

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven."*

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse and we find ourselves at chapter 13, verses 18 through 21.

Please stand for the reading of God's Word...

Luke 13:18 He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 19 It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." 20 And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

Let's pray.

I have to tell you that these were some of the most difficult verses that I have preached on in a long time. The reason is that there is such strong, even diametrically opposed interpretations among commentators, about these two short parables.

One interpretation holds that the kingdom of God, and by extension the church, grows and then experiences corruption. This interpretation makes sense, because in the parables the kingdom of God ends up containing birds and leaven, which are both presented negatively in Scripture. For example...

In the Parable of the Sower birds come and snatch away the seed...

Matthew 13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.

Then when Jesus interpreted the parable he said...

Matthew 13:19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

The birds are associated with the devil himself, which obviously makes birds look bad.

When Babylon is destroyed during the tribulation it becomes filled with demons and birds...

Revelation 18:2 And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast.

Seeing birds live with demons also makes them look bad.

D.A. Carson says, *"Close study of birds as symbols in the Old Testament and especially in the literature of later Judaism shows that birds regularly symbolize evil and even demons or Satan."*

So, when there's a parable about birds coming into the kingdom of God it looks like a parable about corruption coming into the church.

Leaven isn't any better. It is one of the strongest pictures or types of sin:

- Leaven is a fungus that grows in bread dough...just like sin grows in a person's life.
- You can never completely get leaven out of dough...like we can never completely get sin out of our lives.
- Leaven "puffs up" bread...like sin puffs up or leads to pride.
- A small amount of leaven spreads through a batch of dough, like a small amount of sin spreads through:

- A person's life...
- A marriage...
- A family...think of Achen and his sin affecting his entire family.
- A church...many of Paul's letters condemned people whose sin affected the whole church.

—
So, when Jesus preaches two parables about birds and leaven inhabiting the kingdom of God you can understand why some commentators think this prophesies of sin and corruption in the church.

Maybe you say, "But there is no sin and corruption in the church. The church is holy and pure."

Definitely not!

Most of Paul's letters were corrective in nature dealing with the sin and corruption in churches. If you think of Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Revelation, he rebuked five of the churches, and he couldn't find anything good to say to two of the churches.

—
We will look at the parables in detail in a moment, but I will say at the beginning that I hold to the interpretation that the parables describe the growth and spreading influence of the church.

Let me give you four reasons I hold to this interpretation...

First, the second parable doesn't compare the kingdom of God with dough that has leaven put into it. Instead, it compares the kingdom of God with leaven itself. Briefly look at verse 20...

Luke 13:20 And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? 21 IT IS LIKE LEAVEN that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."

If leaven is a picture or type of sin in these verses then I don't see how it can be compared with the kingdom of God. Instead, the idea is the kingdom of God will spread throughout the world like leaven spreads through a batch of dough.

—
Second, when we look at a passage in one of the Gospels and we have trouble interpreting it, we can often look at the parallel account in one of the other Gospels.

In this situation, when Jesus preached these parables in Matthew and Mark, in the context he is repeatedly describing the kingdom as a positive and pervading influence...versus talking about sin and corruption coming into the church.

—
Third, in Luke's gospel the context also looks like Jesus is saying something positive about the kingdom of God. Verse 18 begins with the words, "**He said therefore,**" which connects the parables with the previous account.

And what happened in the previous account?

Jesus healed the woman with the disabling spirit and look at the last verse of the account...

Luke 13:17 As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

This is about two things:

1. First, Jesus being vindicated over his enemies who are opposing him.
2. Second, the people rejoicing over what he did.

In other words, the account concludes with the kingdom of God becoming greater, and these parables flow from that.

—
Fourth, we want to harmonize the Old and New Testaments. This means if we can interpret something two ways in the New Testament and one of those interpretations harmonizes with the Old Testament, we choose that interpretation. Similarly, if we are looking at something in the Old Testament that can be interpreted two ways and one of those interpretations harmonizes with the New Testament, we choose that interpretation.

We are going to look at two passages that prefigure these parables to help us interpret them.

Go ahead and mark your spot in Luke and turn to **Ezekiel 17**.

These verses are a messianic prophecy, which means they are about Christ and his kingdom.

Look at verse 22...

Ezekiel 17:22 Thus says the Lord God: “I myself will take a sprig

Jesus is the **sprig**, or some translations say twig or shoot. Think of the familiar title of Jesus being a shoot from the root of Jesse, David’s father.

from the lofty top of the cedar

The cedar is the royal line of David, which Jesus will be plucked from.

and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one,

Again, this is Jesus.

and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

Remember Ezekiel is speaking to the Jews in exile. They disobeyed God, so he sent them to Babylon for 70 years. Then they knew they really messed up and were worried about being cut off completely.

But God will not allow that to happen because of the covenant he made with them. And the evidence in these verses that he is not done with them is the Messiah is going to come from them. God is going to pluck a branch from them and plant it, or establish it, **on a high and lofty mountain**. This refers to Mount Zion, or Jerusalem, where the Messiah, or Jesus, will reign as King.

This prophecy wasn’t fulfilled when the Jews returned to the land after their exile. Instead, the fulfillment awaits the millennial kingdom when Christ rules and reigns over the whole world.

Ezekiel 17:23 On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it (the Messiah), that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. (Now notice this...) And UNDER IT WILL DWELL EVERY KIND OF BIRD; IN THE SHADE OF ITS BRANCHES BIRDS OF EVERY SORT WILL NEST.

The birds represent the nations of the world, and because it says **birds of every sort** it means every nation will come under the reign and protection of the Messiah and his kingdom.

Ezekiel 17:24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.”

Considering the trees also represent nations, or kingdoms, God is saying he will bring low the proud nations and exalt the humble nations that fear him. The nations that follow Christ will be blessed and those that don't will be punished.

So you've got a tree that grows large enough the birds nest in the branches, and the birds represent the nations of the world, so it's easy to see how this looks forward to the parable of the mustard seed and helps us interpret it.

—
Now turn one book to the right to Daniel 4.

Daniel is like Joseph in that he interpreted dreams for Gentile kings. For Joseph it was Pharaoh, and for Daniel it was Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. In these verses Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a tree. Look at verse 10...

Daniel 4:10 The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. 11 The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and THE BIRDS OF THE HEAVENS LIVED IN ITS BRANCHES, and all flesh was fed from it.

So again, we see a tree that grows large enough the birds come and live in its branches.

Now look at Daniel's interpretation in verse 20...

Daniel 4:20 The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, 21 whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— 22 it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.

Again, the tree represents a kingdom and the birds represent other nations, but the difference is the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom instead of Christ's kingdom.

Because Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom were evil, the tree would be cut down. This dream was a prophecy about Babylon's judgment. But the idea is still the same. The birds that come and dwell in the branches are nations that find themselves becoming part of Babylon.

—
Now go ahead and turn back to Luke.

I'm convinced that when Jesus preached these parables they looked back on these Old Testament passages. So now we have the background we need to interpret the parables correctly.

Luke 13:18 He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 19 It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

This parable looks back on the Old Testament verses that prophecy of the Gentiles coming into the kingdom of God.

And this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson one: the parable of the mustard seed illustrates the outward growth of the kingdom of God.

So the kingdom of God is going to grow from something small like a mustard seed to something large like a tree. It is a source of sustenance and shelter for all who seek its blessing...like birds would find in the branches of trees.

The small nature of the mustard seed looks to the humble beginnings of Jesus. He was a man of no rank and without means, and He lived in what everyone considered a backwater region of the world: Nazareth and Galilee. He was with twelve obscure men.

His life and death did not catch the world's attention any more than a mustard seed would lying on the ground by the road. But this was God's work, and what seemed inconsequential at first has spread throughout the world.

The history of the church shows the parable to be true. It has experienced explosive growth through the centuries. I read that within 40 years of Christ's death the gospel reached all the great centers of the Roman world, and many out-of-the-way places. Since that time it has been spreading, gaining people from every country.

Think of the language of this verse...

Revelation 7:9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.

Every Gentile nation will have representatives in the kingdom of God.

Listen to these verses that find their complete fulfillment in the future, but still prophesy of the kingdom of God spreading throughout the whole earth:

- **Psalm 72:19** Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory!
- **Daniel 2:35** Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone (referring to Christ's kingdom) that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.
- **Habakkuk 2:14** For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

What's interesting is if the birds represent the Gentile nations of the world this interpretation does allow the birds to represent something sinful. Typically, when Gentiles are discussed in Scripture they are presented sinfully, and even they can make a nest, or find a home home, in the church.

—
Despite persecution and repeated attempts to stamp out God's kingdom, it has flourished. Nothing and nobody can stop the spread.

Listen to this interesting speech from a Pharisee named Gamaliel making the point that if Christ's ministry really was from God it could not be stopped.

The context is the apostles were arrested, an angel miraculously released them and told them to go preach in the temple. They did this, which upset the religious leaders. They wanted to execute the apostles, but listen to what Gamaliel said...

Acts 5:34 A Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. **35** And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.

In other words, think twice before you execute them, and he encourages them to do so by discussing other men whose works fizzled out. Gamaliel's point is that if Christ's disciples are not from God their ministry will fizzle out as well, but if their ministry is from God then they would be opposing God himself.

Either way they didn't really need to do anything to the apostles.

Acts 5:36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

The fact that Christ’s kingdom continued to spread through the ministry of the apostles, despite all the opposition they faced, is evidence that God’s blessing was on their work.

—
Look at the second parable...

Luke 13:20 And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”

Leaven spreading through dough is a fitting illustration of the kingdom of God spreading through the world:

- Leaven is microscopic in size, and only a little is put into the dough. Yet, given time, it multiplies and spreads through the whole batch. Similarly, the kingdom of God started out small, yet given time it multiplies and spreads through the whole world.
- Leaven moves quietly through the dough. You can’t see it working but you can see the effects: the dough rising. Similarly, the kingdom of God spreads quietly through the world. We can’t see it working, but we can see the effects when people’s hearts are changed.

—
Both parables are beautiful pictures of the kingdom of God spreading.

So, are they making the same point?

They are but from different approaches:

1. The first parable is about outward growth. Birds from outside fly into and become part of the tree.
2. But in the second parable it’s the inside out. The leaven works from inside the dough.

And this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson two: the parable of the leaven illustrates the inward growth of the kingdom of God.

Leaven makes dough rise from within which pictures the way the gospel changes us inwardly: it changes our hearts and then works its way into our actions. There is an inward change that affects outward behavior.

—
Think of it like this...

When the reign of Christ is introduced into human hearts from without, once having entered, it exerts a wholesome and transforming influence. It leads us onward in the process of sanctification that God has for us...

2 Corinthians 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

—
The other day, I think it was in my Bible study with the Mormons, they asked me what the gospel is. I said it is the means by which sinful wretched people like ourselves, who have been separated from a perfectly holy and just God because of our sin, can be reconciled to him.

Or we could make it shorter and say:

- The Gospel is the means by which sinful men get to heaven
- The Gospel is the means by which sinful men are justified or declared righteous

But the gospel is also the means of our sanctification, which brings all our thoughts and actions into line with Christ's thoughts and actions...

2 Corinthians 10:5 we...take every thought captive to obey Christ.

This happens as the gospel spreads through our lives...like leaven spreads through dough.

As people are sanctified through the gospel changing hearts we can see the godly influence in countless ways throughout the world and history. All of this influence is still continuing and is clear to people who look for it. All we need to do is compare the treatment of people – especially slaves, women, children, and the underprivileged – in human history and in countries where Christianity has spread with countries where Christianity is absent.

This also reveals one of the main differences between the true gospel and the social gospel. The social gospel focuses on trying to improve society by focusing on such things such as poverty, sickness, and job conditions. In other words, the social gospel works from the outside inside.

But the true gospel improves society by focusing on the inside – men's hearts – versus the outside – the circumstances in society. As people's hearts are changed the world changes.

Let me conclude with one short important lesson...

Lesson three: nobody is physically born in the kingdom of God.

This is why we must be born again. In **John 3:3** Jesus said, **“Most assuredly I say to you, unless you are born again you will not enter the Kingdom of God.”**

We have to experience a new birth, a spiritual birth, where we become part of God's Kingdom and this happens through faith in Christ, when He becomes our King.

We are born again and delivered from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light...

Colossians 1:13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

Philip Ryken said, *"If you wish to come into God's kingdom, therefore, you must ask God to rescue you from the dominion of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of the Son He loves. You must renounce your deal with the devil and swear allegiance to Christ the King."*

If you have any questions about anything I've talked about or I can pray for you in any way, I will be up front after service and out consider it a privilege to build a speak with you.

Let's pray.