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Sermon Notes

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The Astonishing and Mysterious Growth of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-33

Gettysburg Address... 271 words

“Brevity is the soul of wit”

John Calvin: “Lucid brevity”

Apostle Paul: Colossians 4:4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

NONE compares with what the greatest teacher in history accomplished here, however... a mere seventeen words in the Greek text to describe all of human history, and all of my own personal history as well!!

I. Two Parables, One Central Message: The Kingdom Grows

A. The Mustard Seed: From Tiny to Impressive

1. Mustard seed: proverbial for tiny

vs. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds

2. Not literally the smallest of all seeds... but the smallest of those seeds one plants in the garden
3. But within the seed is the genetic code for impressive growth

So also the entire history of the Kingdom of Heaven was contained in the life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection of Christ

A seemingly insignificant beginning (unheralded to the ends of the earth, unknown at that moment to most of earth's inhabitants)

4. The end result: a huge plant

vs. 32 *Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.*"

Mustard plants can grow to be as large as 10 to 15 feet high

Birds of the air come and rest protected under the shade of the Kingdom of Heaven:

Christ's point: the Kingdom of Heaven starts from seemingly nothing... and it grows to dominate the earth

B. The Leaven: From One Corner to Total Permeation

1. Leaven (yeast) frequently a picture of evil

Matthew 16:6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

2. Really, though, a picture of PERMEATION and INFLUENCE

Galatians 5:9 "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."

Illus. Yeasts is one-celled fungi that multiply rapidly by dividing... they ferment sugars in the dough and produce carbon dioxide ethanol (alcohol)... the gasses given off cause pockets to form in the dough, which gives the bread a light, airy feel in the mouth... if the leavening is left to go on too long, massive fermentation occurs... this is how alcohol is produced

Yeast is a prime illustration of INFLUENCE... it spreads and multiplies to surrounding areas, spreading persistently through the dough until the entire batch is leavened

3. Even massive batch completely leavened

NIV: "a large amount of flour..." NASB: "three pecks"

Perhaps as much as 40 liters of flour... a huge batch of dough; imagine 20 2-liter bottles filled with flour... mixed together in a huge mixing vat. One tiny amount of yeast tucked in the corner would successfully leaven the entire batch

4. Is this a NEGATIVE parable?

John Walvoord and other commentators point out the fact that leaven is almost always associated with evil

However... leaven is not ALWAYS evil:

Leviticus 7:13 Along with his fellowship offering of thanksgiving he is to present an offering with cakes of bread made with yeast.

If yeast is always evil, why would God command it be used in fellowship offerings?

Also, Christ said simply:

“The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast...”

C. Central Lesson: Growth from Small and Insignificant to Impressive and Dominating

II. New Concept: The Contemptible Beginnings of the Eternal Kingdom of God

What’s astonishing: Not the final glory and expanse of the Kingdom... but the contemptibly small beginning, and the long, slow process of growth!! This is the mystery and the challenge of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A. Jews Expected an Impressive Kingdom

1. World domination

Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. ... "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands

- a. Son of David would rule to the ends of the earth
- b. Gentiles would “lick the dust” before Jewish rule

Psalm 72:7-11 In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. 8 He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. 10 The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. 11 All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.

Consistent prophecies showing that a Jewish King will rule the earth, and that all Jews will have positions of honor and power, even over Gentiles

Zechariah 8:23 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"

2. Gentile submission

- a. "times of the Gentiles" would end
- b. one Gentile overlord after another
 - i) Assyrian... Babylon... Persia... Greeks
 - ii) Roman: strongest, most powerful of them all... no end in sight

Every day the enslaved Jewish people of Jesus' generation saw the Roman legions marching through their streets, demanding their rations, arresting and executing people, behaving arrogantly, worshiping pagan deities, sucking them dry through tax collectors, they comforted themselves with a single hope:

Someday the Son of David will set up his kingdom... then these Gentile dogs will lick the dust at our feet

This Kingdom will be more glorious and more powerful, richer by far than any Kingdom in history:

Isaiah 60:1-6 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ..."

- c. prophets foretold Jewish restoration and domination

B. Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom... BUT This Was NOT What They Expected

- 1. Jesus' message stirred their hopes

Matthew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

- 2. Christ's miracles electrified those hopes

Matthew 12:28 But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

- 3. But Christ's Kingdom was so different than they expected
 - a. it was quiet... humble... almost weak

b. He spoke of redeeming Gentiles, not destroying them

C. “Mysteries” of the Kingdom: Contemptible Beginnings

1. A Small Mustard Seed... hardly worth discussing
2. A “tender shoot out of dry ground”... contemptible

Christ was of humble origins... easily rejected

Born of an enslaved race in an obscure corner of the world
 Raised a despised part of the country... Nazareth
 Not educated in the Jewish halls of power

Carrying on a confusing ministry

Doing mighty deeds... but not **MILITARY** deeds
 Promising a life of poverty and suffering
 Rebuking Jewish leaders
 Cleansing the Temple
 Teaching in parables
 Speaking hard sayings

Followed by a motley band of societal rejects

Galilean fishermen... common laborers
 Tax collectors
 Prostitutes
 Sinners

Hated, rejected, condemned by Jewish leaders who plotted to kill Him

Ultimately: arrested, tried, condemned by His own people
 Crucified on a Roman cross... stripped of all dignity, the most horrible death imaginable
 Sign incredibly offensive: “This is Jesus, King of the Jews”
 Breathed His last, His blood all over the ground... **UGLY UGLY** picture of Jewish abject humiliation

Isaiah 53:1-3 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

All in all, the exact opposite image of the triumphant Kingdom of God...

Gentile opponents had just as much trouble accepting this idea

Celsus (Greek, 3rd century, a bitter foe of the gospel, refuted by Origen) attacked the very concept that God would send His Son in such a contemptible way... to the despised Jews in one small corner of the world:

God is good, and beautiful, and blessed, and that in the best and most beautiful degree. But if he come down among men, he must undergo a change, and a change from good to evil, from virtue to vice, from happiness to misery, and from best to worst. Who, then, would make choice of such a change? It is the nature of a mortal, indeed, to undergo change and remoulding, but of an immortal to remain the same and unaltered. God, then, could not admit of such a change."... (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ANF vol. 4, Book 4, Chapter 14)

"Again, if God, like Jupiter in the comedy, should, on awaking from a lengthened slumber, desire to rescue the human race from evil, why did He send this Spirit of which you speak into one corner (of the earth)? He ought to have breathed it alike into many bodies, and have sent them out into all the world. Now the comic poet, to cause laughter in the theatre, wrote that Jupiter, after awakening, despatched Mercury to the Athenians and Lacedaemonians; but do not you think that you have made the Son of God more ridiculous in sending Him to the Jews?" (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ANF vol. 4, Book 6, Chapter 78)

Christ answered this with these two parables!!!

the parable says from this tiny, rejected, contemptible beginning would arise a Kingdom so vast and wealthy that it will cover the earth with its glory

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

D. Encouragement for Every Generation: Kingdom Comprised of Small Things

Zechariah 4:10 "Who despises the day of small things?"

1. Constant need for encouragement

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Hebrews 12:12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

2. Progress of Kingdom always seems small, insignificant

Illus. U.S. Census Bureau estimates 140 people added to the world every minute... during time of our worship, world population will grow by 10,500 people

In one 24-hour period, world population increases by 201,600 people

Teeming billions presently stand outside pale of the gospel reach... presently living in communities in which there is no viable witness for Jesus Christ

3. Reality is different than appearance!!!

III. The Lesson of the Mustard Seed: Outward and Visible Growth

Matthew 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."

Summary: When the tiny mustard seed of the Kingdom takes root in a heart, it produces immense and visible changes in the life... thus are we the **"light of the world"** and **"a city on a hill"** that **CANNOT BE HIDDEN!!!**

A. Understanding the Parable

1. The Kingdom of Heaven is like...

- a. Christ uses a simply analogy... a parable to explain Kingdom truth
- b. the mysteries of the Kingdom would be unclear to us without Christ's instruction

B. The Mighty Advance of the Kingdom

1. Humble, contemptible beginnings

- a. at the cross... a handful of women and John
- b. in the upper room... only 120 believers (would be considered a small church today)

2. Then began the irresistible advance of the gospel

- Three thousand added to the church on the Day of Pentecost
- The number of men grew to five thousand by Acts 4
- Soon the call came to send missionaries out to Gentile regions... the ancient home of the Philistines (Cyprus) soon heard the gospel from common Christians scattered after Stephen died
- The church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus... and to Gentile regions in Asia Minor
- Next Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia, the home origin of Alexander the Great, begging for help... the gospel was traveling the old roads of conquest... a new Kingdom of far greater power retracing the steps of the Gentile conquerors of old... irresistibly heading toward Rome

- By the end of Paul's ministry, the gospel had saturated all of Asia Minor from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum (modern Yugoslavia... across the Adriatic Sea from Rome)
- The gospel had progressed so far and so thoroughly that Paul found no more place for him to work in that entire region!!
- Over the next two and a half centuries, despite bitter persecution by the vicious Roman Empire, the gospel continued to advance, to permeate the entire empire... going from neighbor to neighbor, from slave to slave, from merchant to customer, from sailor to passenger

Celsus spoke of this quiet, almost subversive growth of Christianity with contempt:

"We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements..." (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ANF vol. 4, Book 3, Chapter 55)

- Christianity conquered the Roman Empire quietly, secretly, like yeast taking over the batch of dough... but in the end, the effects were spectacular and open... like a mustard plant dominating the garden
- In 312 A.D., at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had a vision and was supposedly converted to Christianity. From that time on, he claimed to be Christian and carried Christian symbolism into all his battles and sought to stamp out paganism. Whether or not he was truly a Christian is not the point... what is astonishing is how far the Church of Christ had come... this was an open, visible landmark that the internal spread of the leaven had permeated every corner of the Roman Empire

If you had told Pontius Pilate that, less than three centuries later, the Roman Emperor would declare himself to be a worshiper of a Jewish carpenter and traveling holy man... a Jewish carpenter and holy man who'd been executed as a common criminal on a Roman cross... he would have thought you insane!!

the kingdom of heaven is like yeast [Hidden, quiet, invisible permeation until it conquers the whole loaf]

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed..." [Open, visible growth until it reaches dominating, imposing stature]

1. Christianity has advanced irresistibly for twenty centuries... against immense odds
 2. Now there is not a nation on earth where the church is not represented
- C. Worldwide: The Visible Legacy of Christianity
1. Major visible, historical milestones
 - a. conversion of Constantine

- b. saturation of Europe with gospel
- c. conversion of barbarian tribes
- d. missionary endeavors... transforming power of the gospel

2. Immense evidence of Kingdom of Christ

baptisms... writings...missionaries...Cathedrals... works of art... hospitals... acts of benevolence... world history greatly influenced forever by Christianity

D. Individually: The Obvious Visible Effect of the Gospel

- 1. Heart changes: transformed by the gospel
- 2. Everything external changes eventually
- 3. “Fruit” is obvious

Church history full of lives lived openly to the glory of God... sprung from a small mustard seed of the Gospel and faith

George Mueller: Halle, Germany: One Saturday afternoon, about the middle of November, 1825, a Prussian playboy, liar, swindler, and convict named George Mueller was invited to the house a man named Herr Wagner. Seeing Herr Wagner pray on his knees and explain John 3:16 changed him forever... the seed would grow immense in his life:

Summary: When the tiny mustard seed of the Kingdom takes root in a heart, it produces immense and visible changes in the life... thus are we the **“light of the world”** and **“a city on a hill”** that **CANNOT BE HIDDEN!!!**

IV. The Lesson of the Leaven: Inward and Invisible Growth

What “cannot be hidden” (the outward visible effects of the gospel) comes from what HAS been hidden... the seed in the soil, the yeast in the dough; outward display comes from mysterious, internal transformation

- A. Mustard Seed Grows Outwardly... visible to the eye
- B. Yeast works inwardly... invisible to the eye

“The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast with a woman HID in a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Greek word: “enkrupto”... to hide away in secret

The kingdom’s outwardly spectacular growth takes place based on a secret, inward transformation

C. Individually: One Person’s Salvation Described

1. Seed in the heart
2. Spirit's work on the soul

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

The Kingdom's permeating power is internal, hidden, mysterious, powerful... it permeates everything

3. Word of God gradually influences more and more areas of life

way of thinking... eating habits... conversation... entertainment... work habits... goals and aspirations...

4. Gradual transformation of the entire life until whole self is dominated by the Kingdom

D. Worldwide: World history also described

1. Church tiny, off to the side... hidden in an upper room in Jerusalem

Little by little it begins to permeate the world around it... its influence is irresistible, but not always seen

2. Many times illegal, underground... oftentimes ignored as irrelevant

No New York Times headlines about the advancing Kingdom of Heaven... the world has more important concerns

But the secret leavening of the gospel goes on, person to person all over the world

3. One Christian influences a non-Christian neighbor, relative or friend... even by something like gossip

Illus. Bunyan's conversion: ***He overhears*** "three or four poor women sitting at a door in the room, and talking about the things of God." Later he said: "I thought they spoke as if joy did make them speak; they spoke with such pleasantness of Scripture language and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world...."

That overheard word transformed his life...

In time Bunyan's influence would transform the hearts of millions

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Illus. Church spreading in China... Christians given demeaning jobs like garbage collector

4. Eventually the internal transforming power of the gospel and the spectacular external progress of the gospel meet when Christ's Kingdom is complete

V. Prophecy Being Fulfilled: The Kingdom is Immense... But Unfinished

A. Parable is Prophecy:

CHRIST'S PARABLE IS ALSO PROPHECY... this is what the Kingdom WILL do

His words would have seemed folly at the time if the people had understood the scope of His vision

Christ's prophecy is coming true right before our eyes!!!

B. Worldwide Expanse

Over 300 million people have been added to the true church in last 10 years... About 10 million of these new Christians are from North America and Europe, and the rest -290 million—are from developing countries like Nigeria, Argentina, India and China.

In mid-16th century, evangelicals located only in Europe... numbered about 3 million; In last 450 years, evangelicals have grown to 680 million, most of them non-whites, living in every nation on the face of the earth!!!

- Christianity is the single fastest growing religion in the world
- In Central Asia, a church planted in Uzbekistan just four years ago has grown to 3,000 members and has planted 55 other congregations.
- Mongolia, which had no church at all as recently as 1991, now has more than 3,000 believers in 17 congregations. And the Mongolians have sent their first missionaries to work with Operation Mobilization in India.
- In Nepal, the world's only official Hindu country, over 100,000 Hindus have met the Savior in the last two decades.

B. Innumerable Small Beginnings

The principle of the mustard seed has been characteristic of God's way of advancing His Kingdom for two thousand years... it's the way He starts new movements among every generation... one individual or a small group of believers trusts God for something great, and the reality grows until it is immense

Illus. The Haystack Prayer meeting

On a sultry Saturday afternoon in August, 1806, Samuel J. Mills and four other students of Williams College gathered as usual in the maple grove of Sloan's Meadow for one of their twice-weekly prayer meetings. Thunderclouds broke open the sky, driving the students to seek shelter from the rain on the lee side of a great haystack. With thought turned toward their classroom studies of Asia and the East India Company, Mills

shared his burden that Christianity be sent abroad. The five students prayed that American missions would spread Christianity through the East.

The missionary vision of this group of students, under the leadership of Mills, is the more remarkable since no missionary societies existed in America at that time.

In 1808, Mills and other Williams students formed "The Brethren," a society organized to "effect, in the persons of its members, a mission to the heathen." Shortly thereafter, Adoniram Judson from Brown joined the Brethren. By February, 1812, Rev. and Mrs. Judson, Rev. Luther Rice and five others were commissioned as the Board's first missionaries and set sail for Calcutta, India.

En route to India, Judson and the team converted to Baptist convictions and sent Luther Rice back to America to raise funds to support the missionaries... this was the beginning of the organization that eventually became the Southern Baptists.

C. Mysterious Internal Transformation

This worldwide explosion is happening one sinner at a time... when the yeast of the Gospel permeates his heart and begins to conquer his life

All over the world, the Holy Spirit is spreading the yeast of Kingdom truth gradually through the secret recesses of human hearts, mysteriously transforming them to be like Christ

D. Prophecy Incompletely Fulfilled

The parable is prophecy... BUT the prophecy is not yet complete:

KJV Matthew 13:33 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.

The work of the Kingdom will not be done until the whole world is leavened with this message!!

VI. Application

1. Worship Christ for His power in fulfilling prophecy
2. Never be discouraged over the seemingly slow progress
3. Expect great things from small beginnings

regular pattern in church history

no insignificant acts, words, moments, efforts

everything can be used mightily for the Kingdom

4. Put priority on internal growth over external display

external display of mustard plant encouraging to prove truth of Christ's words

BUT Christ Himself put priority on internal transformation

Before Kingdoms change, men must change from the heart

5. INFLUENCE your surrounding world

a. be the yeast which spreads in your daily life

b. sow seeds for the Kingdom

disciple your children in the small daily things of life

give evangelistic tracts out to UPS deliveries coming to your door

write a letter of encouragement to a missionary and include Scripture

pray for an unreached people group

start a lunch-time Bible study at work and rejoice if only one person shows up

meet with a new Christian once a week and train him in spiritual disciplines

take on a children's Sunday school class and teach them even if they seem barely old enough to understand your words

A hope-filled attitude of faith permeates these parables... great things come from small beginnings; and a great God can use even insignificant actions by a sinner like me to build a portion of His Kingdom