



Great Things Often Start with Humble Beginnings (September 22, 2022)

Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Yeast (Matthew 13:33) and the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

“Size matters not. Judge me by my size, do you?” Jedi Master Yoda, Star Wars the Empire Strikes Back

“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7

A Common Theme in the Parables

Today’s parables feature a farmer with a tiny mustard seed, a baker with a small amount of yeast, and a widow who won’t leave the town judge alone. Each of them, in their own way, illustrate the same basic truth: **Things don’t have to be bigger in order to be better.** Instead, Jesus wants us to know that God is always at work, often in imperceptible ways, to cause his plan for the world to come to fruition. We just need to be willing to wait for God to do his work.

Each of the parables emphasizes the surprising impact something small can have, if we’re willing to give it time to fully develop. A tiny mustard seed turns into a prodigious plant, but not overnight. A handful of yeast leavens enough dough for an entire banquet, but only if you let it rise. A widow with no rights is able to persuade the callous judge to vindicate her, but only after a lengthy season of begging and pleading.

These parables served the important function of resetting Israel’s expectations of the Messiah during Jesus’ lifetime, expectations that were sky high. The people of

Israel had recently had some success launching a revolt against foreign armies who had occupied their land and desecrated their Temple (i.e. The Maccabean Revolt). By the first century, they were once again under the heavy hand of foreign oppressors, and everyone assumed that the Messiah’s primary mission would be to conquer the Romans—for good.

Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah, but he didn’t fit the expectations. He was a carpenter, not a commander. He was a peasant, not a King (at least not the kind they wanted). **They wanted a mighty tree, and all they got was a mustard seed.** Jesus wanted them to understand that God’s greatest victories often start in the smallest way.

Today, these parables warn us against our need for instant gratification. They remind us that the people we least expect to make great contributions to our churches are the ones that God has chosen to lead the way. And they teach us to stop holding back from serving God because we assume our tiny offering will be insignificant in the grand scheme of things. So with that in mind, let’s dive in to our three parables for today.



3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)

“The mustard seed and the yeast, or leaven, together illustrate the potential of enormous growth resulting even from tiny, inauspicious beginnings.” Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 122.

1. Historical & Cultural Context

- Mustard seeds were the smallest seed that farmers typically worked with.
- They took on proverbial status in Israel as the *smallest thing the human eye could see* (Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 156 and Michael Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary, Matthew*, 483).
- Mustard plants would typically be 4-5 feet tall, but could occasionally grow to be 10 feet tall, large enough for birds to perch in (Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 123).
- According to the *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, mustard plants grew on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was preaching.

2. Literary Setting

- Jesus is speaking in Galilee (**Matthew 11:1**) from a boat on the Sea of Galilee (**Matthew 13:1-2**).
- In the previous chapter, Jesus is presented as God’s Chosen servant (**Matthew 12:15-21**), but not everyone believed in him as the Messiah.
 - Some people began to think that Jesus really could be their Messiah (e.g. “Could this be the Son of David?”- **Matthew 12:23**)
 - Some Pharisees were sure that Jesus was *not* the Messiah. They claimed that Jesus was actually Beelzebub, the prince of demons (**Matthew 12:24**).

- Other Pharisees seemed open to the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah, but they wanted proof—specifically a sign to prove his authority (**Matthew 12:38**).
- Perhaps the most heartbreaking rejection came from Jesus’ own family (**Matthew 12:46-47**). The parallel account in Mark’s Gospel tells us that Jesus’ family wanted to restrain him because they thought he was “out of his mind” (**Mark 3:21**).
- **Tree Imagery**—There are several examples in the Old Testament where a powerful kingdom is portrayed as a mighty tree (**Daniel 4:21, Ezekiel 17:22-23, Ezekiel 31:6**). Since this is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven (**Matthew 13:31**), this tree most likely represents God’s Kingdom.
- **A Single Seed**—In the parable, a man sows a single seed that grows into a mighty tree. If the tree is a picture of God’s Kingdom (see the previous bullet point), then the seed would be Jesus. In **Galatians 3:16**, Paul makes the point that Jesus is the one single seed God referred to in his promise to Abraham in Genesis.

3. The Main Point

- Bigger doesn't automatically mean better. God often uses small acts of faith and unlikely people to accomplish mighty things in his Kingdom.

4. What Do We Learn About the Kingdom of God?

- **God Works Behind the Scenes:** "God is at work, even though human eyes may fail to perceive what is happening." *Douglas Hare, Interpretation (Matthew)*, 157.
- **The Kingdom is Here, Even if It's Small:** "Israel always believed that when God's kingdom was established on the earth, it would be great; they were not prepared for an insignificant beginning. But through this parable Jesus declares that the kingdom is already present, although only as a tiny manifestation... What may not look like much to the world will in fact fulfill all God's promises." Michael Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary*, 483.
- God isn't constrained by the popular wisdom of "Bigger is Better."

5. Individual Application

- Don't hold back from serving God just because you think your mustard-seed-sized contribution won't make a difference.
 - "When one is part of a small minority, it's easy to assume that one can have no impact on the large minority. Probably for that very reason, Jesus goes on to tell the next two parables [Mustard Seed and Yeast]." Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 122.
- The only other time Jesus talks about mustard seeds is when he makes a personal application for his disciples: "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (**Matthew 17:20**).

6. Application for the Church

- Embrace the beauty of small church, small gatherings, and inauspicious beginnings: "Both little stories depict the positive growth of the kingdom, all out of proportion to its size at the beginning of the Jesus movement" -Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 124.
- Don't neglect or disparage people who are only able to make mustard-seed-size contributions to the life of the church.
- We can't let our expectations of what God should be doing blind us to the good things he's already doing.



4. The Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:33)

"The parables of the mustard seed and yeast work together to reveal the nature of the kingdom of heaven in Jesus' ministry. The mustard seed emphasizes an inconspicuous beginning of the kingdom of heaven with its growth into external greatness, while the yeast suggests its inconspicuous permeation and transformation. In spite of its small inauspicious beginnings, the kingdom of heaven will pervade the world and eventually produce the prophesied greatness." Michael Wilkins, NIV Application Commentary (Matthew, 484)

The Significance of the Parable

This parable occurs immediately after the parable of the mustard seed. In many ways it is a continuation of the same theme. Don't overlook something small (a seed or some yeast) because we know that those small things eventually create big results.

In the Bible, yeast typically has a negative connotation, like when Jesus warns his disciples against the yeast (or negative influence) of the Pharisees in **Matthew 16:6**. Here, the meaning is positive: If a baker can transform an entire batch of dough (enough to feed a hundred people) with only a little yeast, imagine the positive inner change we can experience when God offers us the "yeast" of a relationship with him, the gift of salvation, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Consider this passage from **2 Corinthians 3:18**, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

God is already at work in our lives, bringing about the inner transformation that we need in order to become better reflections of Jesus Christ.



5. The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

“The point of the parable is then to say: if even a rotten judge like that can be persuaded to do the right thing by someone who pesters him day and night until it happens, then of course God, who is Justice in person, and who cares passionately about people, will vindicate them, will see that justice is done.” N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, 213

1. Historical & Cultural Context

- Widows in Jesus’ time were among the most vulnerable members of society, along with orphans, foreigners, and the poor. Several passages in the Old Testament specifically reference these groups of people as needing extra support and accommodations (e.g. **Exodus 22:22-27**, **Deuteronomy 10:18**, **Deuteronomy 16:11**, **Deuteronomy 24:17-24**, **Psalm 82:3**).
 - According to the *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible*, a widow like this one would be in a “economically precarious and socially vulnerable situation.”
- Widows did not have financial support or the same legal rights as men. As such, this woman was entirely dependent on the compassion of the judge who was presiding over her case.

2. Literary Setting

- Luke’s Gospel tends to give special honor to the outsiders that everyone else was ready to reject (like the sinful woman who anointed Jesus in **Luke 7:36-50**, the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:25-37**, and Zacchaeus the tax collector in **Luke 19:1-10**, to name a few).
- The New Testament uses the word “widow” 35 times. 16 out of the 35 are in Luke’s writings. He seems to have a special heart for the four populations that the Old Testament calls us to care for (orphans, widows, foreigners, and the poor)

3. The Main Point

- In this parable, a heartless, indifferent judge eventually concedes and agrees to do right by the widow. If an evil judge like that eventually comes around to do the right thing, how much more will God answer our own prayers (compare this to Jesus statement in **Matthew 7:11**).
- But since God is a loving father who cares deeply for his people, he answers our prayers with joy: *“If an unworthy judge who feels no constraint of right and wrong is compelled by persistence to deal justly with a helpless individual, how much more will God answer prayer.”* (note on Luke 18:7 in the NASB Study Bible).

4. What Do We Learn About the Kingdom of God?

- **God Answers Our Prayers**, even if it’s in his timing instead of our own.
- **Silence and Waiting** are normal aspects of life in God’s Kingdom.

5. Individual Application

- *“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”* (**Luke 18:1**)

6. Application for the Church

- Don’t underestimate the power of prayer.
- Don’t underestimate the faith of people society is ready to overlook.