

Mustard and Leaven

Matthew 13:31-35

A Sermon for Children

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
1/2/2011*

Mustard and Leaven

Matthew 13:31-35

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” ³³ Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” ³⁴ All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, ³⁵ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:31-35).

Introduction

I was reading the comic strip, *Dilbert* the other day when I came upon a dialogue Dilbert was having with his mom. In this particular strip Dilbert was a young boy who wanted to go skateboarding with his friends at a construction site. When his mother said “no” Dilbert said what my kids (and I’m sure many of you) have said a thousand times: “Why not? Everyone else does?”

Dilbert’s mother then gave the iron clad refutation that I’ve given thousand times. She said: “If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you do that?” But then Dilbert employed some very clear thinking that left his mother speechless. “Well that would depend on many factors,” Dilbert answered, “including height, training and equipment. But if 100% of the people who jumped off cliffs said they enjoyed it, as in my skateboard example...then I would conclude that it was safe. A better question might have been ‘If everyone wore clothes, would you do that?’” The next panel was Dilbert walking to the construction site with his skateboard under his arm.

I don’t bring this up to help equip the children to win dialogues with their parents. What I’m trying to highlight here is the tendency we have to be influenced by what the majority of people are doing. Dilbert’s initial

response to his mother, that everybody is doing it, is insufficient to convince his mother that what he wants to do is okay. But his mother's answer doesn't sufficiently address the problem either (it merely shows that his initial argument is unconvincing). He actually has to go on to explain why it's okay.

There is a logical fallacy employed, not only by children, but by numerous people in all areas of life all the time. The fallacy is *argumentum ad populum* or 'appeal to the masses'. Companies, political candidates and causes want to give the impression that they're ahead of the competition—that they are the norm. They realize this will influence, encourage or discourage.

State Farm wants you to know they sell more than Geico and Progressive put together. Political candidates want us to think they're ahead in the polls. People who want to transform the definition of marriage or what constitutes when a baby's life begins or how human life began want us to think that they have the masses on their side. And we would be foolish to think this will not have some effect upon us.

When I coached college we would play a team that had a gym that almost seemed designed to make the visiting team uncomfortable. There was no player's bench. When I called a time-out, fans would be sitting in my seat. And the fans were loud and obnoxious and close. I would explain this in advance to my team and they would foolishly say things like, "That will just fire me up." But halfway through the game, as soon as we made a mistake, the fans would start screaming and inevitably my players started throwing each other under the bus. A home court advantage is just that.

I think it was for this reason that the author of Hebrews, referring to the faithful saints who had suffered and died for their faith, encourages his readers in their battle against sin, to view these departed saints as a "**great cloud of witnesses**" (Hebrews 12:1) the way a runner might be encouraged as he turns the home stretch to be greeted by thousands of fans cheering him to the finish line.

It was knowledge of this tendency in man (to be influenced by the masses) that led Paul to write, "**let God be true but every man a liar**" (Romans 3:4). This weakness was, no doubt, resident in Elijah when he said, "**Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life**" (Romans 11:3)?

The Mustard Seed

How does this relate to the Parable of the Mustard Seed? The parable itself is simple. The kingdom of heaven starts small and gets big. In its growth it provides branches for nests – a refuge of rest, comfort, protection, nourishment and instruction.

But during the time of the Apostles, Christ's kingdom did not appear to be providing much in the way of size or comfort. It might have appeared to be more of a hornet's nest than a bird's nest. To be in Christ's kingdom meant tribulation (John 16:33) and to be ostracized (John 9:22) and killed (Acts 7). The kingdom of Christ may still appear this way in certain lands even today. In this simple parable Jesus is conveying to His followers that it is His kingdom that will endure until the end. It is His kingdom that will continue to grow.

Here we see a promise God made long ago to Abraham (something Jesus seems to indicate was not fully understood, having been "kept secret from the foundation of the world")

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2, 3).

God further expressed this to Abraham:

Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be (Genesis 15:5).

These are great promises given to Abraham of a kingdom of enormous proportions. Paul clarifies who these promises are referring to:

And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

If you believe in Jesus, there is a great promise that you are part of a kingdom that will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Any sociological study during the time of Jesus would have found this laughable! But Jesus' true followers realized that they had been blessed with **"every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ"** (Ephesians 1:3). And with that they realized that their Savior had been raised,

...far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Ephesians 1:21).

Sometimes things aren't what they appear. Jesus taught:

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24).

We must learn to believe what is true and do what is right regardless of our surroundings. John Calvin said of these two parables:

By these parables Christ encourages his disciples not to be offended and turn back on account of the mean beginnings of the Gospel.¹

This is quite consistent with the way the kingdom of portrayed in the Old Testament. Ezekiel compares it to a healing river that starts small then becomes an impassable deluge (Ezekiel 47:5). In Daniel we learn that it is like a stone which becomes a mountain and covers the entire earth (Daniel 2:35). In Isaiah we read,

For as the earth brings forth its bud, As the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations (Isaiah 61:11).

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

The kingdom of God will have its effect upon all the nations/families of the earth. Jesus didn't want His follower to be discouraged by what might appear to be slow progress. The wheels of God's judgments may grind slowly, but they grind to powder (Matthew 21:44; Luke 20:18).

The Leaven

But we're not left thinking that the kingdom is merely going to get big; like some shallow military occupation. The Jerusalem at this time was occupied by Rome and the Roman Empire had little concern regarding the heart and culture of the Israelites. The kingdom of God is not merely a presence; it permeates.

Like leaven hid in three measures of meal (enough to feed 100 people) it permeates the loaves. There is no aspect of the loaf which is not also, in some respect, leaven. Whether this refers to the individual characteristics of the citizens or the familial/geo-political influence makes no difference; to affect one is to affect the other. If the kingdom influences every aspect of me personally (family, church member, citizen), and if the kingdom grows, it will have its effect upon many families, churches, citizens, etc.

No doubt, front and center of our faith is the shed blood of Christ for the remission of sins. But we should not think of our faith as a mere category in our lives that must stay put. Every part of us (school, social life, hobbies, and careers) belongs to Christ and is to be governed by His wisdom.

It yields more real satisfaction to see in this brief parable just the *all-penetrating* and *assimilating* quality of the Gospel, by virtue of which it will yet mould all institutions and tribes of men, and exhibit over the whole earth one "kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ."²

²Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 13:33). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Those who would take rank against the kingdom of Christ (either wittingly or unwittingly) recognize the need to subdue every category of human culture. One example is a common academic response to the private and home schooling movement which has begun to flourish due to the influence of secular humanism in the public schools alongside the rejection of Christ as the true deposit of all **“wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3).**

Professor Martha Albertson Fineman from Emory University School of Law wrote that “public education should be mandatory and universal.”³ Professor Kimberly Yuracko from Northwestern University School of Law wrote that: “parental control over children’s basic education flows from the state (rather than vice versa). States delegate power over children’s basic education to parents...”⁴

This is not to be taken as a tirade against government education as much as it should be understood that there are forces or influences that want you heart and they will seek to access your heart from numerous venues – not the least of which being false religion. This is why Jesus taught, **“Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:11).**

I believe what Jesus is teaching in the Parable of the Leaven is that the message of His redeeming blood and wisdom of His holy counsel will cover the earth **“As the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).** Christ’s kingdom will not merely be large; it will be a blessing to all the earth. In these parables I believe Jesus is seeking to raise the vision of His followers beyond their current observable circumstances; that they might not be cast down by the naysayers nor intimidated by the **“the disputer of this age” (1 Corinthians 1:20).** They were to know what the Apostle Paul would teach later, **“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world” (1 Corinthians 1:20)?**

Calvin explains:

If the aspect of Christ’s kingdom be despicable in the eyes of the flesh, let us learn to raise our minds to the boundless and

³ Martha Albertson Fineman, “Taking Children’s Interests Seriously,” in *What is Right for Children? The Competing Paradigms of Religion and Human Rights*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Karen Worthington, 229-37 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, Publishing Company, 2009), 233. From *HSLDA Mag*, Nov./Dec. 2010.

⁴ Yuracko, “Education Off the Grid,” 132. From *HSLDA Mag*, Nov./Dec. 2010.

incalculable power of God, which at once created all things out of nothing, and every day raises up *things that are not*, (1 Corinthians 1:28,) in a manner which exceeds the capacity of the human senses. Let us leave to proud men their disdainful laugh, till the Lord, at an unexpected hour, shall strike them with amazement. Meanwhile, let us not despond, but rise by faith against the pride of the world, till the Lord give us that astonishing display of his power, of which he speaks in this passage.⁵

⁵Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. What logical fallacy is used when someone says “Everybody’s doing it” (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does the Bible say about being at odds with the majority (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are some things the mustard seed tell us about the growth and nurturing of God’s kingdom (page 4)?
4. How does this parable connect with the promise made to Abraham (page 4)?
5. How do you think this parable would have encouraged Jesus’ followers (pages 5, 6)?
6. What is the distinction between the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven (page 6)?
7. What part of us belongs to Christ (pages 6, 7)?
8. What is Jesus promising will happen in the Parable of the Leaven? What should our response to that be (pages 7, 8)?