

The Parables of Jesus

Mustard Seed and the Leaven

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

So you are sitting in the coffee shop talking with your friend, who happens to be an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi. He knows the Torah and the whole OT forwards and backwards. He reads them fluently in the Hebrew. You start to tell him about Jesus and your belief that He is the Messiah of Israel. He says that it is simply not possible that Jesus is the Messiah. He cites you a bunch of passages from the OT about the kingdom that is to be ushered in when Messiah comes.

You see, he says, the Messiah destroys our enemies, he exalts Israel, he liberates the world from war, oppression and violence. He judges the wicked and ushers in an era of universal peace. It's quite apparent that Jesus didn't do that – so he cannot be the Messiah.

So you say: let me go get a refill on this cup of coffee – I'll be right back. You use the time to think over a response. You sit back down and tell him: look there are other passages about a suffering Messiah, a crucified Messiah, the lowly servant of Isaiah who will not break a bruised reed or extinguish a smoldering wick. What the Messiah does first and foremost is atone for our sins, you say – and through that – eventually – the other passages will come to fruition.

Of course, he disputes your interpretation of these passages but, he is a charitable man and he realizes that Christians see these texts differently. He politely agrees to disagree, and, like the vast majority of Jews in the world, he remains quite skeptical of the claim that in Jesus of Nazareth the promised kingdom has come.

If you translate that conversation to a first century coffee house in Palestine you will have a good idea of the question behind today's text. The Jews of that day, including the disciples, have their doubts about Jesus' claim that in His life and preaching the promised Kingdom of God has arrived. Even the great John the Baptist had to ask, well into Jesus' ministry: are you the One we are expecting or should we look for another? And I think it's fair to say John knew his OT. John, in his imprisonment is well aware that Jesus' ministry, like his, is facing fierce opposition.

It looks like we have an itinerant rabbi who is unable to even garner the support of Israel. And to the powers that be, he looks like a confused prophet to a

defeated people in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. I mean, the weakness of refusing to even confront, at this point, the Roman overlords. The sheer ineffectualness of sowing and “talking” about the kingdom. Enough with all this ‘the kingdom of God’ has arrived stuff. Where is the victory and the promised international glory?

So we are not dealing here with a peripheral issue. Jesus is quite clear that the central fact of His ministry is that He ushers in the Kingdom of God. He realizes that this IS a cosmic claim. We often don’t get this stress on the kingdom because of our deep individualism. If we are asked: what is the central fact about Jesus we would probably say that he died for our sins.

And as crucial as that is, Jesus sees it as a means to the end of bringing in the Kingdom of God, the civilization of God, the culture of the Lord. His central message is not repent for the atonement is at hand; its repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. The atonement is to bring forth the reconciliation of Jew and Gentiles, the healing of the nations, the liberation of the whole creation, the summing up, as Paul says of all things in Christ; things in heaven and things on earth. Jesus is quite aware of the utterly revolutionary nature of His claims. And, more importantly for our purposes today, He is aware of the possible objections. So he gives us these two twin parables.

I. The Mustard Seed

Let’s look first at the parable of the mustard seed beginning in v.31. Matthew starts with: He put another parable before them. In Mark’s gospel there is a more elaborate introduction. There Jesus says: With what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? Mark makes it clear that Jesus is almost thinking out loud of a way to explain the apparently anomalous situation. He knows the Kingdom is a many-faceted thing. The Kingdom of God is LIKE a lot of things – some of them are the things your Orthodox Jewish friend cherishes.

But these parables are designed to point out some other aspects of the kingdom. Aspects first century, and modern, Jews (and many Christians) need to hear. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. A jarring image indeed! Maybe like an oak or a cedar seed would be more acceptable, or preferably like a conquering army – but a mustard seed? In v.32 Jesus continues: it is the smallest of all seeds. The mustard seed was proverbially an image of smallness among the Jews. Thus, Jesus could say: if you have faith as a mustard seed you can move a mountain.

Jesus is stressing the tiny-ness, the weakness, the apparent ineffectualness of the beginning of the Kingdom in His ministry. Ineffectiveness of what we do here: no public policies are changed, no powers seem to care, etc. It is the smallest of

all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree.

Now mustard seeds produce shrubs, but can, sometimes, grow to 6 to 10 feet. So they produce a small tree. But botany is not the point here. The point is simply that the tiny ineffectual seed produces extensive growth and that there is an organic connection between the tiny beginning and the wonderful growth of the plant. And as it comes to maturity the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. This evokes numerous OT images where kingdoms are likened to trees. In Ezekiel 17 Israel is planted and becomes a lofty cedar and the birds, probably representing Gentile nations, come under its shade.

So the point is clear: the kingdom is starting small but its growth will be great and the nations will be drawn into its orbit.

II. The Leaven

The second parable, the parable of the leaven, makes much the same point. Only here the emphasis is not on extensive growth but intensive transformation. The text is in v.33: He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast/leaven that a woman took. The first parable has a man as the sower. This one has a woman as the baker. Now both the man and the woman have been given allegorical interpretations throughout the history of the church.

The man who sows the mustard seed has been seen as Christ. The progress of the seed as the progress of his life. The woman has been seen as Mary or perhaps the church. But neither the man nor the woman are the point of the parables. The point in both is the PROCESS that takes place by sowing or baking.

It is possible; I think it's likely, that Jesus does this man/woman alternation in twin parables simply to appeal to both genders and the common practices and chores of the people in his teaching. In the twin parables in Luke 15 of the lost sheep and the lost coin the sheep is sought out by a man and the coin is sought out by a woman.

So the woman here takes leaven. Now leaven is often used negatively in the Bible as a type of evil, and thus as an illustration of how evil spreads and permeates. The Israelites had to eliminate leaven from their homes for the Passover. Paul uses leaven as an image of sin in 1 Cor 5. But here it is clearly being used positively. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven. We need to let context determine the meaning of the image. The fact that Satan is called a lion does not mean the Jesus can't also, in a different context, be called a lion.

So here the woman takes leaven (fermenting dough kept back from the previous batch) and hides it in (three measures) a large amount of flour. So Jesus' kingdom is not only tiny, it is hidden. Like the treasure we looked at last week. So she hides the relatively small amount of leaven in the large batch until ALL was leavened. Here the note of intensive transformation is struck. The kingdom, small and hidden as it is, permeates the whole batch and transforms it. The kingdom WILL permeate all of life. So the point of these parables is clear. The kingdom HAS come. And Jesus affirms that it HAS come in a weak and small and hidden way. But it is destined for ultimate dominion and the transformation of the world.

Yet, a caution is due here. You can over-read these parables and think that Jesus is teaching some evolutionary removal of all evil from the world. But the parable of the wheat and the tares, which we looked at two weeks ago, should give us pause here. While these texts DO teach that the kingdom will gradually advance, it's clear that it won't be in a straight line. These texts don't teach that things will simply get better and better. Evil will grow side by side with the good until the end of the age. The kingdom of heaven is LIKE these things, but it is not EXACTLY like baking bread or a growing plant. That is the very nature of analogies. A is like B in some ways, but is also unlike B in other ways.

The key points are that extensive growth and internal transformation will come. There is a deep and real connection between the weak beginning and the glorious end. In partial fulfillment of this parable we have often seen this type of process in the history of the church. This confused and questioning band of Jesus' disciples would turn the world upside down and the gospel would conquer the Roman Empire. They did not eliminate evil from the world, but the plant has grown large and the leaven has worked to transform. Christianity in China had about 1 million adherents in 1900 and today, in spite of horrific conditions for growth in the past century, there are about 100 million Christians in China.

Christianity is, as you all know, growing explosively in sub-Saharan Africa. Evangelical Christianity is growing rapidly in once Catholic Latin America. The kingdom HAS come and in the interval before its fullness it is doing its silent unheralded work. And it is precisely because we know the kingdoms work and we see its growth and leavening power that we can be assured of its final triumph. As Isaiah and Habakkuk both put it: the earth WILL be full of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. But for that to happen, Jesus must suffer and die as a grain of wheat sown into the earth, that He might draw all men to Himself.

This is Jesus' answer to your Orthodox Jewish friend. It is not his complete answer. But it is an answer that goes a long way toward integrating ALL the OT texts on the Messiah and His kingdom. The texts on suffering and humiliation, and the texts on world transforming glory.

So what Jesus is doing here is laying down a staunch challenge to merely human perception. Things are not as they appear. They certainly are not as the media portrays them. These texts are a call to patient endurance. Farmers and bakers learn to be patient. They sow and they hide leaven but the growth happens, wonderfully, almost miraculously, without their aid. And so we are called to sow, to hide the leaven of the kingdom in whatever situation God has called us to. And He will leaven – that is, He will magnify, our small works of service far beyond all human perception. (kindness, encouragement, service, a meal, hospitality, mercy, evangelical witness – dawn of everlasting results)

So, beloved, give yourselves to the Kingdom of God in the sure hope and confidence that it will come forth in all its extensive and intensive glory. Amen.

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