

Focus Text

“He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.” **(Matthew 13:31–34, ESV)**

1. The Mustard Seed

“He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” **(Matthew 13:31–32, ESV)**

Jesus continues the parables for us. One quick note Matthew makes clear: this was Jesus’ primary teaching method when speaking to large crowds. To emphasize that the parables reveal more about the kingdom, or become a stumbling block to those who do not want Christ. The next two parables address the unseemly nature of Jesus’ entrance into the world and offer a futuristic understanding of what lies ahead after His earthly life.

The mustard seed is an allegory found in both Daniel and Ezekiel that God, the King, and the Kingdom would become a strong tree wherein the birds (God’s People) could rest.

The absurdity here is that Jesus claims that a weed that grows into a shrub will instead bloom into a lovely tree. The mustard seed was a weed that farmers would actively try to remove from their fields. They didn’t see this seed as a blessing from God, but as a thorn from the enemy. However, in both of these parables, the active agent bringing the kingdom would be seen as a nuisance rather than a blessing. Could we then say that the rejection of Jesus is like the weeds or the leaven? However, the mustard sprouts a tree that allows the birds to nest in it. In real life, birds don’t nest in the mustard shrub. This plant is mildly poisonous to the birds. However, from this unexpected start, a beautiful tree will emerge, and the birds (Christians) will have a wonderful place to rest and call home.

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In practice, Jesus bringing about the Kingdom of God will bloom into a place of rest for those who have believed in Him and His mission. Jesus, after all, has made the claim that He is the Lord of the Sabbath.

“On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.”

(Ezekiel 17:23, ESV)

“The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth.” **(Daniel 4:20–22, ESV)**

“Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed that grows from the smallest of all seeds into a plant large enough that birds nest in its branches. ([Matt 13:31–32](#)) This stark contrast between beginning and outcome carries the parable’s central message.

The mustard seed represented the tiniest seed familiar to Jesus’s audience, not necessarily the smallest seed in botanical reality.^[1] This minuscule seed symbolizes the kingdom’s initial phase, when Jesus had only a small group of followers.^[1] Few recognized that God’s kingdom had already arrived through Jesus’s ministry.^[1] The parable thus challenges listeners not to dismiss what appears insignificant by earthly standards.

The kingdom of heaven resembles the smallest seed that grows explosively to become one of the biggest plants.^[2] Jesus warns against underestimating the kingdom or believing that small spiritual realities will remain small, just as seemingly insignificant acts of faithfulness carry greater weight in God’s economy than the world recognizes.^[2]

The parable’s imagery draws on Old Testament precedent. The details of birds nesting in branches allude to [Ezekiel 17:23](#) and [Daniel 4:20–22](#), passages depicting great trees offering shelter.^[3] Matthew may intend these allusions to suggest the entry of Gentiles into God’s kingdom, which the risen Jesus commands his disciples to pursue.^[3]

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The parable’s themes connect most closely with the parable of the leaven that follows, since both describe the kingdom as very small initially but advancing until it encompasses the entire world.^[1] Together, these parables reframe how believers should evaluate spiritual reality—not by visible power or earthly metrics, but by the kingdom’s inevitable, transformative growth.”¹

“The claim about mustard as an invasive plant reflects a scholarly debate, though the evidence doesn’t strongly support this interpretation. Some scholars have argued that the mustard plant was considered a weed in antiquity and that the parable deliberately compares God’s reign to a dangerous, pungent, and invasive shrub.^[1] However, the peaceful image of birds nesting beneath the branches of the plant undermines the suggestion that the parable compares God’s reign to a dangerous invader.^[1] Ancient sources like Pliny’s *Natural History* emphasize the mustard plant’s benefits as a seasoning and cure for various ailments rather than its dangers.^[1] The actual oddity of the parable lies elsewhere. The mustard seed is not technically the smallest of all seeds that can be planted, nor does it grow to literally be the largest of all garden plants.^[2] Yet this botanical imprecision is intentional rather than problematic. Critics have objected to the accuracy of the statement that the mustard “becomes a tree,” but they overlook the fact that this description alludes to important Old Testament prophetic imagery, particularly in [Daniel 4](#) and [Ezekiel 17](#) and 31.^[3] These texts describe the expansion of a world-wide empire as an enormous tree that provides a nesting place for birds.^[3]

The parable’s exaggeration—calling a shrub a tree, treating a small seed as the smallest—functions deliberately to signal theological meaning rather than botanical accuracy. The parable is not intending to convey agricultural truth regarding seed and trees; rather, it conveys principles concerning the kingdom of God—that a large plant can grow from a small seed, just as God’s kingdom spreads from one person (Jesus Christ) into billions of believers

¹ [1] Charles L. Quarles, [Matthew](#), ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), [334](#).

[2] R. Albert Mohler Jr., [Tell Me the Stories of Jesus: The Explosive Power of Jesus’ Parables](#) (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2022), [176](#).

[3] Craig A. Evans, [Matthew](#), ed. Ben Witherington III, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), [275](#).

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throughout history.^[2] The apparent oddities are rhetorical tools pointing to the kingdom’s hidden present reality and inevitable future expansion.”²

2. The Leaven

“He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.” (Matthew 13:33–34, ESV)

In a similar vein, Jesus then tells the parable of the leaven (yeast). Two interesting points here: leaven was not a positive ingredient for the Jews. Their Passover celebration forbade leaven and often excluded it from the bread. This woman hides, or sneaks, the leaven into the loaf. The wording is odd; you don’t hide salt in a dish, you add it, and once added, it cannot be removed. The yeast is kneaded in, and this large amount of flour will be contaminated by a small amount of yeast. This is similar to the mustard seed. Jesus, the unwanted king, came into the world in a lowly unassuming way. He has gained some disciples that most would call lackluster. However, the movement of God’s Kingdom cannot be stopped. This reminds me of Luke’s book of Acts, when the Sanhedrin could not believe that Jesus’ disciples were uneducated men, because God was using them in supernatural ways.

In 2026, Christianity is still the largest religion in the world. Sometimes we forget that this move of God began with Christ in Galilee, healing, preaching, and casting out demons. No one at the time would have guessed how grand Jesus’ ministry would become!

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” **(Acts 4:13, ESV)**

² [1] Mary Ann Beavis, [Mark](#), Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), [84](#).

[2] Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, [An Introduction to Christian Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World](#) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2017), [112](#).

[3] Charles L. Quarles, [Matthew](#), ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), [335](#).

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“The parable of the Leaven closely parallels the Mustard Seed, as both recount how something hidden becomes great through an organic process, signaling a shared theme for Matthew.^[1] Both parables begin hidden yet grow, starting insignificant before expanding to consume space.^[2] However, the kingdom arrives not through grand public spectacle but hidden presence, allowing Jesus’s ministry—including its failure in Israel—to be understood as the beginning of eschatology without fanfare.^[1]

The oddities in the Leaven parable are more pronounced than in the Mustard Seed. The text uses the unusual word “hid” rather than describing kneading, and the amount of flour—three measures, nearly 40 liters—would feed over 150 people, far exceeding ordinary domestic baking.^[3] The protagonist being a woman rather than a man, and her handling such a massive quantity of flour without explanation, would have surprised Jesus’s hearers.^[4]

Leaven itself was not a typical kingdom metaphor; Passover rituals associated it with something negative—leavened items were removed and deemed useless for sacrifice.^[3] Yet the parable’s point is that leaven, though hidden in flour, irresistibly leavens a large amount, just as the kingdom of God operates through an irresistible process leading to excessive fullness.^[3]

The main debate concerns whether these parables emphasize contrast or growth, though both interpretations work since both convey the unexpected nature of the kingdom.^[2] Jews may have expected a complete kingdom from the outset, but Jesus reveals it operates differently—like leaven, like a mustard seed, like the presence of Jesus and his followers.^[2]³

³ [1] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), [2:421](#).

[2] Patrick Schreiner, *The Body of Jesus: A Spatial Analysis of the Kingdom in Matthew*, ed. Chris Keith, Library of New Testament Studies (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; Bloomsbury, 2016), [555:116–117](#).

[3] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), [262–263](#).

[4] Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), [699–700](#).

Application

Be the Leaven!

Oftentimes, we think that Jesus’ acts must be like Peter preaching to 3,000 or Billy Graham in the big tent revivals. However, most of Jesus’ work isn’t grand or well-known. It’s praying for people. It is talking about what we are learning in Christ. It’s a simple question: “Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?” Write down on a Post-it note one way you plan to sneak Jesus into someone’s life! Amen!