Part Four: The Parable of the Mustard Seed and The Parable of the Leaven
"How shall I describe the kingdom of God?" ~Jesus

Understanding the Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven
by Jeremy K. Bratcher

Historical Details and Opening of the Parable “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed.” This parable appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Not all of the parables we’ve studied have such a record as this short statement. What is it about the mustard seed parable that had such an impact on the early listeners?

As with other parables we’ve looked at in this series, this parable begins with a man planting seed in a field. According to ancient law (yes, there were EVEN GARDENING LAWS), the mustard seed was to be planted on an outside corner of your field lot. It was considered more of a consuming weed (although useful), than a great tree. The quick growth and consuming breadth of the mature plant wasn’t compatible with growing other crops, so it had to be separated from the larger planting area.

Suspense The tricky part of language is that we often take it to its fullest without context. Note: Botanists know there are even smaller seeds than this mustard seed. Jesus’ linguistic point is that the seed is smaller than most, yet it grows larger than most.

Progress and Plot Conflict The seed is planted and grows. It benefits the “birds of the air.”

Explanation of Elements As an idiom, the “birds of the air” has been used to refer to “unclean” birds...vultures and such. If this is the right rendering of the passage, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is a place for sinners to find rest.

Another possibility is that these are simply birds that are making nests in a tree...much like the connection in Matthew 6:25-34.

Statement of General Theme and Variations The general theme rests in an unassuming Kingdom that continues to grow and benefit those who come into it.
Historical Details and Opening of the Parable “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour...”

We use yeast today when baking bread. In the ancient world, leaven was used. Essentially, this is a small piece of old, fermented dough that would have carried the agent-bacteria that caused bread to rise. In the ancient world, leaven was almost always associated with sin and corruption.

Suspense For the listener, the tension rose immediately when Jesus said Heaven was like leaven! How could the dwelling of God be filled with corruption? Yet, the listening audience missed the point!

Progress and Plot Conflict A little leaven affected the entire batch of dough. When we look at this passage and think three measures, we’re thinking three cups. For the ancient listener or reader, they would understand enough flour to bake about 100 loaves of bread. Three measures were about 50 to 80 pounds!

Explanation of Elements Jesus reverses the common evil connotation associated with leaven for the purpose of prompting the crowd to understand the presence of the Kingdom. The Kingdom comes with positive, hidden permeation in this world. The Jews knew the Kingdom would bring transformation, but they expected it to be immediate. Jesus was telling them to hold firm in faith until the leaven (the Kingdom of Heaven) had worked its way through the world!

Statement of General Theme and Variations The leaven parable continues the effects of the previous parable. This unassuming Kingdom (compared to a mustard seed or leaven piece) has incredible impact when it is worked into one’s life and world.

The photo below illustrates a mustard tree in Israel today:
“So never lose an opportunity of urging a practical beginning, however small, for it is wonderful how often in such matters the mustard-seed germinates and roots itself.”

Florence Nightengale

Reflection Questions:

Read Matthew 13:31-33

1. Summarize the parable of the mustard seed.

2. Summarize the parable of the net.

3. Why do you think Jesus continues to compare the Kingdom of Heaven with commonly recognized images?

4. What do the two parables have in common?

5. What do you think Jesus is telling us? What is the big idea?
6. What are some subtle ways that you see the Kingdom of God breaking through:

   in your life?

   in our church?

   in our community?

Application:

What personal applications can we make from this parable?
Jesus said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.”

It has been said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The Lord Jesus frequently used parables as a means of illustrating profound, divine truths. Stories such as these are easily remembered, the characters bold, and the symbolism rich in meaning. Yet, there was something much more behind the parables of Matthew 13...the secrets to the Kingdom of Heaven were being revealed. As Jesus said, “He who has ears, let him hear.” The Kingdom awaits!