

Mustard Seed and Yeast

This article on Matthew 13:31-35 is edited by John Lin from the Ligonier Ministries

As we continue our sermon series on the parables of Jesus, note again that parables are usually stories drawn from everyday life. Jesus' comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed and yeast in a dough illustrates this fact (Matt. 13:31–33). Men typically worked in agriculture, and women performed domestic chores like the baking of bread in first-century Palestine. In telling parables related to these tasks, Jesus conveys His message in terms that are familiar to ordinary people.

Our studies in Jesus' parables have thus far shown that the Messiah ushered in God's kingdom in a manner that did not meet the expectations of His contemporaries. Instead of an immediate and final entry of God's saving presence, there was an inauguration of the kingdom that is followed by a long period of growth before the final consummation. The mustard plant's growth and the yeast's permeation, both of which take time, illustrate this point.

For the sake of clarity, the NIV Bible describes the mustard seed in verse 32 as “the smallest of all your seeds” (emphasis added). Smaller seeds than those of the mustard plant exist, but Jesus is not making an absolute statement on the size of seeds. Mustard seeds are the smallest of those commonly used by His audience and are used in the parable to make His point easy to grasp. Like the seemingly insignificant mustard seed, God's kingdom starts out small and all but hidden. In time, however, it becomes so large that no one can ignore it — just like the Palestinian mustard plants that can reach ten feet in height. Despite its humble beginning, the kingdom will grow to an immense size (Dan. 2:31–45).

The parable of the yeast makes virtually the same point, albeit from a slightly different perspective (Matt. 13:33). A morsel of yeast is seemingly engulfed and consumed in the larger lump of dough; however, the yeast actually ends up permeating the flour, transforming the dough and making it rise. So too will the Gospel, with slow growth at first, penetrate and transform society. John Chrysostom comments, “The leaven, though it is buried, is not destroyed. Little by little it transmutes the whole lump into its own condition. This happens with the gospel” (Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, 46.2).

Matthew Henry reminds us that yeast “works silently and insensibly, yet strongly and irresistibly.” The kingdom of God works in a similar fashion. Though Christians often suffer and the darkness looks overwhelming, the kingdom is growing nonetheless. One day it will be fully manifest in all creation. Consider today how you have seen the presence of the Lord in your life and pray for His kingdom to come.