

PARABLES: Mustard Seed and Leaven

Mark 4; Matt 13, Luke 13

Joseph Leake – he died in 2003; he was ninety years old. And according to his daughters, Joseph Leake lived and died like a pauper. He watched television, get this, he watched television in a neighbor's home so as to avoid unnecessary electricity bills. Someone asked me after the earlier service if he was Scottish! He had delayed repairs on his home as long as he could; he shopped at the Goodwill and at thrift stores and wore second-hand clothing. He was, to all observers, a poor old man. When he died he left behind him, however, a fortune of some almost two million dollars – all of it earned and carefully saved across his long and frugal life. The remarkable thing about Joseph Leake, however, was that no one, not his friends, not his family, no one knew a thing about it. Appearances, it turns out, can be deceiving.

If you've been around church stuff for a while, you know that is true of other people AND it is true of the growth of the kingdom of God.

Mark: 4

The Parable of the Seed

26 And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. 28 The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 And He said: "How can we illustrate the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to describe it? 31 It's like a mustard seed that, when sown (scatter/ sow) in the soil, is smaller than all the seeds on the ground. 32 And when sown, it comes up and grows taller than all the vegetable herbs, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade."

Luke 13:20 Again He said, "What can I compare the kingdom of God to? 21 It's like leaven that a woman took and mixed into three pecks of flour until it spreads through the entire mixture."

This mustard seed parable shows up in 3 gospels- Parables of the Kingdom

In Matt and Mark it is in the context of other "seed/ growth" parables

In Luke in context of issues with Jews and Barren fig tree

In Matt and Luke it is followed by the LEAVEN / YEAST

Different settings but he uses the same parables. It is not uncommon for an itinerant preacher to use the same sermons at different locations.

THE LEAD – Like a mustard seed or leaven, the kingdom of God/Heaven starts small and becomes large. Don't let the HIDDENNESS of the kingdom blind you to its present reality. – Knox Chamblin

EX: the tree is in the seed. The oak is in the acorn. The fullness of the eternal kingdom is in that which is presently manifested. We get a foretaste and glimpse of it even today.

This was probably a stunning illustration for the audience that was under the domination of Rome, the greatest kingdom on earth at that time.

"Rome wasn't built in a day" Jesus could have said it, but the earliest known use dates from around 1190

The MAGNITUDE used in the parable must have been puzzling. How many of the followers of Jesus could

imagine that their band of disciples would one day be one of the largest trees in the garden? Especially after the crucifixion it would have been easy to forget this parable. BUT THEN, Jesus rose from the grave.

Sin and Death are defeated so nothing can stand in their way.

Jesus explains that there is a big ROI. A surprising result

IT IS ALSO A mysterious result – something so small contains such power.

Mk 4:32 – commentaries suggest that this is a picture of the nations being included in the church. The kingdom of God becomes a resting place for the nations.

RAYBURN

The kingdom doesn't come with thunder and lightning. Jesus was announced by a multitude of heavenly hosts, but to shepherds in a field, not to those in places of power and authority.

His ministry displayed signs and wonders, but even then, a lot of people did not believe Him. The message of Christ took hold among many who were NOT in positions of power and influence.

The religious leaders LOOKED DOWN ON Peter and John

Acts 4:13ff

13 Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

1 Cor 1:26ff – “not many of you...”

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God.

The world doesn't understand that eternal change can come through PREACHING about a man who was crucified 2000 years ago.

Jesus explains that growth is hidden at first. Jesus tells two parables in Mark that deal with seemingly unexpected and unexciting growth.

Mark 4:26 -29 The kingdom is like....

A man sows seed and then goes to bed.

That's rather routine and dull. It's not behavior that we'd expect from someone dealing with KINGDOM GROWTH ISSUES. There is no sense of anticipation, yet he gets up and sees some growth – he doesn't know how. He patiently waits for the normal process – blade, head, mature grain in the head, and when the crop permits, he brings in the harvest.

He doesn't know the secret to the growth.

As with the mustard seed, there is something in the DNA of the seed that causes it to grow. It's a God thing. It is in the DNA of the seed to grow into a tree, and it is in the DNA of Spirit born believer to bear fruit.

The difference is that the believer can resist and work against his / her own best interest. Such is the nature of sin.

The mustard seed doesn't resist; it grows according to its nature.

These two 'seed' parables from Mark indicate that there is a mystery to growth. Agriculture has best practices as does spiritual growth, but there are things that we simply can't manage. In gardening as with the spiritual life, even the best practices don't always yield what we think they should.

The sovereign grace of God in giving the increase does not exclude the biblically mandated means of grace that we should employ. – Dan Orme –

If this creates a sort of tension, then that's ok.

WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST God WITH SUCH TENSION.

We'd like to think that the growth of the kingdom would happen with more flair. And sometimes it does.

EX: Jesus Revolution- movie – like the great awakenings of the past, the Jesus movement of the late 60-s to early 70's did get attention. It had an impact here in LaFayette, 1974, the year I was saved.

But it doesn't always happen that way. Throughout church history there have been seasons of great growth followed by many years of the slow growth of the blade, the head, then the grain.

TIME magazine did a cover story on the Jesus Revolution because it seemed so unexpected and unbelievable. How can such transformation take place simply through the preaching a message about a man who died and supposedly came back to life. This is foolishness to the world.

The secret of the seed is not an underdog story – small seed becomes big tree – although that is true. The world loves an underdog story, but it doesn't love the kingdom of God. **The SECRET OF THE SEED is that the seed is the Word of the Gospel – the Power of God for salvation. It may be foolish to the world, but it is the power of God.**

David Strain...

The growth of the Mustard Seed points to the extensive growth of the kingdom. The parable of the leaven points to the intensive power of the kingdom.

These parables about the seed, the mustard seed and the leaven were true then and are true today. We may want to see some sort of fast track growth, but the normal pattern is the slow growth and development of an ordinary plant. But the ultimate result is a great tree that provides shelter for the birds of the air.

The growth of the kingdom takes place at times and in places that may be a surprise to us. Things have and are happening around the world without much fanfare. Some regions see more evident growth while others are less fruitful, but the kingdom continues to grow.

At any given time, it would be easy to say, "Where is the promised coming of Christ?", and we would probably ask that if we didn't have ears to hear these parables.

When we think of most kingdoms, we don't think of them coming rather silently and slowly. **But the king who was born in a manger is content to work slowly until the final culmination of his kingdom.**

Hodge "Even omnipotence works gradually."

Over the centuries, we've seen strategies and methods that have tried to create growth of the kingdom. While some have been valid, there is a mystery to growth that we can't explain. Ultimately, God is the one who causes the growth. We just don't like thinking that we can't make it happen or manage it in our own way. That is downright un-American. We are a 'can do' people. We are prone to taking matters into our own hands.

EX: Rise Up O Men of God – Wm Pierson Merrill 1897. It is a confident hymn of manly action. It does seem

to go against the grain of what this parable is teaching regarding the growth of the seed and the farmer who doesn't understand how it happens. He just waits on God's care and provision.

Rise up, O men of God! His kingdom tarries long;
Bring in the day of brotherhood, And end the night of wrong.

Rise up, O men of God! The Church for you doth wait,
Her strength unequal to her task; Rise up and make her great.

Merrill was a liberal Presbyterian and an advocate of what he called "world brotherhood." That was also the name of a movement in the liberal wing of the Presbyterian church in the early years of the 20th century with which Merrill was connected. The thought of the hymn was that it was high time for Christian men to take matters into their own hands and bring in the kingdom of God, by which Merrill meant the day of peace and justice. And they thought they could do it. But the world brotherhood movement did not take hold and change the world. – Rayburn

BUT the true kingdom of God is still growing, especially in areas that we thought were hard to reach – The Middle East, China, Africa, and South America. Word and deed ministries are taking the gospel to areas that were once closed. God is causing the growth.

God is using people and methods for the gospel that are new and creative.

EX: EQUIPPING FARMERS INTERNATIONAL – this is the parables of sowing, growth, and reaping come to life as small farmers around the world are equipped with best practices to overcome food insecurity. Believers in the program are seeing harvests to such an extent that others are asking them, "How is this possible?"

It is an example of Ps 67:5-7

5 Let the peoples praise You, O God;

Let all the peoples praise You.

6 The earth has yielded its produce;

God, our God, blesses us.

7 God blesses us,

That all the ends of the earth may fear Him.

These parables of Jesus should bring comfort, not distress. During those seasons when we may not think anything is happening, we can know that God is still working. During the long period of winter, plants may look like they are dying, but something good is going on.

Progress and growth in our own lives may seem slow and punctuated by dry spells, but We have the promise that "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus, and God is at work to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Phil 1:6, 2:13

Salvation is of the Lord and growth is a God thing because only God can change the heart.

The audience to whom Jesus spoke, the crowd at the crucifixion, and the audience of the Apostle Paul may have had a hard time imagining this vision of the kingdom of God. At various stages of world history, God's people have struggled to imagine this vision of the kingdom of God, so scripture continues to say, "hold fast, persevere", the final kingdom is ahead of us.

Be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. – 1 Cor 15:58

COME TO THE TABLE

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