

Luke 13:10-21  
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FBC Vancouver  
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**How the Kingdom [Ordinarily] Advances**  
(Series: Parables of Jesus)

Next weekend, Friday through Sunday, one of the most important events for the health of our city will be taking place at the Vancouver Convention Centre. Thousands of people will gather for the annual Missions Fest.

This year's theme is "Hidden In Plain Sight," lifting up the fact that "the mission field" is right in front of us, if we have eyes to see. This year's Fest features a number of outstanding plenary speakers, including Mark Buchanan, Beth Guckenberger, and Josh McDowell. Between the plenary sessions 100 seminars will be offered, led by women and men in front-line mission projects. There will be 250 exhibits from different mission agencies from around the world. I hope you can get in on at least some of the event. Neil Redenbaugh is taking our youth on Friday night.

Here at FBC we will be offering a number of other ways to focus on the mission of Jesus in the world. On Tuesday night, the CLT are going to serve at Shelter. On Wednesday night, at our "Heart & Soul" gathering, we will hear more about the gospel and human trafficking. On Saturday, we are hosting a workshop by Brian Fikkert, author of the book, *"Helping Without Hurting,"* subtitled, *"Could Our Aid Actually Be Hindering the Poor? And What You Can Do About It."*

Then, next Sunday, we will hear from Dr. Joseph D'Souza, a Christian human rights activist, working especially for the Dalit people of India. You have in hand the latest up-dates from Canadian Baptists of Western Canada. And, you can obtain a listing of all the missionaries First Baptist supports at Connection Point.

This morning, as we continue in our series of studies in Parables of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Luke, I invite you to give your attention to two short, complimentary parables through which Jesus gives us His perspective on His mission in the world. When I look out on the flow of history through these parables; when I look at what is going on in your lives and in mine through the lens of the two parables, I breathe a sigh of relief and am filled with hope. The parables are recorded in Luke 13:18-21. But we want to hear and see them in the context in which Jesus spoke them. So we will read Luke 13:10-22:

<sup>10</sup>And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. <sup>11</sup>And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all. <sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness." <sup>13</sup>And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God. <sup>14</sup>But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, "There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day."

<sup>15</sup>But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him? <sup>16</sup>And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?” <sup>17</sup>As He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him.

<sup>18</sup>So He was saying, “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? <sup>19</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.”

<sup>20</sup>And again He said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? <sup>21</sup>It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”

<sup>22</sup>And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem.

Twice Jesus asks the question, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?” On other occasions we hear simply say, “The kingdom of God is like ....” But this time He begins with a question, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?” “I” – the emphasis is on the “I.” The point being: the One Who is bringing the kingdom of God into the world, the One Who is bringing heaven to earth, the One Who is answering the prayer He taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come,” is now going to tell us His understanding of how the kingdom ordinarily advances. Jesus is going to give us His perspective on His mission in the world.

The kingdom of God, the advancing of the kingdom of God in the world, “is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted ...” and “like leaven which a woman took and mixed ...”

Even on a causal reading of the text, we can see that these two parables belong together. Many New Testament scholars refer to them as “twin parables,” not only because they teach complimentary truths, but because Jesus employs the two complementary genders, to illustrate how He and His reign operate in the world. The kingdom of God is like a *man* who and like a *woman* who.

Now what is significant to realize is that using both male and female in a story to illustrate something about the Living, Holy God, was an unheard-of and radical thing to do in Jesus’ day! No rabbi or scribe or Pharisee would ever do that. But Jesus did. And this is not the only place He does it!

Later in the gospel of Luke, Jesus will be teaching about His coming again. And He will say, “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left” (Luke 17:36,35). And then in His most famous parables recorded in Luke 15, Jesus will explain His seeking sinners and welcoming them into His family and eating with them, by speaking of a man seeking his lost sheep and of a woman seeking her lost coin. Unheard of! And scandalous!

The coming of the Holy God to reign as King is like a man sowing a mustard seed in his garden. The coming of the Holy God to reign as King is like a woman hiding leaven in a lump of dough.

OK. Let us step back now and review the larger context in which Jesus speaks the “twin parables.” John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, living out in the desert away from all the glitz and hype, senses that “something cataclysmic is in the air.” And he is shown by God that this “something cataclysmic” is taking place through his cousin Jesus of Nazareth. So he cries, “Prepare the way for the Lord.” After John is arrested, Jesus comes on the scene from 40 days in the wilderness, where He has wrestled with the cosmic power of evil, and won. (!) He comes on the scene with His gospel, or, God’s gospel as He calls it, the good news that has huge implications not only for the private, religious realm, but also for the public, secular realm. “Today,” He says. “The time is fulfilled ...” He says. “Today.” In Him and because of Him, history has reached a major turning point. A great threshold is being crossed. It is time! For what? For the in-breaking of heaven, for the rule of God to invade the world. It is time for a change in government. It is time of God’s new world order.

Jesus then begins healing people, and freeing them from the demonic – not to prove that His good news is true news, but because the Kingdom He is bringing is all about healing and freedom. Jesus preaches His Sermon on the Mount in which He describes what happens to people when the kingdom breaks into their lives: they become “Beatitude people” – poor in spirit, mourning over the condition of the world, gentle, hungering and thirsting for justice, merciful, pure in heart, makers of peace, people who do not echo the behavior of those who hurt them, people who are learning to bless those who persecute them, people who are learning to love their enemies.

Jesus sends out His first disciples on a short-term mission to announce His gospel. In towns and villages they announce what Jesus announces: “the kingdom of God has come near”! People are healed. People are delivered. People begin to move toward wholeness.

But ... for all that preaching and teaching and healing, life is still profoundly broken. For all the light that is breaking through, the world is still a dark place.

John the Baptist is confused. He is in prison. He hears the reports of what Jesus is doing – good reports, but not enough for John. Good, but not as good as he has expected. The “something cataclysmic in the air” is not coming “cataclysmically enough.” So he sends messengers to Jesus asking, “are You the coming One, or should we look for another?”

Jesus increasingly finds Himself in trouble with the religious leaders. He is not “religious enough.” He is not doing things the way “religion” is suppose to be done. He heals a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. And all He gets is complaints that He should not have done it on Sabbath.

And then He speaks the “twin parables.” I think we can summarize what Jesus is saying in them this way: the kingdom of God does not come the way other kingdoms come. The “something cataclysmic in the air” does not come in cataclysmic ways. Not ordinarily. There are times when it does come in a big way, but not ordinarily.

“What is the kingdom of God like,” Jesus asks; “to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree; and the birds of the air nested in it.”

The language of the parable is very appropriate for speaking about kingdom. For in a number of OT texts, God pictures human kingdoms as trees that have grown large enough for birds, other kingdoms, to come and live in them.

- In Ezekiel 31:1-14, God speaks of the kingdom of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, as a tree growing very tall, and “all the birds of the heavens nested in its bough.”
- In Daniel 4:11-12, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, has a dream of a tree that grew very large, and (quote) “the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches.”
- In Ezekiel 17:22-23, God speaks of His people in such terms. God speaks of taking a sprig from the top of a cedar, and planting it Himself. “And,” says God, “it will bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar, and birds of every kind will nest under it; they will rest in the shade of its branches.”

Jesus hooks into that OT background to give His perspective on His mission in the world. The kingdom He brings into the world will one day grow as John the Baptist expected... until it is large enough for all the kingdoms of the world to nest in it. But the kingdom begins small, much smaller than John expected.

“Like a mustard seed.” “Like a mustard seed” was a first century proverbial way of referring to something very small. Very small. A mustard seed is only about a millimeter in diameter. Very tiny. It takes about 750 mustard seeds to weigh one gram. Yet, from a tiny mustard seed grows a tree 8-12 feet tall! “Large enough for a man to climb as one would climb a fig tree” (Mark Bailey, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 [Oct – Dec 1998], 454).

Jesus is saying to John the Baptist and to us, “Yes, the kingdom is not coming as cataclysmically as you hoped. It looks very tiny right now. But you just wait and see! Do not despair! Hang on to the potency of the mustard seed. So tiny, so apparently insignificant alongside all other seeds, yet it grows to a plant larger than any other in the garden.

And do we not, 2,000 years later, see the fulfillment of Jesus’ word right before our eyes? The tiny mustard seed has grown way beyond its tiny beginnings. The gospel has spread all over the world. Yes, there are many people and many people groups who have not yet heard the good news. And I want to do my part in making sure they do hear. But think of how the gospel has already spread. Millions and billions of people have already come to nest in the branches of Jesus’ tree.

When Jesus first spoke His parable He likely had fewer than 100 followers. Only twelve were enrolled in His intensive training course. One betrays Him. And one, James the son of Zebedee, is killed just as the movement is launched. Yet look how it all grew!

Peter took the good news to Asia Minor, to Jews living in the “diaspora.” Andrew took the good news to the people of Southern Europe. Thomas planted the seed among the Parthians, and eventually brought the gospel to South India. Matthew bore his witness to Jesus among cannibals in Anthropohagi, where he was executed; an act which so troubled the tribal king that as Matthew died the king was converted. Philip bore witness to a eunuch of Ethiopia, who then took the gospel to his people. Philip also helped establish churches in Athens and in Hierapolis, where he was executed. Simon the Zealot and Jude, as a team, took the mustard seed to Persia (Iraq). And Bartholomew took a copy of Matthew’s gospel to India and eventually to Armenia. (For more see George Hunter’s *How to Reach Secular People*.)

Tiny. So tiny. Yet how it grew! And how it IS growing! Jesus has followers on every continent. In nearly every country of the world. The tiny seed is growing and growing and growing.

And the leaven is leavening. The invisible leaven is leavening. “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?” asks Jesus. “It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened.”

Leaven. Yes, in some Biblical texts it is an image of evil at work, something we need to get rid of. But here it is an image of good at work. Besides, Jesus is focusing not so much on the leaven itself as on the leavening process. As one scholar puts it, “The kingdom ... is being compared not to the leaven but to what happens when you put leaven into a batch of meal ...” ( A.M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 44).

In Jesus’ day, bread was the basic food staple. Because there were no bakeries or supermarkets, women baked their own bread in their homes. Leaven, or yeast, was put into a mixture of wheat or barley to cause the mixture to expand and rise. The women did not use fresh yeast each time they baked, but kept a fermented piece of dough from the previous baking, mixing it into the new batch (David Wenhem, *The Parables of Jesus*, 55). And the leaven, the yeast, had a remarkably big effect. The little, hidden leaven had a remarkably big effect – big and visible. The hidden leaven had a big visible effect. Put the leaven into the dough, and the leaven changes the dough from a lifeless lump into a seething, swelling, bubbling, heaving mass. (The verbs are from William Barclay, *Matthew*, 82-83, and A.M. Hunter, *ibid.*)

So it is with the kingdom of God. Often unseen. Actually, usually unseen. Yet its effects are visible everywhere. Seething, swelling, bubbling, heaving, turning things up-side down (or, better, turning things right side up again).

The kingdom of God hidden in the dough of the world is powerfully at work. For 2,000 years now, people benefiting from the gospel even when they do not know the gospel. Hospitals, schools, women’s rights, racial equality, democracy: all the consequences of Jesus bringing in the kingdom. Do you realize that?

Jesus came into a world that marginalized the sick and weak; He came into a world that marginalized children and women and people of different skin color and economic status. In first century Sparta, for instance, when a child was born who was weak or deformed, he or she was simply left on the mountain side to die (William Barclay). The hidden leaven of the kingdom of Jesus changed all that. Disciples of Jesus took care of such children; they even took them into their homes to raise them as their own. The first home for the blind was founded by a Christian monk named Thalasius. The first free dispensary was founded by a Christian business man named Appollonius. The first hospital was founded by a Christian lady named Fabiola (Barclay, 80).

Again I encourage you to read *The Triumph of Christianity* by Rodney Stack. Especially his chapter entitled “Misery and Mercy.” Where he describes the awful, filthy, disease-ridden condition of the cities of the first century. And how disciples of Jesus entered the mess and brought the transforming power of the gospel. Stark quotes William McNeill from his book *Plagues and Peoples*, where he speaks of the nursing ministries begun by disciples of Jesus; and makes the claim that Christian nursing may have reduced mortality by as much as two-thirds!

Every time anyone goes into a hospital, whether he or she knows it or not, they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus' kingdom. Every time anyone gets an education, whether he or she knows it or not, they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus' kingdom. Every time anyone does science, whether he or she knows it or not, they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus' kingdom. The scientific method that has led to the technological marvels of our day was born out of the leaven of the gospel. The gospel gives us a vision of the world, a vision of the cosmos, which allows for the emergence of science.

I know that in our time the Christian faith gets bad press. Some of it is deserved; Christians are not perfect people, and we have done some imperfect things. And not all who use the label Christian are in fact truly Christian. So some of the bad press is warranted, and we need to repent of some of what has been done in Jesus' name. But where would the world be without Jesus and His gospel? Just look at the places in the world today where His gospel has not yet penetrated! Or look at the places in the world today where His gospel once was embraced but is no longer!

Now clearly, the obvious point of Jesus' "twin parables" is that the little will become big and the hidden will become visible. But the deeper point – "the mystery of the kingdom" – is that the little is powerful, the hidden is transformative. That is, the encouragement of the parables lies not in the eventual consequences of sowing the seed and hiding the leaven. The encouragement lies in the mustard seed itself, in the leavening process itself. The "mystery of the kingdom" is the power of littleness and hiddenness.

Yes, the kingdom does at times come in big and visible ways. Like the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit, and 3,000 people became His disciples. And like other times in history when the Holy Spirit moved in such power and whole cities were converted, like the so-called Great Awakenings. For which I am praying my heart out. With many of you, I am asking the Spirit to just come and take over the city! He can. And He has. Right now in Latin America, 3,000 people an hour are coming to Christ. That is one new Pentecost every hour! By this time tomorrow, 72,000 more people will be following Jesus. By this time next Sunday, over a half-a-million more will have been born again into the family of God.

But the encouragement of the parable lies deeper. In the power of littleness and hiddenness. The kingdom of God ordinarily comes in little, hidden ways. This means that we can resist the temptation to spruce up the gospel, to make it bigger and more visible. The gospel will do just fine as it is, thank you. Let it stand as it is. Seemingly as small as a tiny mustard seed. Seemingly as insignificant as invisible leaven.

One day, the kingdom will come in a cataclysmic way. On that day, Jesus says "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, the powers of the heaven will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). And a new heaven and a new earth will descend!

But before that day, the kingdom ordinarily comes in little and hidden ways. Until that day the gospel does not get the headlines. And that is ok. The gospel does not need the headlines to have its way in the world. Jesus does not need the headlines to accomplish His purposes in the world. Littleness and hiddenness.

Has this not been God's usual way in the world? Of all the people groups, which did God chose to be the first covenant people? The big and visible? No. God chose the Jews, who at the time of their election, were not a great nation. Indeed, they were no nation at all! Just a man and a woman, Abram and Sarai, living in ancient Iraq. And when God raised up a king for His people, whom did He choose? The big and highly visible? No. He chose David, the youngest, the smallest, of a forgotten clan. And when God chose a mountain on which to uniquely dwell, was it the big and highly visible? No. He chose Mt. Zion, the smallest and most obscure of the hills of Jerusalem.

When God came to earth in person, when God incarnated Himself in our flesh and blood, where was He born? In a big-name, flashy city of the world? Jerusalem? Alexandria? Athens? Rome? Surely God would chose Rome, right? No. Bethlehem. A little, seemingly insignificant village off the jet-set path. In the last book of the Bible, in those grand apocalyptic visions of the glory of God, what is the central focus? The grandeur of it all? The size of the throne? The lightening and flashing? No. A Lamb, a little Lamb. Who little though He may be stands in the very centre of it all. Even in the new creation, the new city, still the Lamb, the little Lamb. The Lamb Who is the Lamp of glory, the endless source of the glory of God.

"To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God?" asks the One Who brings the kingdom. Mustard seed (littleness) and leaven (hiddenness). Through littleness and hiddenness transforming the cosmos.

I want to conclude this morning with my favorite story about the way Jesus does His mission in the world. It involves the former bishop of the Church of South India, Lesslie Newbigin, from whom I have learned so much. He received a message one day asking him to go to a remote village in South India which he had never heard of to baptize 25 families. He went, and was able to piece together the story of how these families had come to be prepared for baptism. "It was a story in four acts," he discovered. Hear it in his own words:

Act One. A water resources team had come to assist the villagers in digging a well so that they could have a clean water supply for the first time in their history. The man in charge of this team was a Christian. He was not formally trained, even theologically naïve. He was not good at communicating, in verbalizing his faith, but he made it clear that he was a Christian. He left behind the impression of a good, caring, honest, sincere man.

Act Two. Three or four months later one of the people of this village was visiting a neighboring town to do some shopping. A representative of a Bible society sold him a copy of St. Mark's Gospel; the man brought it back and started reading it. Now reading in an Indian village means reading aloud. So this man sits on the veranda of his house reading this strange book. And of course people with nothing better to do gather round and listen, and then start discussing. Week after week for several months you have a group of people reading St. Mark's Gospel, which is totally strange to them. They try to make out what it's all about.

Act Three. Along comes what we call an independent evangelist. We have a rather remarkable breed of such evangelists in South India. Each one is totally independent of any human agency. Each one has a hot line to God and knows exactly what God intends, and they go around to villages preaching fiery sermons. One of these independent evangelists dropped in on our village, preached a fiery sermon and left behind a tract

which simply said, "If you die tonight, where will you go?" Act Three closes with alarm and despondency in the village.

Act Four. The village decides they better do something about it. They will try to find out what this Christian faith is all about. They remember a village five miles away where there is a Christian congregation. So they write and ask these people, "Tell us what is all this about this man Jesus?" Now these Christian people are village coolies, day laborers. One of them had broken his leg and is unable to work, so his people said, "You go to the village, spend a month and tell them what you have." So he did.

Then Newbigin writes this:

"The result of these acts was that I was sitting down in front of 25 families as eager for the Gospel, as well instructed as any group in that circumstance you could find. None of us knew about the four acts; no agency of the church had any idea what was going on. The strategy was entirely in other hands."

That is what is happening in each of your lives and in mine. It is what is in your workplace and in mine. It is what is happening in your neighborhood and in mine. It is what is happening all over our city. It is what is happening all over British Columbia. It is what is happening all over Canada. It is what is happening all over the world. Jesus invisibly leavening the dough with His gospel. Jesus working His little, but powerful, mustard seed conspiracy.

To Him be the glory, now and forever more. Amen.