



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Little Is Much When God Is In It

Matthew 13.31-33

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### Introduction

1. In the 1976 movie, *Midway*, Henry Fonda in his role as Admiral Chester Nimitz looked back on the battle as he imagined a [fictional] subordinate who was killed would have. He thought the man would have said something like the following: "It just doesn't make any sense, Admiral. The Japanese fleet had everything going for them. Superior forces. Strategic location. Ships at full strength [the Americans had hastily repaired a carrier and rushed it into battle]. Yet, we won a decisive victory."
2. As they are wont to do, historians debate the planning—and good or bad fortune—of the foes at Midway (June 1942) when an inferior American force still reeling from Pearl Harbor dealt a crippling blow to the Japanese navy, a major turning point in the Pacific War. Like other events we could mention, it really didn't make sense.
3. I thought of that story when I looked at our current text which reports Jesus' parables of the mustard seed and leaven. There was something about the kingdom as Jesus proclaimed it that didn't seem to make sense. Yet, it was true—and remains so today.
4. Let's examine these parables that tell us that little is much when God is in it.

### Body

- I. Thinking About the Kingdom.
  - A. The parables in Matthew 13 are all concerned with "the secrets [mysteries] of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11), a subject we need to stop and think about more.<sup>1</sup>
  - B. Kingdom expectations.
    1. Most of us know that the Jews of Jesus' day were awaiting the kingdom's arrival (cf. Matt 2.1-6; 3.1; 4.23; etc.).

<sup>1</sup> Donald A. Hagner, "Matthew's Parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:1-52)," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 102. The parable of the wheat and tares (vv. 24-30) also begins with this statement of comparison, but since I am developing this series thematically, this is the first time we have encountered the phrase in our study.

2. Though not the only way it was expressed, many did expect that when the kingdom came, Israel would overthrow its oppressors (in that day, the Romans), and the glory and power of the physical Davidic/Solomonic kingdom would be restored.
3. Various claimants to the throne had come—and gone (cf. Acts 5.36-37). The people were disappointed but had not given up hope.
4. When Jesus came on the scene with his amazing teaching and deeds, many dared to hope he might be the one (cf. Luke 3.15; John 4.29; 7.41-42; Matt 11.3).
5. But he was not like what they had been led to expect. So, even those inclined to believe wondered whether he would really establish the kingdom of God, especially as the criticism began to increase (cf. John 7.41-42).

C. Jesus' view of the kingdom was different from his contemporaries.

1. Our translations typically translate the noun as "kingdom" (βασιλεία, *basileia*), but it has a verbal idea of God's *reign*, not a "kingdom" in the sense of a territory.<sup>2</sup>
2. It was a reign that was breaking in on the natural realm during the ministry of Jesus, a point Jesus made in his response to the charge that he was casting out demons because he was possessed by demons (Matt 12.25-30; note especially v. 28).
3. Such statements were guaranteed to get a response; if the reign was already coming upon them, why was it not making more of an impact? Were the critics right?

II. "The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like"—Two Surprising Figures.

A. Verses 31-33, more similes than parables (as commonly understood as "stories"),<sup>3</sup> use two common figures from Jesus' world to make a reassuring claim about God's reign.

B. The mustard seed (31-32).

1. The seed was "the smallest of all seeds."
  - a. Some have argued that there are in fact seeds that are smaller, a point that, while technically correct, misses the point in Jesus' context where "in rabbinical thought the mustard seed was proverbial for smallness."<sup>4</sup>
  - b. See Mark 4:31 – "It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is *smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil*, . . . (NASB).<sup>5</sup>
2. "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." (Matt 13.32 ESV).
  - 1) According to France, "it is an exaggeration to call it a *tree*,"<sup>6</sup> but it did grow to be a bush-sized plant, reaching a height of 10 to 12 feet and therefore able to hold birds or provide shade for them (cf. Mark 4.31; Luke 13.18-19).

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent overview of the concept of the reign of God in Judaism and the New Testament, see Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 18-36.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of the first century Jewish understanding of *parabolē* (παραβολή) for multiple figures of comparison in lesson 1 in this series, "Stories for the Heart," 2.

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew chapters 13-28*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version, paperback edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 317.

<sup>5</sup> NIV 1984 has "the smallest seed you plant in the ground." See the comments by Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 220.

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 227.

- 2) This was not unknown in Judaism; the *Babylonian Talmud* “refers to timber from a mustard seed sufficient in quantity to cover the roof of a potter’s hut.”<sup>7</sup>
  3. The point is not the size of the seed, but the contrast it represented—what started out as so small as to be insignificant would eventually be a force with which to be reckoned; so it would be with God’s reign.
- C. The leaven (v. 33).
1. In this case, the gradual fermentation that came from yeast shows the point.
  2. Just a little leaven mixed in the flour would eventually make enough bread to feed about 100 people, far more than most women would typically make.
  3. Again, the contrast is the point: what starts small will gradually become a force of almost explosive quality; so it would be with God’s reign.
- D. Biblical applications.
1. The reign of God might have begun small, but it had begun. It would prosper and prevail.<sup>8</sup>
  2. This would reassure Jesus’ immediate disciples who were perplexed by the strange (to them) things Jesus was doing and would become even more puzzled as opposition to him gained momentum.
  3. It would also reassure Matthew’s readers for whom the ultimate conquest of God’s reign—in the face of the Judaizing influence and later pagan persecutions—would have been an open question.

### III. Little Is Still Much.

- A. At times when the world seems to be falling apart, we need reassurance that God’s reign will win out.
- B. We also need the reminder that the little things do make a difference.
1. As Prentice Meador observed, “It’s a tiny beginning and easily overlooked. It doesn’t draw attention to itself. It’s quiet. Personal. God begins with someone in the crowd, someone with an open heart and life. You would never imagine it. God’s rule moves from person to person. Its origin is so small; its end is so great! From totally lost to godliness. From a nobody to a somebody.”
  2. Meador continued, “A sure signal that God is at work in his boundless vitality. He permeates your values, purposes, career, and relationships. Such a radical change may bring intimidation, curiosity, apathy, and even persecution. But one thing is always true of the growth of God’s rule: nothing can stop it! It’s quiet. Tiny. But the beginnings of something great!”<sup>9</sup>
- C. We need reminders of two great truths.
1. God’s plan will work out, no matter how things may look.
  2. What we do in service to God matters.

<sup>7</sup> Hagner, 114.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of growth is likely a secondary application of these parables; see Hagner, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Prentice Meador, *Stories That Astonish: The Parables of Jesus* (Abilene, TX: Hillcrest Publishing, 2000), 126-127.

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- a. Like the disciples of old, we fight despair; the world is so large and we are so small, possessing so relatively little influence, often beaten down and wondering whether we really do matter.
  - b. But the issue is never our power, influence, wealth, or ability; always, the issue is our God and what he can do through us as we submit to his reign.

### *Conclusion*

1. Someone (perhaps James Allan Francis?) wrote an essay about Jesus entitled "One Solitary Life." It reminds us that what looks to be futile, even defeated, is in God's hand merely a mustard seed waiting to become a tree, a bit of leaven waiting to feed many.<sup>10</sup>
2. Humanity generally has never believed this about God and his ways. Let us be different, completely committed to his service as he does the great things he will do.

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<sup>10</sup> For "One Solitary Life," see the web site, [www.anointedlinks.com/one\\_solitary\\_life.html](http://www.anointedlinks.com/one_solitary_life.html). Accessed February 12, 2021.