The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like

Passage: Luke 13:18-21 | From the series: Luke
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Good morning! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here.

Let me pray as we get ready to jump into God's Word together.

Lord, thank you that you are a God who speaks. Thank you for speaking to us through the prophets of old, through your Son, Jesus, through our Word, the Holy Scriptures, and through your Spirit. Give us ears to hear and hearts to receive your Word to us today. Amen.

In the opening chapter of C.S. Lewis's novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, a Cambridge philosopher named Ransom finds himself in a precarious situation. After being drugged and then hit over the head, he awakes to find himself kidnapped…in space. Or, more specifically, on a spaceship on its way to the planet of Malacandra, where Ransom must spend the next several weeks.

This new planet is unlike earth in many ways. The water in the lakes is strangely warm. The plants are unusually tall and skinny. Gravity itself seemed to work differently.

Early on, Ransom realizes that he has much to learn about this new planet. Fortunately for him, he has a guide: a creature native to this planet who teaches him the language, explains the planet's landscape and culture, and helps him navigate his way through this strange new land.

If you have ever traveled to a new country or even an unfamiliar part of our country, you may have felt like Ransom – out of place, ignorant, and unsure how to act. Wouldn't it be helpful to have a guide?

Up to this point in our study of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been introducing his disciples (and us) to a strange new land, a land called the kingdom of God. This land is not another planet or another country. It's not even a different physical place. Rather, the kingdom of God is this place, this life, this world, under the rule and reign of God.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is breaking in. That the rule and reign of God is breaking in.

And he also tells us that life in the kingdom of God is categorically different from life outside the kingdom of God. The rules are different. The expectations are different. The laws that govern the land are different. We have a lot to learn about life in the kingdom of God.

But thankfully, Jesus is here to serve as our guide – to teach us about the kingdom of God, to help us understand what it is like and how it works so that we can live well in this new kingdom.

Lessons from the Mustard Seed

As we read earlier, our text for this morning contains two parables about the kingdom of God. Two illustrations. Two object lessons that help us understand the nature of the kingdom and the impact that it makes on the way we live. The mustard seed and the leaven. Two images. Similar points.

Let's look again at the first parable.

Luke 13:18-19

> *18 He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 19 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."*

As with many of Jesus' parables, Jesus uses an image that would have been familiar to people. In this case, he uses the mustard seed. You might actually be more familiar with this image than you think. The mustard plant was common in Ancient Israel, and it is common in California as well. It's a weed-like plant that covers the hillside with beautiful yellow flowers in the spring. It looks something like this **[Mustard Field image]**.

The Scriptures use the seed of the mustard plant on several occasions as an image of something small. In Mark's version of this parable, he explicitly says that it is the smallest of all seeds. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus says that even faith the size of a mustard seed—in other words, very, very small—can move mountains.

The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like this tiny seed that a man plants in his garden, and it grows into a tree—a tree so large that birds can make nests in its branches. Now, take a look at this field of mustard plants. Do you see any trees there? No. Mustard doesn't grow into trees. Its a shrub-like plant that grows 4 to maybe 10 feet tall.

How could a mustard plant grow into a tree so large and strong that birds could make nests in it? Only by the power of God. This is supernatural growth—far beyond what anyone expected and far beyond what anyone could produce in their own power.

So it is with the kingdom of God. You see, the first thing that Jesus wants to teach us about the kingdom of God is that **The Kingdom of God starts small but grows large.** The Kingdom starts small, but it grows large.

Think about Jesus and his small band of disciples. Jesus didn't come on a war horse. He didn't build an army or establish an empire. No. He gathered twelve disciples. He taught people about the kingdom of God. He shared meals with people. And in the end, everyone abandoned him as he hung alone on a cross. Even after the resurrection, his band of followers remained small. If it stopped there, Jesus would have been the kind of character that history books would have overlooked.

But it didn't stop there, did it? No, the mustard seed fell into the ground, and slowly, over time, it has grown into a tree as nearly 2.5 billion Christians surround the globe. And the growth is just beginning. One day, the kingdom of God will cover the whole earth.

The kingdom of God starts small, but it grows large. This is not only true of Jesus and his disciples. This is also true for us. We don't have to do something "big" for the kingdom in order for it to count. No, even the small things count. In fact, every contribution to the kingdom of God counts, no matter how small. One conversation with a coworker or neighbor. One selfless act of love. One student that you share the gospel with while serving in children's or youth ministry.

The life of Edward Kimball illustrates this perfectly. Living in Boston in 1855, Edward Kimball was like many of us. He was a business man with a love for Jesus and a desire to make him known, but without much to offer the kingdom of God.

Kimball started serving at his church, working with the youth. As he did, a special burden emerged for one particular teenager, a young man named Dwight Moody.

Dwight Moody, about 17 years old at the time, was relatively uneducated. He dropped out of school and was working as a clerk in his uncle's shoe store. His uncle, the story goes, had hired Moody under one condition, that he started attending church.

So Moody ends up in Edward Kimball Sunday school class. As Kimball gets to know Moody, he develops a special burden for sharing God's love with him. One day, Kimball decided to visit Moody while he was at work at his uncle's shoe store. Anxious about stepping out of his comfort zone in this way, Kimball walked right past the store, too nervous to go in. Eventually he works up the courage to enter. He finds Moody, shares the gospel, and right there, that young teenager gave his life to Jesus.

In the decades that followed, Dwight Moody became one of the great evangelists of the century, starting a movement that resulted in thousands of people coming to Christ.

One small act: visiting a teenager at work to share the gospel with them. One small act that supernaturally grew into something large.

This is how things work in the kingdom of God.

So what do we do? We **Sow Seeds.** We sow the seeds of the kingdom knowing that things in the kingdom always start small. A word of encouragement here. A prayer here. An act of hospitality here. An evangelistic conversation here. Small things. Mustard seeds. We sow seeds knowing that God takes small things and grows them into things larger than we can imagine.

Lessons from Leaven

Let's think now about Jesus' second parable, the parable of the leaven. Look again at **Luke 13:20-21.**

> *[20] And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? [21] It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."*

Leaven—another common, household image—becomes Jesus' next point of comparison. We talked about leaven a few weeks ago as Garrett was up here making sourdough on stage. Leaven is a living culture of bacteria and yeast that ferment sugars in order to make bread rise.

In the ancient world, when making bread, you would take what we think of as a sourdough starter, a small mixture of water and flour that contained these living cultures. This was the leaven. You would then "hide" that small mixture into a larger batch of flour by kneading it throughout, adding more water until you had dough.

At this stage, dough with leaven and dough without leaven would look the same. You could not distinguish one from the other. Because the leaven was hidden. But as the living cultures in the leaven begin to ferment the sugars in the flour, bubbles begin to form and the dough begins to rise.

Here's the thing about leaven: once you mix it into the dough, even though you can't see the leaven, growth is inevitable and unstoppable.

If you have ever made sourdough before, you know this well. Linzy makes sourdough at our house. She usually feeds the starter, the leaven, in the evening, adding more flour and water to the mixture. On more than one occasion, we have woken up to a jar that is overflowing. You see, once you have mixed the leaven into the dough, the process is out of your hands. Even though the leaven is hidden in the dough, the growth that will come is unstoppable.

So it is with the kingdom of God. **The Kingdom of God is Hidden yet Unstoppable.**

Early this year, I had the opportunity to teach a group of middle school students at The King's Academy 7th and 8th grade fall retreat. As I was getting ready, the leader of the retreat gave this preface on multiple occasions: *Just remember, with middle schoolers, it might look like nothing is happening, but God is at work. You might not see your words making a difference, but when they get to high school you start to see that God really was doing something in their lives this whole time.*

This might be especially true with middle schoolers, but this is just how things work in the kingdom of God. So much remains hidden in the kingdom of God. It often looks like nothing is happening. But just as leaven that has been kneaded into a lump of dough, the growth is both inevitable and unstoppable.

Before coming to PBC eleven years ago, I was doing high school ministry at a church in Chicago. There were several guys that I met with regularly for mentorship. Weekly. Twice a month. The rhythms varied, but I spent a lot of time with these guys. There were times in which I saw these guys grow, but the growth seemed small. A few steps forward. A few steps back.

A few months ago, one of the guys reached out to me after not hearing from him for ten years. He saw a clip from one of my sermons online that reminded him of something I told him twelve years earlier. And he said, *Hey, I just wanted to let you know how impactful that was in my life. I still think about it often, and it's really helped me grow in faith over the years.*

I actually remembered the conversation that he was referencing. I remember where we were sitting in the pizza parlor when we had that conversation. But I had no idea that my words actually made a difference in his life—much less a difference that would persist over a decade.

Hidden, yet unstoppable. This is how it is with the kingdom of God. That relative that you have been praying for for years. That friend that you have shared the gospel with multiple times. That small act of love toward a stranger than you never saw again. All leaven that we knead into the dough. Once we do, it's hidden. We don't see what's happening. But know this: something is happening. God is at work. We may not see it. We may not understand it. But the kingdom is growing, and the growth is unstoppable.

So what do we do? We **Wait Expectantly**. We wait expectantly knowing that God is at work even when we can't see it. That the Spirit is stirring even when we don't know how. That God is growing his kingdom in ways that may be hard to perceive now but will one day be undeniable. Because the kingdom of God is unstoppable. No failure on our part, no opposition from others, no spiritual warfare is able to stop God's kingdom from coming. It is breaking in, and one day it will cover the whole earth.

The Kingdom that Makes Space

The mustard seed and the leaven. Two parables that teach us that the kingdom of God starts small but grows large, that it is hidden yet unstoppable.

There is one more point about the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus wants to communicate through these parables, and we see it in an element of both of them, and we see it in two phrases: "the birds of the air made nests in its branches," and "three measures of flour."

In the mustard seed parable, Jesus says that the tiny seed will grow into a tree so large that the birds will make their nests in its branches. In various places throughout the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as a tree, usually a large cedar tree, that the birds make their nests in. The birds, in this Old Testament image, are the nations. The people of God was never meant to be confined to one ethnic group or to one culture. It was meant for all people.

In the same way, now in the New Covenant, the Kingdom of God is so large, so expansive, so inclusive, that it makes space for all kinds of people.

In the parable of the leaven, we are told that the leaven is hidden in three measures of flour. This would have been nearly 50 pounds of flour, or enough to make bread for over 150 people. That's a lot of bread!

The principle here that Jesus wants us to understand is **The Kingdom of God is big enough for everyone**. The kingdom of God is big enough for everyone.

Throughout the teachings of Jesus, there is this repeated emphasis that those who assume they are in the kingdom are in the most danger of being excluded, while those who seem like they should be excluded are actually right in the heart of the kingdom of God. When we finally arrive in the new creation, we will almost certainly be surprised by who is *not* there and by who *is* there.

Because, while the kingdom of God welcomes all people, not everyone will receive that welcome. What matters isn't how well you fit the part. It's not about external appearances or performance. What matters is whether you trust Jesus. Whether you look to him as your Lord and Savior.

So I have one final encouragement for us this morning: **Make Space**. First make space for Jesus. Open your heart to him. Create space in your life for him. Welcome him in even as he has welcomed you in. But also make space for others, especially others that don't seem like they belong, because the kingdom of God welcomes all people.

Two Guys in a Garage

As I sat with these parables over the past few weeks, I began to wonder what kind of parable would Jesus tell if he were here today? What image of metaphor from our culture would he use?

The kingdom of heaven is like two guys in Menlo Park who started a business in their garage… And that business grew into a $3 Trillion multinational corporation that touches nearly every space known to man.

This story has some things in common with the mustard seed and the leaven. It started small and grew large. Growth was slow at first and seemingly unstoppable over time. But that's about where the comparison ends.

Here is where Google, or any other startup story breaks down as a parable for the kingdom. A startup is about *building* something, but the mustard seed is about *growing*. All the man did was plant the seed. God brought all of the growth.

Building a startup is flashy, especially when its a startup that grows into a company that changes the world. But even the largest companies around today will fall. All companies do. All empires do. But not the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God will continue growing until it fill the whole earth. The kingdom of God will prevail. It truly is unstoppable.

And who benefits most from a startup? Hopefully it offers a product or service that is actually good for the world. But the person who benefits most is the founder. When the company does well, I do even better. But the kingdom of God is about others. Loving others. Serving others. Welcoming them in.

So, it turns out that the kingdom of heaven is nearly nothing like two guys who started a company in their garage. It's nearly nothing like anything else we are familiar with. It is unique. Mysterious. Otherworldly.

But it is here. It is among us now. And it will continue to come until it fills the earth.

In C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom ends up learning much about Malacandra from his guide. But here is the most surprising thing that he learns: Malacandra is not the strange planet. Earth, in fact, is the strange planet. Earth, the silent planet, has cut itself off from the rest of the universe. It has become bent in on itself. Earth, filled with sinful people, is the place that does not function as it ought to. Malacanda is actually normal, and earth is strange.

So it is with the kingdom of God. It seems strange to us, but it turns out that *we* are the strange ones. The way things work here are not the way God has designed them. So let's look to Jesus. Let's let him be our guide. And let's follow him into the kingdom of God.