

Chapter 52: The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Matthew 13:31–35

In the parable of the sower, Jesus taught about the different kinds of hearts who receive the gospel in differing degrees. Then, in the parable of the weeds, Jesus exhorted his hearers to persevere, even when surrounded by vast amounts of evil that remain in the world until the final judgment. In both of these parables, Jesus explained why the kingdom of heaven does not seem to be growing at the speed we might expect, given its divine power. By the end of those parables, Jesus' hearers might have reasonably wondered: "What, then, can we really expect from such a kingdom?" In the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in Matthew 13:31–35, Jesus teaches that *the kingdom of heaven will come by surprise*.

Small Beginning (Matt. 13:31–32)

While both the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven emphasize the surprising growth of the kingdom, they emphasize different aspects of that truth. First, in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus explains that the kingdom may start out small and insignificant, but that it will certainly—albeit surprisingly—reach its full maturity. Therefore, as Calvin writes, followers of Jesus ought "not to be offended and turn back on account of the mean beginnings of the Gospel."¹ So, Jesus explains through this parable, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (vv. 31–32).

Unlike the parable of the soils/sower and the parable of the weeds, Jesus does not give us his own explanation for this parable.² The general idea of the growth of the kingdom from a small form to its fullest expression is clear, but commentators have differed on the interpretation of some of the details. For example, some believe that the mustard seed is a reference to Jesus, "for the entire kingdom grows from him as the King."³ Others, however, believe that the sower in this parable refers to Jesus, as in the previous parable (Matt. 13:37).⁴ Both of these interpretations end up substantially at the same place, but I tend to agree with the interpretation of Jesus as the sower in this parable. Jesus sometimes uses the same elements in different ways in his different parables, so that the seeds of the previous parable make different references (Matt. 13:19, 38). Nevertheless, we should remember that the interpretation of the "one who sows the good seed" as "the Son of Man" from the parable of the

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:126.

² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 552.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 528.

⁴ e.g., Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 552.

weeds comes directly after the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:37). This gives a strong suggestion that we should interpret the sowers in all three parables as a reference to the Son of Man.

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus focuses on the organic connection between the seed and the tree that grows from the seed (v. 32).⁵ The kingdom begins in the smallest ways, as symbolized by the mustard seed which “is the smallest of all seeds” (v. 32a). While technically even smaller seeds exist, people in the ancient world commonly referred to the mustard seed as the smallest seed—not as the final result of a scientific survey, but as a proverbial expression.⁶ France is surely correct when he writes, “Only a pedant would worry about whether there are in fact any smaller seeds or spores!...But the point of the parable does not depend on its botanical accuracy; parables often exaggerate for effect.”⁷ Even today, modern people still talk about a “sunrise” or a “sunset,” despite the fact that we have known for hundreds of years that the movement of the sun in the sky is not because of the sun, but because of the rotation of the earth.

Importantly, the language of the growth of a tree is Old Testament language that describes kingdoms in three places.⁸ In Ezekiel 31, the Lord speaks of the Assyrian empire as a tree in whose branches the birds of the air nested:

[3] Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds. [4] The waters nourished it; the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field. [5] So it **towered high above all the trees of the field**; its boughs grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots. [6] **All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs**; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations. [7] It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant waters. [8] The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; neither were the plane trees like its branches; no tree in the garden of God was its equal in beauty. [9] I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches, and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God. (Ezek. 31:3–9)

Nevertheless, because Assyria became proud of her greatness, the Lord declares that he handed her over to the nations to cut down the tree, so that the whole tree went down to Sheol (Ezek. 31:10–18).

The Lord makes a similar comparison to the Babylonian empire in a dream of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:

[10] The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. [11] **The tree grew and became strong, and its top**

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 365.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 352.

⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 527.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 220; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 526–27.

reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. [12] Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and **the birds of the heavens lived in its branches**, and all flesh was fed from it. (Dan. 4:10–12)

Once again, because of the pride of this tree (i.e., the pride of the empire and her emperor), the Lord commanded that the tree should be destroyed: “Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit” (Dan. 4:14).

Finally, in Ezekiel 17, the Lord prophesies about the kingdom of the Messiah through imagery of a tree:

[22] Thus says the Lord GOD: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. [23] On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. **And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.** [24] And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; **I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree**, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.” (Ezek. 17:22–24)

Here, the Lord insists that he alone cuts down high trees, and that he alone establishes low trees—that is, that he builds and breaks down kingdoms. Jesus builds on these comparisons for his imagery of the small mustard seed growing into a large tree.

By this imagery, then, Jesus is making several points: (1) the kingdom will come from very small beginnings; (2) the kingdom will certainly grow to become a very large, mature tree; and (3) the kingdom will ultimately be a blessing to the nations, who are symbolized by the birds of the air nesting in its branches. The attention that Jesus gives here to the small size of the mustard seed furthermore suggests that Jesus is speaking about the growth of the *visible* kingdom of heaven in the world.⁹ That is, this is a reference to the multiplication of churches of professing believers and their children throughout increasingly more tribes, languages, peoples, and nations. This improbable spread of the kingdom of heaven from obscurity to an influential cloud of witnesses throughout the world will result in the praise and glory of God, who accomplishes far more than we can think or imagine.¹⁰

⁹ So Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 565; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 529–30.

¹⁰ If the aspect of Christ's kingdom be despicable in the eyes of the flesh, let us learn to raise our minds to the boundless and incalculable power of God, which at once created all things out of nothing, and every day raises up things that are not, (1 Corinthians 1:28,) in a manner which exceeds the capacity of the human senses. Let us leave to proud men their disdainful laugh, till the Lord, at an unexpected hour, shall strike them with amazement.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:126–27.)

Secret Development (Matt. 13:33)

If the parable of the mustard seed focused on the visible, outward, external growth of the kingdom, the parable of the leaven focuses on the invisible, secret, internal growth of the kingdom:¹¹ “He told them another parable. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened’” (v. 33). The word “hid” is an important word appearing significantly in other points through the Gospel of Matthew, where the kingdom was hidden “from the wise and intelligent (11:25), and given to the disciples only as a ‘secret’ which is not available to others (13:11), the ‘hidden things’ of v. 35; note also the hidden treasure of v. 44.”¹² Whereas the mustard seed starts with a small (i.e., nearly invisible) seed but eventually grows into a tree so large that the birds of the air nest in its branches, the leaven is hidden from beginning to end. One may see the effects of the leaven on the dough, but the leaven itself remains hidden.

There may be another important suggestion through the amount of flour (three measures, or three seahs) of flour. This was a huge amount of flour, “enough to feed 150 people.”¹³ In Hebrew measurements, three *seahs* make an *ephah* in the same way that three feet make a yard. In three Old Testament stories, three seahs/one ephah of flour is prepared to make a great feast: in Genesis 18:6, when three visitors (Yahweh himself) visit Abraham; in Judges 6:19, when the angel of Yahweh visits Gideon to ask him to lead an army against the Midianites; and in 1 Samuel 1:24, when formerly-barren Hannah the flour as a part of a sacrifice in order to consecrate her miraculously conceived son, Samuel, at the temple.¹⁴ Notably, each of these feasts involve the visitation of the Lord to his people.¹⁵ Here, Jesus using imagery appropriate for a visitation from the Lord.

Throughout the parables so far, Jesus has presented himself as the one who has come to sow seed(s); here, though, the woman leavening the lump may refer to the church who sows the leaven of God’s word through preaching.¹⁶ The main point of the passage is to emphasize the work—both the importance of the work as well as its invisibility. The kingdom of God will grow visibly, but, more importantly, it will also grow invisibly in order to lead many to know and love Christ. It is especially important to note that this parable is not (as some commentators have suggested) a reference to the leavening of false teaching in the church (Matt. 16:6).¹⁷

¹¹ “...the two parables of verses 31-33...are a pair, the first referring to the outward, the second to the inward growth of the kingdom of heaven. These two cannot be separated: one might say that it is because of the invisible principle of eternal life, by the Holy Spirit planted in the hearts of the citizens of the kingdom and increasingly exerting its influence there, that this kingdom also expands visibly and outwardly, conquering territory upon territory.” Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 565.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 527.

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 390.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 567.

¹⁵ In the case of Hannah, the Lord “remembered” her to conceive Samuel (1 Sam. 1:19), but the Lord “visited” her so that she conceived other children (1 Sam. 2:21).

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 530–31.

¹⁷ “The argument advanced in favor of the latter position, namely, that everywhere else in Scripture leaven indicates something bad, breaks down immediately. One could, for example, say that in Scripture ‘the serpent’ is generally associated with, and/or is a symbol of, evil (Gen. 3:13; Ps. 58:4; 140:3; Prov. 23:32; Isa. 27:1; Matt.

Surprise Ending (Matt. 13:34–35)

At the conclusion of these two parables, Matthew offers another few words of summary that function the same way as Jesus' words of explanation in Matthew 13:10–17. First, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus' teaching ministry to the crowds was entirely shrouded in parables: "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable" (v. 34). While Jesus did occasionally teach the crowds in forms other than parables, what this word of explanation tells us is that, "even when [Jesus' teaching is] not cast in a form we would recognize as *parabolē*, [it] remains elusive, challenging, and unsettling, leaving his audience in a dilemma as to what response they should make. And that is what parables do, when given without explanation."¹⁸ In other words, Matthew is reminding us of Jesus' own stated purposes for the parables: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matt. 13:11).

To reinforce the point, Matthew insists that Jesus' teaching "was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world'" (v. 35). Here, Matthew quotes Psalm 78:2, which gives an extended account of God's dealings with Israel. Matthew is not saying that Psalm 78 should be interpreted as one of the unique and direct prophetic predictions about Christ that Matthew cites elsewhere, when Jesus does something to fulfill some aspect of the Old Testament.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there is an important connection between Psalm 78 and Jesus. Matthew is quoting from the opening lines of Psalm 78 to say that Jesus is doing something very similar to what Asaph did in that psalm: "though the history of the Jews, which Asaph relates, is well-known, the psalmist selects the historical events he treats and brings them together in such a way as to bring out things that have been riddles and enigmas 'from of old.' The pattern of history is not self-evident; but the psalmist will show what it is really all about."²⁰ In that psalm, Asaph shows how all of human history has moved toward the establishment of David as kind to shepherd God's people (Ps. 78:67–72). In the same way, Jesus is showing explaining the secrets of the kingdom through these parables—secrets that explain God's purposes in all of human history to build a kingdom for the ultimate Davidic Messiah, Jesus Christ himself. Just as the Davidic kingdom was the surprise ending of Israel's history, so Jesus' kingdom is the surprise ending of all history. Yet, while these parables unveil these secrets to the disciples, they keep those secrets to remain hidden from the crowds.

23:33; II Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2). But what shall we do with Num. 21:8, cf. John 3:14, where the serpent obviously represents the Son of man; and with Matt. 10:16, which admonishes us to be 'keen as the serpents, guileless as the doves'? It is the context in each case that must decide the symbolical meaning, if there be any such meaning. In the present case the yeast clearly represents the kingdom or kingship of heaven, that is, the rule of Christ gladly acknowledged in heart and life, and this is something very good indeed!" (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 568.)

¹⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 530.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:129.

²⁰ Carson, "Matthew," 368.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the smallness of the mustard seed emphasize in relation to the kingdom of heaven (v. 32)? What does the final tree represent, especially in light of the symbolic meaning of a tree in Old Testament prophetic literature (Ezek. 17:22–24; 31:3–9; Dan. 4:10–12)? Why does Jesus emphasize the visible and external growth of the kingdom? How do we see the visible growth of Jesus' kingdom today in the world?
2. What does Jesus mean when he says that the woman “hid” the leaven in flour (v. 33)? Where else does Jesus talk about the secret, hidden nature of the kingdom? Where else in the Old Testament do we see people preparing three measures/seahs (or, one ephah) of flour for a feast? What do those stories have in common? What does the parable of the leaven emphasize about the invisible and spiritual growth of the kingdom?
3. Why does Jesus say nothing to the crowds without a parable (v. 34; see Matt. 13:10–17)? Why does Jesus quote from Psalm 78? What does that psalm tell us about God's purposes in history to build a kingdom for his messiah, David? How does that winding road of history incorporate great acts of God's salvation and deliverance, as well as the sin of the people? How does the theme of that psalm relate especially to these two parables?
4. What is the visible church? What is the invisible church? How does the visible church relate to the invisible church? How do the visible and the invisible church relate to the kingdom of heaven? How do these parables talk about the interconnected growth of the visible and the invisible church? What do these parables teach us about the importance of the church? What surprises you or corrects your own thinking about and/or relationship toward the church?