

Will they offer sacrifices? Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish which are burned?" These enemies laughed at any possibility of success, yet Nehemiah working in dependency on the Lord, in very short order they did rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to the consternation of the enemies!

Example after example could be given about how God works with what seems so small and tiny to accomplish great things. Think of young David anointed as king rather than his bigger, more established, and recognized brothers. See giant Goliath fall headlong and David prevail so strong, living by God and His Word! Think here of Micah 5:2 where God's Word proclaims, "*But thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth to Me, that is to be the Ruler in Israel; Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*" In Isaiah 60:22 we read, where God is speaking of the glory of His cause and kingdom, "*A little one shall become a thousand and a small one a strong nation: I the Lord will hasten it in His time.*" Can anything good come from little despised Nazareth where Jesus lived most of His life? You see how God works through small ways to accomplish great things? As we read also from John 6, the question of Andrew underscores the same, with a crowd of more than 5000 to feed, "[We have here] a *lad who has five loaves and two fishes, but what are they among so many?*" Think further of the small beginnings of the Christian church with the 120 in the upper room waiting and praying for the Holy Spirit? Would they influence and transform the whole then known world? It hardly seemed possible, but with God nothing is impossible...and this is His Word from beginning to end, the work which He has begun, however small it may seem at first, it will by His grace and power be fully done, and totally triumphant be in the end.

This is the message of all of Scripture and Jesus' two parables just reinforce this gospel truth so beautifully and powerfully. Are you savingly persuaded and influenced and impacted by this gospel? Is it hidden in your heart and life, too, transforming your whole being for God and good, and that more and more as each day goes by, through His grace and Spirit? Don't let us be discouraged by small beginnings and/or much opposition in the gospel way, but keep with God and His Word and you cannot fail! That is one clear message of our two parables. Does anyone not have ears to hear it? Listen again next week as we continue our study of these two most encouraging parables of Jesus.

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*Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee that it may be displayed because of the truth. (Psalm 60:4)*



#### JESUS' POWERFUL GOSPEL ENCOURAGEMENT [1]

Jesus' powerful gospel encouragement is the theme for this and next week's message looking now at Jesus' two short parables about the mustard seed and leaven as found in Matthew 13:31-33. In these verses we read: *Another parable put He [Jesus] forth unto them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof. Another parable spake He unto them; the kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.'*

In studying these two parables, consider with me the following three questions:

1. What is pictured here by Jesus?
2. What is proclaimed here by Jesus?
3. What is promoted here by Jesus?

First, let us see the pictures of encouragement Jesus gives. The setting is important here for us to realize. Jesus had just given two parables also found in Matthew 13 that may have seemed a little disheartening. The parable of the sower spoke of four different types of hearing, and stressed only one of the four is the kind of hearing you and I need to give to God's Word. We must ever watch out for barely listening to God's Word, or listening only superficially, or listening only temporarily with one ear to God's Word while at the same time having one ear to the world. He that has an ear to hear, urges Jesus earnestly, let him hear! This parable is followed by the one about the field of wheat and tares, telling of the evil one influencing and infiltrating the Christian church until the end. These parables could come across as somewhat discouraging, but in that setting, listen now to these two little parables, and what Jesus in great encouragement pictures with them.

In the first parable, Jesus pictures the kingdom of heaven which refers to His gospel cause, His rule of grace in people's hearts and lives, or you could say even the life and activity of the Christian church. It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field, 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.

The mustard seed and plant is still commonly grown in Palestine. It is among the smallest of seeds around as such, and it was a common saying in Jesus' time that when you wanted to speak of something very tiny and small, you would say, "it is as small as a mustard seed." But from something so small and tiny, Jesus brings out, you get a huge plant, indeed, a plant that can grow 10 to 15 feet tall at least so that it can be referred to even as a tree. Just imagine, from one tiny seed a huge 15 foot tree with branches spreading out giving a place for the birds of the air to come and perch and lodge and rest and nest therein.

What is Jesus picturing for his disciples here and for all of us still today? His cause cannot and will not fail, but even from the tiniest and simplest of beginnings it will grow and grow and grow not only, but also it will be a source of true blessing to countless others. The birds of the air coming and nesting in the mustard tree bring out this fact how the gospel cause will be a source of blessing for many others, even for as many as will come and hear and abide in the gospel cause. Indeed, we can even say from this little parable, we may know that from those who first would oppose the gospel cause and tried to swallow it and destroy its influence in the world, one day they too may come by God's grace to find shelter in its branches! Wouldn't even the apostle Paul later be a real example of this, a bird that first tried to swallow the mustard seed of the gospel, but later lodged in the mustard tree, and lived that others might come under its shade and blessing too?

The parable gives such an encouraging and hopeful and inviting picture about the success of the gospel cause regardless of how simple and small its beginnings might be and seem to be. Jesus then underscores this encouraging picture with the twin parable following when He says, "*the kingdom of heaven is like leaven [yeast], which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal [flour] till it was all leavened.*" Three measures of flour is a large amount of flour, about a bushel even, but, says Jesus, putting a little leaven or yeast in it will impact the whole batch causing it all to rise in an irresistible, unmistakable, visible manner. The leaven in this parable refers to the penetrating, powerful energy of God's Word, the Word of His kingdom, the Word of Christ. When that takes root in our lives, it will have an impact that affects and impacts every part of our lives, and indeed, ultimately the whole world!

Notice the parable says the woman took the leaven from elsewhere to mingle it with the lump of dough and even such is the gospel telling of a kingdom not of this world. As R.C. Trench put it in his commentary on the parables, Christianity "is not the unfolding of any powers already existing in the world, but a new power brought from above!" Indeed, brought through Christ and His saving work! And having this leaven hidden in the dough refers to the seed of the gospel being received and rooted and grounded within our hearts, by faith worked by the Holy Spirit and resulting in total

transformation of life by His grace. The early history of Christianity in its simple and quiet beginnings from God seemed like it was hidden, as also the first beginnings of the Lord in a person's heart when the Spirit works with regenerating power through the Word. It is something untraceable and hidden from human view, but when it once is within us, that leaven of the gospel moves from the inward to the outward towards total renewal and renovation of life and outlook.

The parable says the result of the leaven hidden in the dough is that it will work till it is all leavened, the whole of it influenced and graced by His saving power. Till the whole is leavened promises not only of Christianity and it's influence reaching to the ends of the earth in a worldwide sense, but also in a personal sense we may say Jesus is teaching here, when the word of life, the gospel of His kingdom, is received into any single heart, it shall not cease working, by God's grace and Spirit, till it has brought the whole man into obedience to it, sanctifying him wholly, so that he shall be altogether a new creation in Christ Jesus. What powerful gospel encouragement Jesus surely gives here! How encouraging it would have been for Jesus' disciples. Do you find it encouraging too?

You see how both parables simply but powerfully teach us that the kingdom of heaven, though obscure and small in its beginnings, will most certainly progress and irresistibly even expand, and there will come ultimate triumphant success on the gospel cause. While the twin parables together emphasize this gospel truth, they differ in that the mustard seed parable focuses on the outward and extensive growth of God's kingdom cause, whereas the parable of the leaven focuses on the inward and intensive growth and power of God's kingdom cause. The two joined together speak all the more encouragingly about the kingdom of heaven in its sure inward and outward growth and success individually and worldwide.

What a gospel message also for our times today, and for each individual person in all the world. To see this more, let us move on to our second question under the theme of Jesus' powerful gospel encouragement here and notice going from what is pictured here to what is proclaimed here? I have already touched on this somewhat but see with me more specifically the following.

For one, how these two little parables fit so in line with all God's Word and gospel message, also very much from the Old Testament. Speaking, for instance, of God working through seeming small and even hidden beginnings, think of texts like Zechariah 4:10 where God says, "*Who has despised the day of small things?*" telling things may look small and tiny and even be invisible from our perspective but in the hands of almighty God, great things will be accomplished! In Nehemiah 4:2 we read of the heathen scoffing at the Jews under Nehemiah rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem and they say there, "*What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves?*"