

Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: Matthew 13: 31-35
Pastor John E. Dubler

From the pulpit of a fisherman's boat Jesus taught the crowds who were standing on the beach. The multitudes included the sincere, the skeptical, the savvy and the serpents. They were not of one heart, nor of one mind toward the miracle worker from a few miles away in Nazareth. After relating the Parable of the Tares and Wheat (though not its explanation), Jesus proceeded to tell them two more parables before leaving the crowds and going back to Peter's home in Capernaum. These two parables, the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, are short but loaded with meaning. Jesus leaves it to us to delve into them and extract the meaning, for nowhere will we find His explanation given. But, as we read in Proverbs 25:2,

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.

In this case, the searching will not be arduous nor rancorous among scholars, for there is general agreement, at least among conservative, Bible-believing scholars, on the meaning of Jesus' words.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed. Matthew 13:31-32 [Parallel passages are found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18.]

The meaning of this parable

The smallest of seeds produces a very large tree; and it is just so with the Kingdom of God. A small seed, bearing the DNA of the kingdom, when planted in good soil produces amazing growth, both in individuals and in the Kingdom of God taken as a whole.



Recall the small beginning of the kingdom. Jesus was born in an obscure village to impoverished parents. His mother, Mary, was virtually unknown in the world and her husband a common stone mason and carpenter. Yet within 33 years Jesus' life was rocking the foundations of the religious and political authorities in occupied Israel, and only decades after that the believers had transformed the Roman Empire through the blood of the martyrs. [Photo credit: from truechristian.com]

Thus we quickly extract the meaning: the small beginning of the Kingdom of God has a much larger ending.

A stone becomes a great mountain. This exponential growth of God's Kingdom is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy concerning the stone which became a great mountain and filled the whole earth:

You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. Daniel 2:34-35¹

Elements of the parable:

1. The mustard seed and mustard tree: A mustard seed is tiny indeed. In Rabbinical thought a mustard seed was proverbial for smallness. The mustard seed represents the tiny beginning in the parable.

Some have taken the mustard seed under the microscope and argued about whether it really is the smallest of seeds. Of course this misses the point entirely. Here is a small seed, well known to the audience and the very soul of a proverbial expression with which they would already be familiar. Though there may be smaller seeds in this world, is there a better illustration, or would it grow into so large a plant in the Palestine of Jesus' day? Even if there is a bigger garden plant, would it be known to the hearers?



Mustard is mentioned a total of five times in the New Testament, always in reference to small beginnings or small faith. Mustard seed faith does not mean ineffective faith any more than a mustard seed beginning means a small and ineffectual ending. The Lord shows us the truth about how effective our “little” can be, as recorded in Luke 17:6:

And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.”

The tree in Palestine which has come to be known as the mustard tree, grows to a height of 10-15



feet with a stout central stem and strong branches. It bears yellow flowers producing minute seeds about the size of—well, about the size of a mustard seed. In actuality the seed is so small that when it is incorporated into jewelry, the makers encase it in a glass globe the size of a marble, which serves to magnify the seed so it may be easily seen. [Photo credit: Pastor Petersen as posted by Rev. Paul McCain on his blog.]

The man and the field: Here are two elements that are not consequential except that they hold the story together, making comprehensible and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated Version, used with permission.

visible to the mind's eye. The man is any man or farmer, the field is any field. They hold no encrypted meaning.

Exposition of the parable

Do not despise the day of small beginnings, as the work of God, once planted, will grow into a huge kingdom. God working within a man means that he is merely the farmer, the sower, who one day tosses some tiny seeds into the ground, not particularly expecting or looking for results. Later he discovers the small seed sown has become a big tree.

It is God who will finish what He has started. "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" **Philippians 1:6**. Or again, as we read in Isaiah 55:10-11:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

When the Kingdom first appears it is small, but later on, after accomplishing God's good purposes, the Kingdom fills the whole earth, and the second coming of the messiah to claim His seat of governance over all the kingdoms of the earth is anything but small and inconsequential. His appearing at the end of the age will be cataclysmic. Then there will be earthquakes and fire. Men's hearts will fail from fear as huge hailstones fall from the sky. Every eye shall see Him; every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The concluding act of the kingdom is not something acted out in a corner, unnoticed by most and derided by many.

The Leaven. Matthew 13: 33 [A parallel passage may be found in Luke 13:20.]

Meaning of this parable

The parable shows us how transforming the Kingdom of Heaven becomes, once the small start has been made. The meaning is basically the same as the Parable of the Mustard Seed, but with an important change in emphasis. Both parables tell us that the kingdom produces results entirely out of proportion to their insignificant beginnings. The Mustard Seed shows us extensive growth from a small beginning, but The Leaven shows us extensive transformation. Therefore the difference in the two parables is not nearly so pronounced as the similarities. The mustard seed grows, the leaven transforms.

Leaven is known for its amazing power to transform substances inside out. So it is with the kingdom. Once a man has the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven within himself, the transformation begins.

Elements of the parable

1. Leaven: Usually, but not always a metaphor for sin, leaven in this case is a metaphor for positive transformation. Here is leaven representing not sin but the Kingdom of Heaven. Sometimes Jesus surprises us with His choices for metaphors. Certainly, in this case the choice is eye-popping, making us stop dead in our tracks and read it again. The Kingdom is like leaven? How can this be? Because the kingdom of heaven, once received in man's heart works like leaven. And yes, sin works in the same way. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:6 and Galatians 5:9. In those passages, and in most of the Old Testament as well², it is the leaven of sin that permeates the dough producing a negative result. But here, the opposite is true.



It should not be considered incongruous that a symbol for sin can likewise be a symbol for the righteous Kingdom of God. After all, other symbols likewise find opposite expression. Satan, for example is referred to as "like a lion" seeking whom he may devour. But Jesus is referred to as "the Lion of Judah." The lion metaphor is inverted in these cases without losing its usefulness in understanding its subject.

2. The woman. Like the man and the field in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the woman is not particularly relevant to the parable, other than to give it the kind of mental glue that holds the story together and makes its visualization more poignant. Who, after all, has not seen a woman mixing leaven into dough? Well, perhaps in our fast food society there are more than we would like to think. Nonetheless, the image of a woman kneading the dough, the dough set aside and rising until the entire batch is leavened is imminently imaginable.

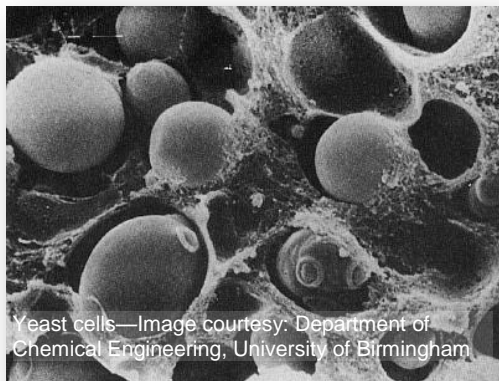
3. Three pecks of flour. The fact that there is *three* pecks of flour is not germane—do not look for extra meaning in the number three. The volume of the flour is the point. Three pecks amounts to about 36 liters of dry measure. The word for "peck" in the Greek is *σατα* (sata) about 12.3 liters dry. The point is this: 37 liters (3 pecks) of wheat flour is a huge volume of flour. Nonetheless a very small volume of leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.

² Leaven in the Old Testament is not always representative of sin. Consider, for example, Leviticus 7:13 where the peace offering is leavened and Leviticus 23:15-18 where we find the wave offering likewise leavened. Thus, in these cases, leavened offerings are used as symbols for the expiation of sin.

Exposition—Understanding transformation

Permit me to explore a Greek word not used in the text, but entirely relevant to the concept of the transforming work of leaven.³ ΜΕΤΑΜΟΡΦΟΥ (Metamorphoo) is the Greek word for “transformation.” “Meta” in this case means “to exchange” with “morphoo” referring to the outward form of a person. In other words, this is an observable and definitive transformation. Metamorphoo is used only four times in the New Testament as follows:

- (1.) Matthew 17:2—in reference to the transfiguration of Jesus
- (2.) Mark 9:2—also in reference to the transfiguration of Jesus
- (3.) Romans 12: 2—referring to the transformation or renewing of the mind
- (4.) 2 Corinthians 3:18—a person entirely transformed or changed into Jesus’ likeness



Yeast cells—Image courtesy: Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Birmingham

Consider then how powerful the transformation of believers really is. We, the hapless lump of dough now having the leaven of Jesus’ heavenly kingdom mixed in, begin to see amazing results. Our minds (the realm of the soul), always at war with the spirit and formerly always winning, begin to be transformed. What area is more a stronghold than our very thoughts? Yet they are transformed as the leaven begins to permeate. And what area needs more transformation than the heart of man, “more deceitful than all else and . . . desperately sick” Jeremiah 17:9.

And just how much transformation can we expect from the leaven of the kingdom? Where the soil is good and unobstructed by rocks or thistles, we can expect to see a near total transformation. Of course this does not mean sinless perfection. “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” 1 John 1:8-9. But it does mean a Romans 12:2 kind of transformation of the mind.

Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks of this transformation as a “death” with a subsequent resurrection. “. . . knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” Romans 6:6-7.

This is a complete change of heart, a transformation of body, soul and spirit. The body enjoys the cessation of destructive and addictive habits, the soul is liberated from bitter thoughts and a tongue that “sets on fire the course of our lives,” and the spirit is set free to soar in the power of His resurrection.

³ Using a word which does not appear in the text does not necessarily do violence to the text if the ideas remain in harmony or context. The Apostle Paul does no violence to his subject of “remuneration for those who preach and teach the gospel message” by taking out of context Deuteronomy 25:4 “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” [See 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18]. In the same way I contend that no harm is done by examining the uses of *transformation* in scripture in order to apprehend how the principle of *leavening* in the subject passage works.

What a joy to be free of the deeds of the flesh: “immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, and things like these . . .” (Galatians 5:19). Welcome here, transforming power of the Holy Spirit and His fruit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5: 22).

We are looking here at a total and permanent transformation. “This could never happen,” one may assert. Never underestimate the power of leaven.

Jesus, the one who transforms,

Changed water to wine at Cana of Galilee
He changed a funeral for the only son of the widow of Nain to a celebration of life
He transformed the woman at the well, giving her living water
He changed tempest and storm, calming wind and wave
The demon possessed He delivered
The sick he healed
When the house of prayer became a house of commerce he cleansed it
When Lazarus died he called to him, “Come forth”
Zaccheus was changed from a cheat to a Son of Abraham
Joseph of Arimathea transformed from secret follower to claiming His body before Pilate
Nicodemus was changed from being born of water to born of the Spirit
Thomas was transformed from doubter to “My Lord and my God!”
Peter was a man of unclean lips; he became the Preacher of Pentecost
John wanted to call down fire from heaven; he became the Apostle of Love
The disciples were changed from fishermen to fishers of men
Those behind closed doors for fear of the Jews to “We must obey God rather than men.”
Saul of Tarsus the persecutor to Paul, the church’s greatest spokesman and theologian
Mark, a timid follower who left the field in shame to a man who was profitable to Paul

And if we were to look at the transformation of lives of those who have walked this earth since the time of Jesus and the first apostles, we could go on forever:

Saint Patrick from English Slave to Irish sinner set free
John Wycliffe from the straits of monasticism to saving power of sola scriptura
Martin Luther from hopeless monk to victorious reformer
William Tyndale from Oxford and Cambridge scholarship to the first English Translation
John Bunyan from the caste of tinkers and vagrants to *Pilgrim’s Progress*
Jonathan Edwards from metaphysical conceits to *Sinners in the hand of an angry God*
John Wesley from religious clubs to Aldersgate Street
John Newton from slaver to *Amazing Grace*
Charles Finney from his law office in Litchfield, Connecticut, to revival preacher
D.L. Moody from shoes to souls
Billy Sunday from baseball to the sawdust trail
Evan Roberts from the coal mines of Wales to the Welsh revival and burning zeal
Nate Saint from America’s shores to South America and the Auca Indians

Auca Indians from head hunters to preachers of gospel
Billy Graham from the woods of North Carolina to America's pastor
David Wilkerson from peaceful life in Pennsylvania to the chaotic streets in NYC
Nikki Cruz from the switchblade to the cross

Jesus has transformed millions upon millions and even billions of people from

Despair to Triumph
Hopelessness to Victory
Warfare to Peace
Hurting to Healing
Willfulness to Obedience
Weakness to Strength
Hate to Love
Death to Life Everlasting

And he transformed me from Search and Destroy to Seek and Save; From proud and self-assured to “Just as I am without one plea.” He saved me. The seed of faith has grown and still grows in my heart. The leaven of the kingdom has transformed and is still transforming this lump of dough from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of God.

And what about you? Has the mustard seed of the kingdom been planted in your heart? Has the leaven of His kingdom been at work transforming you?

Conclusion and review: Matthew 13:34-35

“All these things Jesus spoke to them in parables . . .” The fact that Matthew notes that “all these things Jesus spoke to them in parables,” gives us a chance to review these first 5 parables found in Matthew 13, a substantial fraction of the overall total of 33. Here are the five so far studied:

1. House built on rock, house built on sand: Matthew 7: 24-29
2. The sower and the four soils: Matthew 13: 1-23
3. The wheat and the tares: Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43
4. The mustard seed: Matthew 13: 31-32
5. The leaven: Matthew 13: 33-35

Notice also that “He did not speak to them without a parable.” Parables conceal the truth from the “dogs and swine,” the insincere—those who would ensnare Jesus as He teaches—and reveals the truth to the sincere seekers. Even if the sincere are not quick to apprehend the meaning, they keep on digging until they understand, the Holy Spirit being our teacher, and the One who leads us into all truth.

Then in the text we learn, “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet . . .” The scripture quoted is from Psalm 78:2, a psalm of Asaph the prophet. The message of Psalm 78 is that “God guides his people even when they are unfaithful.” The last verse of Psalm 78 first tells us that we will be shepherded by God with *integrity*. We can depend upon God to reveal His

marvelous truths to us through the parables. They will not remain long hidden from us. Secondly the conclusion of the Psalm quoted in Matthew 13 is that we will be shepherded *skillfully*. The parables are wonderful examples of skillful shepherding by the Great Shepherd.

Psalm 78:72 “So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,
And guided them with his skillful hands.”