

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 13 contains seven parables Jesus gives about the Kingdom of heaven. Most of His stories are based on agriculture, because all the people living in Galilee understood gardening. If you're a gardener, these parables make more sense to you than to the non-gardeners. Let me give you a short test. If you can answer these correctly, then you qualify as a real gardener. (1) What do you call a grumpy and short-tempered Gardener? A Snap Dragon. (2) What do you get when you cross poison ivy with a four-leaf clover? A rash of good luck. (3) What do you call it when earthworms take over your entire garden? Global Worming. (4) What do you get when you measure a pumpkin and divide its outer circumference by its diameter? Pumpkin Pi. And, thankfully, only one more on the test: (5) What's long and green and is a crack shot with a rifle? Annie Okra. I'm sure you're glad that test is over!

Whether you're a gardener or not, Jesus' parables are so simple, anyone can understand them. I am continually amazed at how Jesus could take simple ordinary things like seeds or yeast and use them to teach tremendous spiritual principles. Today we're going to look at two simple yet profound parables that teach us this lesson: "Little is Much When God is in It."

Matthew 13:31-35. "He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.' He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.' Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.'"

I've chosen the title, "Little is much when God is in it," because both a mustard seed and yeast are tiny agents but if they are planted or placed in bread dough, they can both have amazing results. I borrowed the title from a song written by Kitty Suffield in 1924. It was a rather unknown song until it became a hit for the Gaither Vocal Band. One of the verses asks this question: "Does the place you're called to labor, Seem so small and little known? It is great if God is in it, And He'll not forget His own." The chorus goes, "Little is much when God is in it! Labor not for wealth or fame. There's a crown—and you can win it, If you go in Jesus' Name." Now let's go behind the music. Kitty was the pianist at a small church in Ottawa, Canada. The pastor had a teenage son who sometimes sang in church, but he was shy and was reluctant to sing. Kitty encouraged him to use his gift for the Lord. That teenager's name was George Beverly Shea, who grew up to sing to millions at the Billy Graham Crusades. She really believed that little is much when God is in it! Let's examine both of these short parables and see how they apply to our lives.

I. MUSTARD SEED: GOD'S KINGDOM STARTS SMALL BUT GROWS LARGE!

A tiny seed has great potential. Several years ago an MIT student went to the Harvard University Football stadium every day during the summer. He blew a whistle and scattered birdseed on the

field. For fifteen minutes each day he walked up and down the field, blowing a whistle and scattering birdseed.

At the first Harvard football game that season the referee blew the whistle for the kick-off—and the game was delayed half an hour to get rid of the thousands of birds that swooped down onto the football field looking for birdseed. The MIT student did it for two reasons. First, he hated Harvard, and second, he was conducting research on conditioned response. If you had seen him scattering seed in the summer you might not have known why he did it. But Jesus tells us WHY God plants seeds in this world: He is interested in growing His kingdom.

A mustard seed is tiny, only slightly larger than a grain of sand. But a mustard seed has something in it a grain of sand doesn't: Life. It grows into a beautiful mustard plant. I've seen thousands of colorful, yellow mustard plants growing in Israel. Mustard plants can grow to be over eight feet tall. Like that living seed, the Kingdom is alive and although starts small, it grows very large as well. There are two different ways to think about how God's Kingdom starts small and grows large.

A. NUMERICAL GROWTH: The Church started with a few people and has grown into a global family

Jesus called 12 disciples to make up His inner core of believers and one of those was a spiritual dropout. He told them to change the world. On the Day of Pentecost, these 11 disciples were joined by 109 other people who were praying in the upper room. That day, Simon Peter preached the gospel and there was explosive growth. The Bible says, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day...and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:41, 47) Almost overnight, the church grew from 120 to 3,000—and then to 5,000 in a matter of days. Today there are about 2 billion people who claim to be Christians. That's a small start that resulted in something large! Like a seed, God's global family is growing.

This is also true of local churches that are alive. Living organisms grow. Green Acres started in 1955 with about 300 members and today God has taken that small start and we have over 15,000 members. Churches that have over 2,000 in attendance are called mega-churches. I don't mind that label because "mega" means great. In 1960 there were only 16 churches in the U.S. that had over 2,000 in weekly attendance. By the year 2,000 there were over 600 mega churches in the U.S., and in just ten years that number has doubled to over 1,300 congregations with over 2,000 in attendance. (What makes GABC unique among mega churches is that we are the only one located in a city of about 100,000. All others are in metropolitan areas.) There are 50 churches in the U.S. with a weekly attendance of over 10,000. These are now called giga-churches, and three of the top five are in Texas: Lakewood in Houston, The Potter's House and Fellowship Church in the Metroplex. But God is actually doing greater things around the world than in the U.S. Of the top 30 largest congregations in the world, none of them are in the U.S.! The church started small, but it is continuing to proliferate around the world!

B. SPIRITUAL GROWTH: Your initial commitment to Christ grows until you become a source of shelter and support to others

Growth has not only occurred numerically, but personal spiritual growth also happens. When you first enter the Kingdom of God, you don't fully understand the impact it has on you. It's a small part of your life, like a mustard seed. But if you are truly growing as a Christian, the older you get, the influence and impact of God in your life grows and grows until knowing and serving God becomes your single most important goal. How can you tell if you're growing or not? A mature believer is someone who can help others. We are glad to have a new grandson, Grant. But because he's a newborn, he can't do anything for himself. His parents have to feed him, clean him, dress him, carry him, and rock him to sleep. He cries a lot (more of a whine than a cry). He demands a lot of attention. The same is true for an immature Christian. They demand a lot of attention. They can't feed themselves with the Word, their Christian walk is pretty shaky, and they whine a lot. But as kids grow older, they start doing things for themselves and eventually they grow old enough to provide care for others.

Jesus described a grown mustard plant as being a place where birds came and perched on its branches. In Israel I've actually seen the nests of small birds that found shelter and security in the tall mustard plants. A mature Christian is someone who can offer the same thing a mustard plant offers to the little birds—shelter and support.

The Bible teaches that it is our job to help others who are struggling. We are to "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2) Three verses later Paul adds, "For each one should carry his own load." Which one is it? Are we to shoulder our own burdens or share them with others? These two verses have confused many Bible readers. The answer is found in the word "load" in verse 5. It's a word for backpack. Imagine life is like a hike in the mountains you're taking with some friends. Your backpack represents your own personal responsibilities. As we go through life, we all have a certain amount of responsibilities that we should carry ourselves, we shouldn't ask anyone else to carry them. We get to choose what goes into our backpack, and we should make sure it doesn't become too heavy for us to carry.

Imagine boulders represent burdens. Sometimes we all experience the occasional heavy boulders of pain and grief: the death of a loved one; a divorce; the loss of a job. You carry your own backpack, but if a boulder rolls over onto one of your fellow hikers, you're going to jump in and help take the load of that burden off them; you're going to bear their burden. As you do that, you fulfill the law of Christ. The law of Christ is the law of Love. You are to love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. Spiritual maturity has nothing to do with age, there are plenty of adult Christians who still cannot feed themselves.

So a mighty mustard plant comes from a tiny seed. That reminds me of a mighty oak tree that comes from a single acorn. Someone said an oak tree is just a little nut that refused to give its ground. Little things can lead to great things in God's Kingdom.

II. YEAST: GOD'S POWER CHANGES YOUR LIFE GRADUALLY!

Jesus warned against the leaven of the Pharisees, but here He used leaven or yeast in a positive way. Like a mustard seed, yeast is tiny, but it is living and active. The Fleischmann's Yeast

website says, "In yeast, there are thousands of living, plant-like micro-organisms. When activated by warm liquid, and fed by sugar or starch, the yeast releases tiny bubbles of carbon dioxide gas. This gas is what makes the dough rise and achieve its light texture after baking."

If you don't use any yeast, bread won't rise. But if you add too much yeast, you may not be able to handle the result. One of my favorite episodes from I Love Lucy was when she tried baking bread. She worked with a lump of dough that started out the size of a softball. She told Ethel the recipe called for 13 yeast cakes. Ethel picked up the cookbook and said, "That's 3 cakes, not 13!" Lucy said, "Well, at least I won't have to bake for awhile!" As she worked on the lump of dough it grew larger and larger until it was so heavy Lucy could barely lift it. Finally, with the dough the size of a medium sized dog, she and Ethel stuff it into the oven. Later when she opened the oven, a huge loaf of bread pushed out of the oven and trapped her against the cabinet as she yelled for help. It's a funny scene, but it demonstrates the power of yeast. This yeast parable can be applied to three areas of our life.

A. SALVATION: Christ-in-you influences every part of your life

A tiny bit of yeast can affect an entire lump of dough. The kingdom of God is a living catalyst that changes every part of your life. You cannot have an encounter with God and stay the same. Yeast doesn't enlarge the dough immediately; it changes it gradually. That's what Jesus is doing in each one of us. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

Jesus said the yeast worked all through the dough. Yeast doesn't affect just half of the dough, or 2/3 of the dough: It works through ALL of it. In the same way, when you understand the reality of Christ in you, you can't separate your life into categories and say, "Jesus affects my spiritual life, but not my business life." You can't say, "Jesus affects my spiritual life, but not my family life." No, every day and in every way, Jesus is working in you to change you.

B. TRANSFORMATION: The Kingdom isn't about outward appearance; it's a continual change of attitude

Yeast also works invisibly on the inside of the dough. Religion attempts to change people from the outside in, it's very interested in appearances. However, the Kingdom of God works invisibly on the inside of your life, and, like yeast, God changes you from the inside out. One of the best verses in the Bible to define the Kingdom of God is Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

When you ask some people about their faith they'll answer about their outward religious habits. They say, "I don't eat pork." Or "I don't drink alcohol." To them, religion is all about what they DON'T do. But the Bible says God's kingdom isn't about what you eat or drink or don't eat or drink. It is an inner transformation where the Holy Spirit produces righteousness, peace, and joy in you.

I believe those three attitudes are sequential. First, righteousness means you admit you can never be good enough to stand before God based on your own goodness, because even your good

works are like filthy rags to Him. Only then can you stand in the righteousness of Christ, which is a gift you receive by faith. When you understand that, it produces a peace that passes all understanding. And the result of righteousness and peace is that you'll be full of joy, not happiness. Happiness is dependent on happenings, but joy is dependent only on Jesus. Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy might be complete." (John 15:11)

When Jesus saved me, He placed His righteousness, peace and joy in my heart, and as He kneads and shapes my life, He has been changing me. I have more joy today than I had yesterday because I truly believe "every day with Jesus IS sweeter than the day before!"

C. PERMEATION: We can be catalysts for change in our culture!

When yeast comes in contact with bread dough, it serves as a catalyst, setting off a chemical reaction called fermentation. It creates enzymes that change the starch molecules in the flour into sugar, which in turn creates carbon dioxide and alcohol. Don't worry, you can't get drunk eating bread because the alcohol cooks off and the carbon dioxide makes the bread expand. That's a great picture of how we should be impacting our culture. As yeast infiltrates bread dough and changes it, so we should be influencing our culture for Christ. As yeast makes bread better, so we should be a force for good in this world. But yeast that stays in the container doesn't change the bread. We can't be content to hide in our safe little churches; we must go out and make a difference. Jesus prayed, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18) The message of Jesus started small in Jerusalem, but it has spread throughout the world. That's why we continue to send missionaries around the globe, to be yeast in every culture. That's why we're asking you to go out from here into your mission field called East Texas and bring your friends, relatives, and neighbors to hear the good news during Freedom Celebration. Wherever the message of Christ has gone, the world has been made better. The anti-slavery movement of the 18th century started in England led by evangelical Christians like William Wilberforce who was influenced by a pastor named John Newton who was a former slave trader. Newton also happened to write a little song you might have heard before, called "Amazing Grace."

A little yeast can have a huge impact. Many of you are familiar with Greg Mortensen, who wrote the book "Three Cups of Tea." He's an MK, a Missionary's Kid, who spoke in Tyler recently. A few years ago Greg got lost while on a climbing expedition to K-2, the second highest summit in the world. Sick and wounded, he wandered into an obscure Pakistani village where they nursed him back to health. This was such a remote village, they had never even seen a Westerner. In gratitude, Greg promised to build the village a school where boys and girls could be educated together. In strict Muslim countries, girls are seldom included in school. This project gave Greg a calling for life and since then his organization has built 126 schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. He says our real enemy is ignorance and ignorance creates hatred. The Taliban doesn't want children educated—they prefer illiterate teenagers because they are easier to recruit. Greg is motivated by the belief that if these children can receive an education, then they aren't as likely to become candidates for enlistment into the Taliban or Al Qaida. He says a culture can be changed through education, not just through military force. I agree. We need our soldiers there to root out the Taliban and other radicals now, but what about the next generation?

A few years ago Greg visited an elementary school in Wisconsin where his mother was the principal. He spoke to the students about his work, and a fourth grade student offered to open his piggy bank and give the pennies to help the children there. A penny doesn't seem like much to us, but it will buy a pencil in Pakistan or Afghanistan. And 100 pennies will pay a teacher's salary for a day. This small offer from a 4th grade student motivated the other students in his school to collect pennies, and when they had finished, they had collected over 62,000 pennies. That boy's generosity a nationwide movement among children called "Pennies for Peace." (You can visit the website at www.penniesforpeace.org). Last year, students around the U.S. gave almost a million dollars in pennies to help educate the children of that troubled area of the world. A penny is a small thing, but if you get enough of them together, they can make a huge difference!

CONCLUSION

The message of the mustard seed and yeast parables is simple: Little can become much when God is in it. In fact, God delights to demonstrate this principle over and over. Instead of an army of 32,000, God used only 300 of Gideon's soldiers to defeat the enemy of over 100,000 soldiers. Little David picked up five smooth stones and with just one of them he killed a giant and changed the entire history of Israel. A little boy gave Jesus his lunch one day and Jesus fed 5,000 people with it.

Sometimes little words spoken at the right time to the right person have a huge impact. One of my spiritual heroes is John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church. Wesley rode a horse tens of thousands of miles around England preaching in fields and town squares because the Anglican Church defrocked him.

Late one night a thief accosted Wesley. He was told to hand over his money or die. Wesley got down off his horse and emptied his pockets. He showed the thief he only had a few coins but that he was welcome to them. He invited the thief to examine his saddlebags and search for anything else of value. In disgust the thief turned to leave and Wesley said, "Stop! I have something more to give you!" The thief returned and Wesley bent near his ear and said, "You may someday live to regret this life. And if you do, remember these few words: 'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all our sin.'" The robber hurried away.

Years later a stranger asked to speak to Wesley after he preached. He immediately recognized him as the thief, but now he was a well-dressed merchant—and better still, a follower of Jesus. The man knelt and kissed John Wesley's hand and said, "To you, sir, I owe it all. Your words changed my life." Wesley said, "No, not to me, my friend, but to the precious blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from all our sin." There may be someone listening to me right now and you are regretting the life you are living. I want to speak those same few words to you again: "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin." Let God plant that seed in your heart and see what happens!

OUTLINE

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Jesus prayed, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." *John 17:18*

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David O. Dykes
Pastor, Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes