

**Parables of the Kingdom:
The Mustard Seed and the Leaven (Mt 13:31-33)
The Growing Seed (Mk 4:26-29)**

BACKGROUND

- “Leaven in Jewish tradition often had the symbolic meaning of evil, the proneness or tendency to sin in an individual, connected with the rituals of Passover as the feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex 12:19; 13:7; Deut 16:3; 1 Cor 5:6-8)” (Jerome Biblical Commentary). (Lack of leaven was also used to remind Israel of their speedy exodus, e.g. Ex 12:39.)
- “The mustard seed was a black seed called *Sinapi Nigra*, grown in the fields to produce a sharp tangy spice from its grains and greens from its leaves... Michael Zohary, an Israeli botanist, describes the plant as ‘an annual herb with large leaves clustered mainly at the base of the plant. Its central stem branches abundantly in its upper part and produces an enormous number of yellow flowers and small, many-seeded linear fruits.’ ...Even today mustard bushes in Israel often grow to a height of eight to twelve feet.”¹
- “Manson points out that ‘birds of heaven’ are a stock symbol for the Gentile nations, as seen in Ezek 17:23; 31:5-6; and Dan 4:12, 21, which refer to the success of Assyria and Babylon or to the future restoration of Israel.” (Bailey)

QUESTIONS

1. State in one sentence (each) what each of these three parables says about the kingdom.
2. Do you tend to think of the world as getting better, worse, or staying the same? Do these parables have anything to say about this?
3. About the parable of the leaven, John Chrysostom writes:²

Do not say to me, “What shall we be able to do, twelve men, throwing ourselves upon so vast a multitude?” Rather, the most conspicuous thing about the apostles is that they were not put to flight when they mixed with the multitude. The leaven then leavens the lump when it comes close to the meal, and not simply close but so as to be actually *mixed* with it. He said it was not simply put in the flour but *hid* in it. So you also, when you come close to your enemies and are made one with them, then shall you get the better of them.

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. Do not fear, then, that there will be many dangerous circumstances. For even then you will shine forth and be victorious.

Discuss.

4. Regarding the parables of the leaven and mustard seed, Gary DeLashmutt writes:³

Note carefully what Jesus is predicting as the key development in human history between his two comings. Not Christian political domination or military conquest or cultural imperialism, not simply a church building in every political nation, not the whole world Christianized—but world-wide, cross-cultural evangelism resulting in an indigenous community of true believers in Jesus for every ethnic group.

¹ Mark L. Bailey, *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, 449-59 (1998)

² Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. Ia, Ed. Manlio Simonetti (IVP: Downer’s Grove), 2001, p. 282.

³ Xenos Christian Fellowship, Columbus, OH; <http://www.xenos.org/teachings/topical/parables/gary/parables-3.htm>.

While in 100 AD there were 12 unreached people groups for every local church, today there are 600 local churches for every remaining unreached people group.”⁴ ...If you understand this, it becomes an itch in your soul that prevents you from settling down into the ‘American Dream’ of personal peace and affluence. This is God’s purpose for your life—to contribute to his worldwide plan for this age. When you stand before Jesus at the judgment seat, he’s not going to ask you how low you got your gold score, how wisely you picked your stock portfolio. He’s going to ask you, ‘How did you invest the life and resources I entrusted to you to my plan to take the gospel to every people group?’

(Note: DeLashmutt doesn’t see Church growth as the only interpretation of this passage.) Discuss.

5. The parable of the growing seed describes how the kingdom grows without our assistance. Was Jesus trying to emphasize a hands-off approach to kingdom growth? If so, what sort of action was he discouraging on the part of the disciples? See also the application in James 5:7-9.
6. We have read three parables about the coming of the kingdom: The mustard seed (small beginnings and big endings), the leaven (universal effect from a small source) and the growing seed (its autonomous action—Mk 4:28 says the earth produces of its own accord, in Greek *automate*). (Feel free to argue with these summaries.) How would you apply these to local church growth?
7. Regarding the parable of the leaven, Michael Green writes⁵

Despite its appalling failures and sins, it is beyond question that down the ages the church has had an amazing record in medical care, social work, education, liberation of women and slaves, and the defense of prisoners, the aged, the helpless, and those whom society neglects. The first institution for the blind was founded by Thalasius, a Christian monk. The first free dispensary was founded by Apollonius, a Christian merchant. The first hospital was founded by Fabiola, a Christian woman. Hidden and obscure the kingdom may be, but it has had and continues to have an undeniable effect upon society. It is yeast in the flour.

How is our local body of believers leavening the loaf around us?

8. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven both suggest the that the kingdom arrives gradually but thoroughly. Do you think this is on a global or local scale, or both? On a scale where 1 is the seed and 10 is the tree, where are we globally? How about locally? If the fully grown seed is a sheltering tree, what does the fully grown kingdom look like?
9. Regarding the parable of the leaven, Robert Capon writes

Just as yeast enters the dough by being dissolved in the very liquid that makes the dough become dough at all—just as there is not a moment of the dough’s existence, from start to finish, in which it is unleavened dough—so this parable insists that the kingdom enters the world at its creation and there is not, and never has been, any unkingdomed humanity anywhere in the world. For by, with, and in the very fluids that make and restore creation—by waters on whose face the Spirit moved, by the mist that watered Eden, by the paschal blood on the doorposts, by the blood of the covenant on Sinai, by the waters of Jordan in Jesus’ baptism, by the blood and water from his side on the cross, and by the river of life in the New Jerusalem—the Word, who is the yeast that leaves not on scrap of this lump of a world unleavened, has *always* been hidden in his creation.

(*Parables of the Kingdom*, Eerdmans) Discuss.

⁴ Ralph Winter, *Mission Frontiers*, Nov-Dec 1996, **18**, pp. 18-19.

⁵ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP: Downer’s Grove), p. 159.