Kingdom Parables of the Mustard Seed & Leaven

We assume Jesus would depict the Kingdom of God with thunder, crowns, and armies.

Instead, He chose yeast. And seeds.

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom, He often uses surprising and highly creative ways.

Jesus isn't just a good storyteller but perhaps the greatest of all time. His parables invite what Eugene Peterson calls "the imaginative participation of the listener."[1]

Let's explore two of Jesus' Kingdom parables – found in both Matthew 13:31-33 and Luke 13:18-21 – where Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed and to leaven.

> **Luke 13:18-21 (NASB)**
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> 18 So He [Jesus] was saying, "What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? 19 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 sky nested in its branches."
> 20 And again He said, "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of flour until it was all leavened."
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> *(Note: a "sata" is a Hebrew unit of dry measure, and three sata is approximately 48 pounds or 22 kilograms of flour, enough to make bread for over 100 people.)*

[1] Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Chapter 1.

The Context: Healing, Disruption, and Invitation

While both Matthew and Luke include these parables, Luke's gospel places them in the middle of a tense scene – right after Jesus heals a woman who had been bent over for 18 years – on the Sabbath, inside the synagogue (Luke 13:10-17). Instead of celebrating, the synagogue leader objects. The leader's concern? Jesus worked on the Sabbath.

Jesus sharply responds, exposing the hypocrisy of the synagogue leader. While he and other religious leaders like him untie their oxen for drinking on the Sabbath, they deny compassion to a suffering woman. Jesus' healing is more than kindness – it's confrontation. It undermines religious legalism and reveals what the Kingdom truly looks like in action.

Then – into this tense moment – Jesus shares these parables. They're not random; they are a direct reflection of what happened.

The Kingdom, He says, is like that healing: quiet, disruptive, and unstoppable. It breaks open what's rigid. It restores what's bent. And it spreads – slowly but thoroughly – until it transforms everything.

The Mustard Seed: Small Start, Expansive Reach

Jesus compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed – tiny but capable of growing into a large shrub. This wasn't a flattering comparison. Mustard was a wild plant, considered invasive and unwelcome in orderly gardens. It spread where it wasn't supposed to and took over.

Jesus uses that very image to describe God's reign: surprising, uncontrollable, and far-reaching. The seed grows into a tree, echoing Old Testament images of great kingdoms as trees offering shelter to the nations (**Ezek. 17:23; Dan. 4:12**).

As R.T. France observes, "The main point lies in the huge extent of this kingdom which has developed from such unimpressive beginnings."[2]

John Dominic Crossan explains that choosing a wild bush over a noble tree highlights the Kingdom's rebellious, disruptive nature. It doesn't seek permission. It takes hold and spreads – even in surprising places.[3]

The Leaven: Hidden, Quiet, Transforming

In the second parable, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a small lump of fermented dough "hidden" in 50 pounds of flour. The contrast is striking: a tiny starter, a huge impact.

The verb "hid" implies quietness and secrecy. There is no show – only silent influence. But once it is introduced, the leaven cannot be removed. It functions from within, unseen but unstoppable.

As R.T. France notes, "The leaven does not call attention to itself; it simply and inevitably permeates."[4] This isn't domination - it's transformation.

Together: The Kingdom's Quiet Power

This is a Kingdom that welcomes outsiders.

It challenges legalism.

It grows quietly in unseen places.

It defies our expectations.

It begins at the margins and transforms the center.

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[2] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), Commentary II.J.5.b.
[3] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), [chapter on parables] pp. 278-279.
[4] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), Commentary II.J.5.b.

The Kingdom isn't based on spectacle or control. It progresses through small acts of mercy, hidden acts of faithfulness, and everyday choices to love when it's easier not to.

It's an invitation to participate in the quiet, faithful, often unseen effort of renewal.

These parables invite us to become Kingdom leaven – to be planted, to be hidden, and to allow God's love to spread through us into the world.