

How His Kingdom Comes, Part 1

Luke 13:18-21

If you could turn in your Bibles to Luke, Chapter 13, we are finishing up a section today. Two brief parables from Jesus, and you'll find them in Luke 13:18 to 21. Luke 13:18 to 21. Two simple parables. But once again, we find, what appears to be simple on the surface is profoundly searching and at the same time profoundly encouraging to us.

Jesus said, "Therefore," Luke 13:18, "He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 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.' And again he said, 'To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.'"

PILLAR OF —TRUTH—



Several things Jesus wants to teach about the kingdom of God, all intended to upset our own human expectations, our assumptions. We look back at the Jews, in Jesus' day, these first century listeners, we can see them recorded on the pages of Scripture and they don't get it, do they? They're often missing the point completely. And we read, and we say, we kind of stand on the side of Jesus, we say, how could they not see that? Well, this is the after-action report. I mean, this is the word of God explaining and interpreting it to us. So, let's not become too haughty, as if we'd be any different.

In fact, even today we have certain expectations and assumptions that we carry into the text, all the time. We have certain expectations and assumptions about what the kingdom of God looks like, what success means, what a fruitful ministry is. We're Americans, after all. Some people who've moved here recently are Texans, right? Everything in Texas is big. We are Americans. We love what's big. What appears on the outside to be successful and what is that? A lot of numbers and a lot of money, right? We think in terms of American religion. It's not, at all, the assumptions that we should bring into the text.

We should let the text determine our assumptions and set our expectations. If we all let go of our limiting, limited understanding and if we enter into the text and allow Christ to shape our thinking, we're going to come out of this thing not only with understanding, but with a deep, deep sense of gratitude, and joy, and wonder, in the work of God in his kingdom, as he spreads his kingdom across the world.

First point. One by one, we got the kingdom subverts our expectations. Let's start there, number one, the kingdom subverts, overturns, our expectations. I, should just add, our sinful expectations, our limited expectations, our, our, human expectations. We could even add the words, our inherited expectations. The way we have been cultured. The, the sense that, we all have growing up in the world. We need to lose that.

Kingdom subverts our expectations and we're just gonna start here, making an observation about how Jesus gets into the parables. It kind of portrays him here, in verse 18, as sort of searching for the right metaphor. What is the right image? He says, in verse 18, "What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what

shall I compare it?" You think he's puzzled? Again, in verse 20, he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?"

You know what he's doing by voicing the question. He's not trying to tell you, Hey, I'm human like you. I gotta search for stuff. No. By voicing the question, he's calling on those in the crowd to kind of join him in coming up with the proper analogy. I mean, what do you think the kingdom of God is like? If this synagogue crowd is left to fill in the blank, if he stopped there and just gave them time to muse, provide the imagery or the simile, what do you think of first century Jewish crowd would come up with here?

"What is the kingdom of God like?" Well, oh, the kingdom of God, well, it's the, of God kingdom, and God is bigger than any other. So, it's like the empires, of maybe, like Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, only greater; like the might and the glory of Rome under which we are dominated and oppressed, only stronger, more powerful. Full of heavenly glory.

Perhaps there would be some godly folks who are looking back to Israel's glory days and the kingdom of God is like the kingdoms of, of, David or the kingdom of Solomon. Or maybe both David and Solomon all rolled up into one. Military force, able to both project power around the world and also provide security for the homeland at the same time. Maybe a just judiciary with the wisdom of Solomon, impartial, showing mercy, also able to execute swift justice on evil doers. And consequently, with strength, and wisdom, and judicial righteousness, there is an unimaginable degree of wealth, and health, and prosperity.

That's what the kingdom of God is like. It's just like all those restoration promises. This speaks of the millennial kingdom of God that will rule over the earth. That's the image. That's the kingdom. That's what the kingdom of God is like. Verse 20, "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God?" Hmm, well, it's like the mighty mountains for height. It's like the oceans for depth. It's like the expanse of the earth that runs East, West, North, and South.

We compare the kingdom of God to the sun and its brilliance, to the stars, and all of their wonder and glory, to

the heavens for awe and majesty. We could go on and on. And I don't want you to misunderstand me here. Those comparisons are not wrong. They are true, even biblical. This is how these folks would have answered the question. That's how we answer the question, of what, as well, when we're called to make comparisons. What is the kingdom of God like? But notice, that's not what Jesus said. He said the kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed. And when it grows into a mature tree, everybody can picture a mustard tree, or plant, or bush. It provides nest for the birds.

Ever seen a mustard tree? It's no cedar of Lebanon. Thoughtful Jewish listener, reflecting on this, hearing this from Jesus, his mind may have recalled similar sayings in the scriptures. Nebuchadnezzar was portrayed in Daniel 4, as this massive tree, "the top of which reached to the heaven itself, visible from the ends of the earth." Nebuchadnezzar, "whose leaves were beautiful, it's fruit abundant in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches, the birds of the heavens lived."

That portrayed a pagan king, Babylonian king who came under divine judgment, but there was also a restoration prophecy that they may have called to mind, an illusion. This may have been an illusion for many to Ezekiel 17. Ezekiel 17:22 to 24, it foretells the kingdom of God. So, it's perfect context. It's the perfect setting. Verse 23 says, "On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble," not mustard tree, "a noble cedar. Under it will dwell every kind of bird in the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest."

Jesus has taken a common biblical image; he's given it a little twist. He does that often in his parables. So, a tree with its top reaching heaven. Visible to the ends of the earth. A mighty noble cedar like the renowned cedars of Lebanon. Now those are trees conveying strength, power, glory, height. But for his analogy, Jesus uses the scraggly, relatively unattractive image of a mustard tree, more like an overgrown bush.

He also compares the kingdom to a woman in her kitchen. Domestic setting. She uses leaven in her baking to make her

bread rise. Again, the, the, thoughtful Jewish reader may have heard this. And his mind wants to go back to Moses, right, for bread imagery. Manna coming down from heaven. Nobody's gotta work at all. Just gather it. The very bread of angels.

For his analogy: Common woman, in a household setting, leavening her bread. From the very beginning, Jesus is subverting expectations about the kingdom of God. Human expectations, thoughts that we have about what the kingdom of God should be like. He subverts those expectations using common, rather mundane figures of speech, common metaphors.

And some might call, this, these comparisons a bit pedestrian, so, others, others may even dare to say they're a bit boring. And if that crossed your mind, consider the scene. Consider the setting of the history, the historical setting, here, how the kingdom of God came into this common setting of a synagogue. Common world of a crippled woman; unnoticed by these. so common coming in and out for 18 years with a bent over back. Unnoticed by people for 18 years!

Consider how these people and Jesus drew on this, and confronting them. Consider how they went about with their weekly habits, as unthinking as the animals that they were untying and leading to water. Totally unthinking about what they did week by week and how that should translate into, if I show mercy to my animals, how to show mercy to a woman who needs mercy. Common, used to illustrate the principles of God's kingdom. What God considers the right use of a day of rest. So that's the kingdom that subverts our expectations.

Let's go onto a second point. That the kingdom ignores our assumptions. The kingdom ignores our assumptions. The assumptions that we make. The common is the setting for the uncommon. And in that setting, we see that big things come from very small beginnings. We see this in our common world, all the time. If we'll just quit looking at what's marvelous, and great, and glorious, and just look at our day-to-day life, big things come from very, very small beginnings. Every single one of us is a testimony to that. What did we come from? A fertilized egg in our mother's womb. Invisible to the eye.

And now look at us. God seems to delight in ignoring all the assumptions that we want to make, as he accomplishes his will. Jesus says, in verse 19, "The Kingdom of God, 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 nest in its branches." And then, verse 21, "The Kingdom of God it is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." The tiny grain of mustard seed. The tiny particle of yeast.

If we're thinking according to our own assumptions about, what the kingdom, how it should come in glory, and power, and strength, and all that. When we look in contrast to these very small things, we tend to assume very little of things that are so insignificant, so small. But God just delights in ignoring all those assumptions and setting them aside and accomplishing his will.

A lot of ink has been spilled by commentators as they tried to identify the exact seed and the exact plant that Jesus is identifying here. It's the mustard seed. It's, it really is this, you know, the smallest seed of all the seeds of the earth.

Some say, ha, there are smaller seeds on the earth than the mustard seed. He's not trying to talk in terms of botany here. He's trying to speak in terms of what anybody would use in their garden.

So, it is indeed the smallest of all seeds anybody would care to plant, willfully, in their garden anywhere on Earth. What variety of mustard plant is it? Is it the mustard bush, what's called the *Sinapis Nigra*, which grows from a tiny little black seed to a height of a maybe even 15 feet. Is it that? Or is it the *Salvadora Persica* tree, which can grow in height of up to 25 feet? Many commentators still not getting the point, they want the 25 foot version, not the 15 foot version.

Again, it's not the point. Jesus doesn't want us to go off and study botany here. He's talking about common, mundane, known things to everyday people. He is drawing attention to it. Very simple contrast. Something that anyone in his day, listening to him, anybody could see plainly the, the, mustard plant. Starts from a relatively small size, in its nascent form. A tiny little, tiny little seed, and by contrast, in its mature form, with deep roots, strong trunks, sturdy branches, a broad canopy of leaves,

it provides shade and refuge, home for all kinds of birds, such that when you look from the outside, you can never see the birds hidden in there. That's interesting. Just if you stop and think about it, small to that.

Similar contrast with the woman baking her bread, verse 21, kingdom of God like a woman. "Leaven that a woman took hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened." Now, unless you've been studying in your Bibles, in the back the table of weights and measures, you're not gonna get the significance of what three measures of flour is. It's not going to strike you with the same force that these listeners would have heard.

His audience understood three measures, three *sata*. The word *saton* is the Greek name, for the Hebrew, *se'ah*, single *se'ah*. A single *saton* of flour, a little more than 16 pounds of flour. So, if you prefer the metric system, seven kilos of flour or in dry measure 13.13 liters. That's nearly 50 pounds of flour. This woman is making enough bread to feed more than 150 people. This is an astonishing baking operation. But it can't happen without the addition of a little bit of yeast.

Some yeast particles with invisible influence working its way through the flour. Small bit of leaven that works its way through, the, the whole batch. Changing it. Affecting all of it. Big things come from very small beginnings. As we bring this into, just some things we've seen in Luke's gospel, so far, we can see how this principal transfers clearly to us. Start with the citizens of God's kingdom, those whom Jesus calls in Luke 12:32. He calls them, little flock. I mean, they're not much to look at. Small, small in numbers, small in stature. What are they?

I mean, those who believe in Luke's gospel so far, they're generally anonymous. They're unknown to the pages of history. In the world's eyes, they're insignificant at best. At worst, they're regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. Romans 8:36. They're not only that, though, they may appear small. They may appear weak as sheep, "but they are more than conquerors, not on their own strength, but through him who loved us." Romans 8:37. Many of them, most of them come from small, insignificant beginnings.

Many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Three closest friends, Peter, James, and John; fisherman. One of the disciples was a tax collector, hated despised. Another was a zealot of a failed political cause. Several of the others are hardly known. By the world's estimation, these are unremarkable, relatively unimportant men. And yet they became the foundation of the church. Their names are going to be inscribed, if you look at Revelation 21:22, their names are inscribed on the 12 foundation stones of this incredible city of God, the New Jerusalem.

Other citizens of God's kingdom that we've seen in Luke's gospel, some unknown, unnamed disciples, Luke 8:1. Also in Luke 8:1-3, some women who've been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Luke 8:2. That doesn't sound like a great recruiting pool, for your team, that's on a dream team, you're putting together.

People have issues. One of them, Mary called Magdalene, seven demons came out of her. You imagine the scrambled mess that her life looked like at that point, before the transforming power of the spirit changed her. Doesn't sound promising, at all, to start with. Jesus is pleased to be supported by these

people. Many of these women supporting him out of their own means. He was pleased to do it. Because he didn't see the small beginning. He saw God's greatness in, hidden in treasure, treasure hidden in jars of clay, and he saw what they would be.

Consider their leader, Jesus Christ, king of this kingdom of God. He doesn't enter the scene riding on a white stallion dressed in knights' armor, conquering Romans, seizing the throne. It's how we would have written the story. As far as anyone knew, this king came with no fanfare at all. In the smallest, humblest, most insignificant, of beings, of beginnings. The king of God's kingdom, he's born into the world in the darkness of night. A baby, a human baby, weak, vulnerable, swaddled in cloths, laid in a manger. He's completely and utterly dependent on his mother for his survival, can't even take care of himself.

His parents, they hadn't even consummated their marriage. So, he came with the appearance of, not the truth of, but the appearance of illegitimacy. They're quite poor, these two parents, this family he came into, even when they came and presented Jesus at the temple for the, the, offering, they only

could, could, offer up two turtle doves. Two pigeons maybe? I mean they had nothing.

They had to flee to Egypt for their lives. After returning, they sought the refuge of anonymity in lowly, insignificant Nazareth. That's where Jesus was raised. He entered into ministry, and one of his would-be disciples had the bad sense to point that out to his face: Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Jesus' ministry in Nazareth, as he entered into ministry, as he was baptized by the spirit, in the waters of baptism, with John, when the voice from Heaven said, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. He went back to Nazareth, almost a fatal first step in his ministry. People of his hometown, they're so offended by him, they almost throw him off a Cliff. Not great beginnings. Doesn't look promising.

He set off, an, on an itinerant ministry throughout Galilee, supported by these women. Seemed to be a wasted effort, because many villages, they received his ministry, but they

rejected his teaching. They've refused to repent. Refused to believe in him. Even places like Capernaum, where he had spent so much time, people refused to believe in him. His mission, his mission looked like an abject failure from a human standpoint. Especially when it ended in a humiliating death on a Roman cross and, at that point, even his most loyal disciples, even his closest friends defected. His closest, Peter, three times, "I don't know this man."

Small beginnings and our assumptions; nothing's gonna go well. Yet this Jesus is none other than the son of God. He is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. He came as the son of man, who was known from ancient times. Daniel 7:14, "He was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away. His kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed."

The scandalous message of the cross, the story of a crucified Christ; complete foolishness to most people. But to those who know it's transforming power, to those who are being saved by this message of a crucified Christ, it's nothing less

than "the power of God and the wisdom of God," 1 Corinthians 1:24.

This crucified Christ, God raised him from the dead. God glorified him. He set his seal of approval on him. He gave him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus, Philippians 2:10, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Every tongue should confess that this Jesus Christ is lord, to the glory of God the Father." God put his, he staked his own glory on this one.

This Jesus Christ, Revelation 1:5 says, "He is the faithful witness," he is, "the first born from the dead," he is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Look around at the kings of the earth right now. He's their ruler. They owe him worship. This one is the one who loves his people. He is the one who's freed them from their sins by his own blood. He has made them a kingdom, priests to his God and father. Who were they? Veritable nobody's, not many wise in the world's estimation, not many mighty, not many powerful, not many of noble birth, but God delights to elevate those.

He chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, 1 Corinthians 1:27. "God chose what is weak in the world. To shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are," or seemed to be. He subverts. He just completely abolishes and ignores all of our assumptions, and he does his own thing. Why? First Corinthians 1, "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."