to say, we're missing so much about Jesus, so much about Christianity, so much about the gospel if we don't have an idea of the kingdom of God through the kingdom parables.

So what is it? That's our task. The next couple of weeks, we're going to look at some kingdom parables. I'm going to do that with you. And we're going to try to think what's the kingdom of God and the light of the kingdom parables.

[4 : 45] And so today we've got the mustard seed and the leaven. What's the kingdom of God? And he tells us three things. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is a tree, a mustard tree.

We'll spend most of our time on that. He tells us that the kingdom of God is a place for birds to nest. And he tells us the kingdom of God is yeast or leaven.

Now that's not helpful because that's me just repeating the metaphors he already gave us. But let's look at them and think about it and see what they mean. So first, the kingdom is a tree, it's very possible that Jesus, when he says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows up into the tallest of trees, could be holding a mustard seed in his hand in that moment or maybe looking at somebody that is sowing mustard seeds.

So they're probably present with an agricultural setting and they're watching it. And he says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds and yet it grows into the largest of all the trees.

Now people have come after Jesus for this. Christopher Hitchens mentioned this in a debate when he was alive because the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds and it is not the biggest of trees.

[6 : 02] But Jesus is simply saying something very obvious and that's that in agricultural context in the first century, Greco-Roman Empire in a Jewish setting in Palestine, the mustard seed was the smallest seed that people were sowing to plant crops with.

This is not, Jesus is not the first person to say this, we have extra biblical literature where people use this as a common ordinary phrase, the mustard seed, the smallest, but yet grows to the biggest tree.

So he's taking something that was ordinary speech in his day and making a point with it. And he immediately takes us into the context of farming and to the context of a garden.

So anytime that you take plant life and you arrange it and you cultivate it, you have a garden. A garden is just organized wilderness, right? A wilderness is unorganized wilderness and a garden is organized wilderness.

And so here we have a garden, that's the context he's taking us to. And like I said, it's tricky for us because we don't throw mustard seeds very often or I've never, some of you have I'm sure, compared seed sizes.

[7 : 08] But actually we could go do this, I think the trickier bit for us as we interpret this is where we don't immediately think like a first century Jewish person would think.

And they knowing their Old Testament much better than we do would immediately recognize, and this is what all the commentators say, that Jesus is connecting to Daniel chapter four when he says this.

So in the Old Testament and Daniel chapter four, and it also shows up a couple of times in Ezekiel, we have this picture of a tree, a great world tree, as people have called it. Nebuchadnezzar has a vision, the king of Babylon, and he sees in his dream a big giant tree that the whole world can see. And it connects heaven and earth, it stretches from earth all the way up into the heavens. And this is the key. Nebuchadnezzar says, in my dream I saw all the birds of the world coming to make their nest in its branches.

And all the animals coming and finding shade under its branches. And so Jesus is very, very probably working here with the vision of Daniel four. And Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel four goes and he gets Daniel to interpret the dream.

[8 : 20] And in the dream, the tree is chopped down and there's nothing left but a stump. And the image is that Nebuchadnezzar thought he was going to be the great world tree, that he would have the great kingdom, kingdoms being visualized as a tree, and all the communities of the world would come and find its nest under him.

But it gets chopped down and there's a stump left. And Daniel says there's going to be a better tree. There's going to be another tree. Yours is not the kingdom, the ultimate kingdom.

It's not the kingdom that's going to unite earth and heaven, which is what the great world tree of his vision did. Now the point is, let's bring it together, let's take some stock.

The point I think is really simple. Jesus is saying to us that the great world tree, the kingdom that will unite heaven and earth and bring people from every community in all the world, the birds of the air into its branches, that it's in your hearing, it's standing right in front of you.

That's what he's saying. That I and the kingdom I'm bringing is the great world tree from Daniel chapter four. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was building it, but now it's actually standing right in front of you and it's me.

[9 : 33] He's saying I am the tree and I am going to bring all the birds of the world into my branches. I'm going to connect heaven and earth.

That's what he's saying. That's what he's come to do. So the very first thing Jesus says in the gospel is the kingdom of God is at hand. It's here. I've brought it. The tree has come.

The fulfillment of the Old Testament. What should we think about this? What should we feel about this? What should we do with this? Let's apply it a little bit. What is the kingdom of heaven? What is the kingdom of God?

And the first thing I think we learn here that we have to say about Daniel four and the mustard tree, the picture Jesus gives us is that the kingdom of God is first got to be defined as that moment, that power when God himself brings heaven to earth.

When God himself comes down and brings heaven, heaven is just the presence of God. That's all heaven really is. It brings the presence of God into the world, into earth.

[10 : 33] And that's the kingdom. Jesus Christ condescended, God condescended and brought heaven to earth. It is the kingdom. It is his power. And one of the things I think he's saying is I am the tree.

I am the king. I am God. What should we do with that? There may have never been a more important time in world history to say something so simple as this, but when we learn about the kingdom of God in the Bible, it's really important just to say that it is the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of me.

It's really important, I think, to say it's the kingdom of Jesus. He's the tree, not the kingdom of you or us. I think that's one of the first big emphasis that comes subtly through and underneath this parable.

Let me put it this way. I heard one pastor say this recently. How do you approach, if there is, if there really is a divine king, one who has the power to bring heaven down to earth, how do you approach a king?

How do you approach God himself? How do you approach, how should you approach the divine king that has the power to bring the presence of God into this world?

[11 : 44] Heather and I, most of you that attend here will know, we had a baby recently. And this week, we had to go to maternity triage for a checkup unexpected.

And we were there for quite a long time and down at the royal, and they didn't really have much literature. I forgot to bring a book, and we were just sitting there. You wanted something to read. And they had all these medical pamphlets. I didn't want to read that. But they did. I did find two magazines, Good Housekeeping. So I picked up the Good Housekeeping magazines, and I read a couple of the articles in there.

And there were two articles that were both focused on a middle-aged woman and then a woman that had just turned 60 and both interviewing them, both public figures. I won't name them about kind of what they're experiencing, turning 45 and turning 60.

And this is what they said. One was a BBC TV presenter, the woman that turned 45. She said, I'm finally in my middle age learning to prioritize me, to enjoy and embrace my imperfections and my vices.

[12 : 52] I've now learned that I don't need to get rid of my imperfections and vices. I need to just use them in a way that will make me happy. And she talked about how I'm looking for religion and spiritual experiences in my middle age that fit me and fit my personality.

In the second article, the woman that turned 60, she said, now what I've learned, it's taken me this long into my older age. What I have to do with the time I have remaining is do and pursue whatever makes me happy.

I have to spend as much time being as happy as I possibly can be and all the time I have left. Now that's a wildly utilitarian approach, but it is the normal approach for most humans in 2024 in our great city, the city of Edinburgh, that we live life in order to chase happiness and to embrace ourselves and to do whatever it is that can make us as happy as much of the time as we can possibly imagine.

Now the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ comes into the world, Christianity comes into the world and flips that, it turns it upside down and says the exact opposite and says, you will never, never, ever be truly happy and find joy until you stop chasing your own personal happiness, until you stop running after your own little joys.

And he gives you an ethic, he said, well, think about it. He says, seek first the kingdom of God and you'll get everything. How does he say that, because what do you do if there really is a divine king?

[14 : 18] What do you do if there really is God come to earth? You just bow the knee, you kneel, you serve, you say it's not my kingdom, it's not my world, none of it belongs to me, I'm not here to chase my own happiness, I'm here to acknowledge what's real and to get behind meaning that's so much bigger than me and only then can you actually have joy.

Lewis, he always says it best, this is a cliché quote, but it's worth saying, I think, C.S. Lewis, he said, if you aim at heaven, you get earth thrown in, if you aim at earth, you don't get either.

And Jesus is saying, seek first the kingdom of God, because it is the kingdom of God, the great world tree that has the power to connect heaven and earth, because it's real, because it's the only place you can actually find meaning that can give you joy.

The second and final application here, and we'll move on, the final two points, two metaphors are very brief. He not only connects us to Daniel 4 to see that the kingdom of God is his kingdom, but he also tells us something new here that's not present in Daniel 4, and it's just simply what he says about the mustard seed, he says, this kingdom is growing into a great tree that can encompass the whole world, that will, but it starts off as the tiniest little seed.

So that's what he adds, that's not present in Daniel 4, that it's going to, it appears, in other words, to the people listening, like something so little and so small, so weak, in fact.

[15 : 54] And you think about Jesus' life, he's saying, I am the fulfillment of Daniel 4, I, how will bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. But you look at that moment, and he has a tiny little band of followers, fishermen, tax collectors, publicans, people with no public reputation of any kind.

Isaiah 53 and 55 tell us he was not something, he was not an extraordinary person to look at, he was not the tallest in the room. We know he came from a poor family, a carpenter's son, somebody who didn't have enough money to offer the proper sacrifices at the temple.

He didn't come into Jerusalem on a mighty steed, he came on a donkey. And what we're, what he's telling us here is the kingdom of God will be the great tree that encompasses the whole world, that connects heaven and earth, it is that power, but it starts off in the most unexpected way as a tiny little mustard seed.

And Paul picks up on this in 1 Corinthians 15. And in 1 Corinthians 15, 36, he said, he says that a seed goes down into the ground and experiences of type of death, the outer shell dies.

And in that death arises blossoms life from that death. And Paul is saying that about the most unexpected thing in all of world history, that God would become a wiggly little baby in order to get close to you, and that God the Christ, the God, man would die, the Lord of the universe would go down as a mustard seed.

[17 : 31] He would go into the ground, he would be buried. He would die in order to blossom into the great world tree. It's the most unexpected thing I think in all of human history it is.

There's a second century graffito, that's what the scholars call it, I don't know what that means, but graffito, it's a painting, it's a picture, it's an etching into a rock wall in Rome, in the city of Rome right now.

It's been cut out of a cave that it was found in and put in the Palatine Museum in Rome. And it's a picture of a man, a man, the body of a man, hung on a cross with a donkey head. And underneath it it says, Alex Zamanos worships his God. And so somebody had etched into a cave in the second century a painting of a Christian named Alex Zamanos, sorry, the God who Alex Zamanos worships, some Christian, making fun of him for worshiping this crucified criminal, picturing this blasphemous image of this donkey head. And you can go see it right now in the city of Rome. Everybody thought it was foolishness. Christ was crucified as a public criminal.

[18 : 46] And Paul tells us, he said, the Greeks said it was foolish to the Jews, it was a stumbling block. Today, one third of all the humans in the world follow this man, Jesus Christ, and say that he is God.

2.4 billion people. It was a tiny little mustard seed, and billions upon billions upon billions of people across world history have said, this is God.

He is God. He is the Christ. He went down into the ground in weakness, taking on our sin. He rose up to become the great tree, the kingdom of God himself, the power.

And I just want to move on by saying, it's important for us, especially if you've grown up in the church, to remember this was totally unexpected.

The Jews did not expect this. The Greeks did not expect this. The Romans did not expect this. This does not find precedence in mythologies.

[19 : 45] This came into the world as the most unexpected power, and that means that it's true. That means that it's real. It's so unexpected it has to be real. It couldn't have been written.

It couldn't have been made up. Sewn in weakness, raised in strength, the kingdom of God. What can you do with it? It's very simple. The call of the kingdom ethic is simply this, we've got to be willing to go down with him.

It's the opposite of every instinct we have in 2024 to chase our own happiness, to be great in and of ourselves, to build our own little kingdoms. And the gospel ethic is this, go down with him, die with him, be buried with him, say, be willing to say, I'm a sinner.

I can't build my own kingdom. I'm not in charge. I know that there is a God and it's not me. That's the one thing I'm sure about. And be willing to go down with him so you can be raised up with him so you can find real joy, real meaning, meaning that lasts.

But let's conclude with the final two metaphors, which are just little applications. Jesus says the kingdom of God is the great world tree, and then he tells us that it's a place where the birds can put their nests, and it's like leaven, that leaven is a whole loaf of bread.

[20 : 59] So the second one he gives us is that the kingdom of God is a place where birds can find a place to nest. Very simple, very brief.

It's just to say this. He's telling us here from Daniel 4 that when you realize the reality, the truth, and the objectivity of the kingdom of God, of the gospel, that Jesus really is the tree of life.

When you come to him, you find home. Coming to Christ is homecoming. It's a place, he is a place, the kingdom of God is a place where you can come and put your nest.

You can find rest. You can be at home. It's homecoming. He's also, as I've written, very famously said, one of the most famous quotes of Christian history outside the Bible, that you will not find rest. You will not find rest in your heart until you find rest with and in God, with Christ. And that's just to say that Jesus is telling us here that he himself is the place where you find home.

[22 : 01] Now, again, simple points. There is a God and we're not him. The kingdom of God is real and seeking it gives you meaning above all else in life.

And third, very simple idea from the Bible. We were made by God for God. And if we're not seeing that, if we're not leaning into that, if we're not chasing that, if we're not realizing that God's presence is our ultimate home, then we'll be homeless in our souls.

So if you're struggling today with a soul that maybe feels homeless, that you have success in your life, your circumstances are good, but your soul is not healthy.

It's not at rest. It's not at peace. It's because the only place that you can put your nest and it be secure and stable, the nest of your soul, is in the homecoming you find in the presence of the living God.

Being with God is home. And wherever God is, that's where you want to be. And Jesus is saying that when he comes, when he brings the power of heaven into earth at the point of his resurrection,

he is bringing the heavenly home into the earthly realm.

[23 : 13] That's the big vision of the kingdom. He's making this world his home and thus our true home, because our real home is being in the presence of Jesus Christ himself. Lastly, the leaven.

The last one he gives us is that this woman takes three ephas of flour. I had to go find this out, but three ephas of flour is about 24 kilos worth of bread.

So that makes about 24 kilos of bread, not flour, but bread. That's a lot of bread. And so Jesus is being extreme here with the amounts, because he's trying to get us to see something.

And a woman takes a tiny little pinch of last week's dough and sticks it into three ephas of flour and makes 50 pounds of bread out of it.

And the highlight here is that you only need a tiny little bit of last week's dough to fill up, to fill an entire, a huge amount of bread with leaven, to fill it up with air, air pockets, you know?

[24 : 15] The mother, isn't that what it's called? The last week's sourdough. The very literally sourdough, that's what he's talking about here. That's how they did it. They kept a little bit of the dough from the last time and stuck it into the new flour and it provided yeast, right?

The kingdom of God, so small in the beginning, permeates and fills the whole world. He's talking here about the future of the kingdom and he's saying, what looks so small at this moment, such a little band of followers, so weak, the cross itself.

It has power to fill the entire world. Not only with God's people, but boy, all throughout the Gospels and in the Old Testament, one of the interesting things we see is that the writers talk about the leaven, you remember the phrase, maybe the leaven of the Pharisees.

Typically in the Bible, leaven is negative. So it's sin. Adam and Eve's sin, the leaven of human sin, just a little bit of it destroyed the whole world.

It filled up everything. And Jesus in this moment is taking that metaphor that we see from Genesis forward and flipping it on its head and saying, now that the kingdom of God has come, a little bit of leaven, the cross, something that seems so foolish and weak, will fill the world with grace and mercy.

[25 : 37] It'll change everything. The leaven of Christ is so much greater than the leaven of the Pharisees. The leaven of Christ is so much more powerful than the leaven of our sin. That though our sin destroys and devastates the world, our sins, there are many, His mercy is more.

It's bigger, it's greater. His leaven will cleanse in a way that is well beyond the destruction our sin has brought. And that means that when He comes again, the new heavens and the new earth will be so much greater than we could have ever imagined.

The tree, the tree that is coming. Now let's close final word. If you think about what He's taught us here, what's the, and somebody asked you, what is the kingdom of God?

Here's what you can say. The kingdom of God is the power of Christ come down into the world. It's the people, the birds of the heavens that find, the birds of the air that find their place, the nest in His home, and it's His permeating presence.

Now I don't like alliteration very much, and I usually don't do it, but what is the kingdom of God? It's the power of heaven coming to earth. Jesus Christ Himself, it's the people that God is building into the great tree that is His kingdom, and it is His permeating presence to fill the world with mercy and peace.

[26 : 56] It's His power, the people, and His permeating presence. What do you do with it? This week, as we step into the Lord's Supper, and as we step into Monday, I think Jesus is inviting us here to kill every desire, to mortify every desire right now in our hearts, to say, I want to be great, I just want to be happy, I want to build a life, a personal kingdom of happiness, and then said to be small and to go down in weakness and to say, my sins there are many, His mercy is more, it's greater.

And to acknowledge and believe and trust that what was sown in weakness in the middle of history was raised in strength, and that that's the very ethic, the very way we receive the gospel, the very way we step into the world in the light of the gospel, to go out in weakness, to actually find strength, to go down like a little mustard seed, to grow up into a great tree in our lives.

When you believe that, when you embrace that reality, that power, that gospel, remember the parables are stories, and that the truth of this parable becomes your own story.

What's the story? The story is this, that in the beginning of world history, God put us humans in a garden, and there in the center was God's presence represented through the tree of life.

And when we chose to eat from the tree of death, the tree of life, the presence of God was taken away from us. We were exiled. And in the middle of the Old Testament, God said through a vision, there's going to be a great tree, another tree of life.

[28 : 29] And it's going to come and fill the world with the presence of God. And in the middle of history, in the gospels, the tree of life himself came and said, the kingdom is at hand, it's standing right in front of you. But the tree of life because of our sin hung upon the cursed tree of death.

And when he rose, he blossomed forth, the tree of life that we see in Revelation 22, the tree of life standing in the middle of the new Garden of Eden, himself with us, the birds of the air gathered around him.

That's the meaning of world history, and it's your story. It's the meaning of your life, it's joy, it's peace. And that's the meaning of the meal that we're now about to celebrate.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the parables, and we thank you for the meaning of the kingdom. We long, Lord, to live in a kingdom of peace and justice and mercy.

And we know we don't have that in the kingdoms of this world. So we look today to the mercy and forgiveness we find in the mustard seed of the cross so that we can have the resurrection, the great tree.

[29 : 33] Lord, we look to you today and just say, we need you, Lord, we need you every hour we need you. And we need today to be healed from our self-centeredness and our focus on building our personal little kingdoms.

And so right now, as we come to this great meal, we ask that you would refocus our hearts on the true meaning of life, the kingdom of God. And we pray this in Christ's name.

Amen.