

## The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

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### Parables

- Stories to illustrate a spiritual truth.
- Greek parabolē – ‘placing beside’ – an analogy – parallel - comparison
- A bridge from the familiar to the unknown.
- An apparently obvious meaning on the surface but with a spiritual element somewhat obscured
- Meant to be intriguing to encourage hearers to ask questions; the spiritual meaning revealed to those intrigued enough to ask and hungry enough to want to know what Jesus was really saying
- Different to an allegory which has hidden meaning in every detail

Read **Matt 13:31-35** – (Also in Mark 4:30-35 and Luke 13:18-22)

Matthew groups 7 parables here in ch13 (of about 40 in the gospels).

### “The kingdom of heaven is like .....”

- The kingdom of God in Mark & Luke
- We usually think of a kingdom as geographical /territory – UK – Israel in OT – Christendom -
- A kingdom is wherever a king’s rule/authority/control/jurisdiction is effective.
- Jesus at start of ministry - Matt 4:17 – “*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*” – within reach! Confusing to Jewish audience; they were God’s chosen people; to them Israel = God’s Kingdom.
- Nominal Christianity – in name only; Christendom dating from Constantine
- Luke 17:20 - *Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation,<sup>21</sup> nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”*  
– unseen – within you!
- Kingdom of God is not related to territory but is wherever God is received as king – wherever his jurisdiction is submitted to – wherever he is allowed to rule.
- If we submit to God, he imparts his kingdom within us by the presence of his Spirit – Amazing!

### What is it that Jesus wants to convey about the Kingdom of God?

- **Firstly** - Like a mustard seed – generally taken to be ‘black mustard’ - very small seeds (1-2mm dia.) – amazing growth to about 3m high – smallest seed/ largest plant cultivated by Jews to spice food. No other cultivated plant gave this increase in size.
  - My experience of growing tomatoes – 80 cherry toms per plant.
  - What is Jesus saying? Not allegory so meaning is what would be most obvious to his listeners.
  - From insignificant to very significant. Humble beginnings to great significance.
  - Grows imperceptibly, unnoticed but suddenly becomes apparent.
  - Think of Jesus’ disciples as a small bunch of ordinary guys, then think of the global significance of the church of Christ today. The Kingdom of God growing.
  - Jesus “*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Unimpressive start but can’t be ignored in the fullness of time.
  - Personal> local/community> national> global
  - Are the birds significant? – most obvious meaning - providing refuge within its branches.

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- **Secondly** - Like yeast (or leaven) mixed into dough.
  - Yeast are single-celled fungi. Yeast's function in baking is to ferment sugars present in the flour or added to the dough. This fermentation gives off carbon dioxide and ethanol. The carbon dioxide is trapped within tiny bubbles and results in the dough expanding, or rising. (Ethanol evaporates off during baking).
  - My experience of making bread rolls – 7g yeast in 750g flour = 1%
  - ...until it worked through the dough ... a small amount permeates the whole and has an effect beyond anything else Jesus' listeners would have experienced.
  - Very different result if you forget the yeast – flat/hard vs. light/fluffy texture.
  - ... a large amount of dough..... I get 16 rolls from about 1 litre of flour. Jesus is talking about over 20 times that amount = over 300 rolls - enough for a whole village!
  - So what is Jesus saying?
    - The Kingdom of God is pervasive, spreading throughout. It doesn't just affect the individual but permeates beyond, affecting large groups of people, beyond family boundaries, giving spiritual sustenance way beyond the family of God, benefiting society as a whole!
    - The church has had an amazingly beneficial impact on our society over the centuries – education, health, law.

### **Other references to yeast in scripture** may come to mind

- All other references are negative or connected with sin or evil.
  - Ex 12:15 – Festival of unleavened bread – expulsion from Israel if all yeast not removed from houses
  - Matt 16:5-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1 – after the feeding of the 4000, Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and of Herod – the insidious nature of their corrupt and misguided doctrines and their opposition to Jesus.
  - 1 Cor 5:6 – Paul concerning the damaging effect of an incestuous relationship in the church that wasn't being dealt with.
- Should all references to yeast therefore be regarded as concerning sin or evil?
  - Allegorical interpretations of these parables:-
    - Christianity becoming a state religion; birds=evil ref. parable of sower i.e. corruption and evil in the official church (e.g. the inquisition)
    - The woman = false prophetess in Revelation; leaven = evil doctrine
  - But these parables are about the Kingdom of God, not the nominal Christianity of so-called 'Christian' countries.
  - Yeast does not equate directly with evil or sin itself but rather, illustrates it's insidious, permeating effect.
- Radically different interpretations, but these helped me recognise that anything of a spiritual nature, that touches us deeply, can have an almost imperceptible permeating effect that we won't notice until it begins to dominate our lives – for good – or for evil.
- A spiritual continuum – any input to our lives at a spiritual level will ultimately bring results out of all proportion to the starting point – godly or ungodly. Ultimately incredible hope or massive danger!
  - Gal 6:7-10
  - Cultivating faith in God and positive spiritual inputs to our lives will bring amazingly positive benefit to us - and all around us.
  - Conversely, allowing progressively negative spiritual attitudes to grow in us ultimately brings tremendously destructive impact to people's lives – and to those around them.

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### **Application**

Jesus is saying that if we make the tiniest amount of room for the Kingdom of God in our lives, it will grow almost imperceptibly within us, but ultimately will grow steadily more and more significant until it begins to branch out and provide spiritual refuge and spiritual food, not only for ourselves, but for others – an extending to those currently outside the family of God.

Our growth as Christians begins with a moment of faith that is so intangible that we hardly know if it will have a real impact in our lives. Think of the first moment you responded to Christ. All it takes is a willing heart to go God's way, trusting him to lead us – he does the rest – he makes it grow.

But, if the Kingdom of God is to come to fullness in our lives, we have to co-operate with God.

- A seed grows best if it is cultivated, watered and fertilised.
- Yeast works best if some sugar is added to the flour to feed the yeast, and if the dough is put in a warm place to speed up the yeast's action.

I sincerely believe that developing good, godly habits is vital to Christian growth. With them, our lives will move god-wards along the spiritual continuum – the kingdom of God will grow like the mustard seed and pervade us like the yeast.

Danger - Failure to put good, godly habits in place in our lives will result in movement in the other direction, away from God, with faith slowly extinguishing like a coal removed from a fire.

Scripture makes clear that our default position is sin.

- Default = failure to take action; not doing something that's necessary.
- Rom 3:23 – *'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,'*
- The first thing Jesus said when he started teaching the people was "Turn from your sins – the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17)
- Before taking our first tiny step of faith step towards God, we have to acknowledge our starting position - that we are sinners - incapable of breaking out of this default position on our own – in desperate need of God's help – which he gladly offers us in Christ!
- That's our starting position – but it also continues to be our default position spiritually if we don't co-operate with and cultivate the kingdom of God – his rule, the presence of his Spirit – in our lives.
- Sinful attitudes permeate us insidiously like yeast. If we don't stay close to God and cultivate the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, responding to his convicting us about sin, sinful attitudes will slowly take hold and work to undermine faith and destroy the positive character attributes he brings.
- Bad spiritual habits:
  - Criticism;
  - Unforgiveness> resentment> bitterness
  - Greed; selfish ambition
  - Sexual sin

### **Developing good, godly habits – How?**

- We're not much good at effort – we flag! But establishing good, godly habits so that they become part of our lives, – then it becomes normal for us - odd if we don't do them.
- Eph 5:18 "Be filled with the Spirit"; DL Moody – we leak!
- Establish a regular quiet time that fits into a routine – even if it means getting up a bit earlier. Even just one or two days a week are better than rarely or not at all.

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- Taking time out to talk to God about what's going on in your life and then listening for his promptings as to what action to take (prayer!).
- Willingness to turn away from attitudes that aren't in line with godly character (sin!) as soon as we become aware of them (repentance).
- Learning about godly character by getting to know God the father and Jesus better - by feeding on what he's revealed to us about himself from his Word – the Bible.
- Meeting regularly together for mutual encouragement and to learn from one-another and to worship our amazing, loving and wonderful God. Sundays – midweek – prayer meetings - make it the norm!

Not 'law' that makes us feel guilty if we miss it, but a new normality that makes it far more likely that it'll happen.

If we **don't** do this, our spiritual life will progressively leak and we will return to default.

If we **do** – the kingdom of God will progressively impact our lives, our church life. We will see the transformation that all people desperately need - in our community – our nation – other nations!

As we are transformed by the living presence of God within us, let's reach out and become the branches that those currently outside the kingdom can find rest and restoration within!