**LARGE LESSONS FROM LITTLE THINGS**

**(Matthew 13:25, 31-35)**

It was a classic American TV show. It ran a total of five seasons between the years 1959 and 1964. In all there were 156 episodes 92 of which were written by the show’s creator and host. The show had a memorable opening theme song. Maybe you can remember Rod Serling looking at the camera and saying, “There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man’s fears, and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area, which we call, THE TWILIGHT ZONE.”

One of the great episodes of that science fiction show tells the story of an American on a walking trip through central Europe. The traveler gets caught in a terrible storm. As he wanders through the blinding rain he comes upon a medieval castle. He discovers that it is a monastery for a brotherhood of monks. Reluctantly, they agree to take him in for the night.

While he is there, the American finds a jail cell with a man locked inside. An ancient wooden staff is being used to bolt the door shut. The prisoner informs the guest that the insane head monk, Brother Jerome, is holding him captive. With kindness on his face and gentleness in his voice, the prisoner pleads with the American to release him.

The American goes straight to Brother Jerome, who claims that the prisoner is none other than Satan himself. He maintains that the father of lies is being held captive by the Staff of Truth, the one barrier from which he was unable to free himself.

The American becomes convinced that Jerome has gone mad, certifiably crazy. As soon as he has a chance, he returns to the jail cell and frees the prisoner. Instantly, upon his release, the prisoner is transformed into a hideous horned demon, and he vanishes in a puff of smoke.

The American is horrified by what he has unknowingly done. He returns to the head monk and confesses what he did. Jerome says to him, “I’m sorry for you, my son. All your life you will remember this night and whom you have turned loose upon the world.”

“I didn’t believe you,” he laments. “I saw him and didn’t recognize him.”

Jerome replies, “That is man’s weakness . . . and Satan’s strength.”

How well able are you to recognize Satan’s presence? The Bible warns that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light. He doesn’t come to us dressed in a red suit sporting a tail and holding a pitchfork. He resembles anything other than what he actually is. He is a master of disguise. It is our inability to recognize him that is our weakness and his strength.

We have been investigating the parables of the Kingdom that Jesus gives us in Matthew 13. So far, we have looked at the first two and the interpretation which Jesus provides privately to His disciples. In the first two we see an element of evil and Satanic opposition that is actively working against the progression of the Kingdom.

In the Parable of the Sower, the sower went out to sow his seed, and some of his seed fell upon the path. Birds came along and ate that seed. Who were the birds? Jesus said the seed stands for the word of the Kingdom and that “the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.” Of course, the evil one is Satan.

Then, in the parable of the Weeds, we saw how an enemy came and sowed weeds in the farmers field of wheat. Jesus explained that the enemy who did that dastardly deed was the devil and that the weeds are sons of the evil one.

These first two parables of Matthew 13 are the only ones that Jesus specifically interpreted for us. If the first two contained elements of opposition, doesn’t it stand to reason that some of the other parables might, as well? I think so. But for some reason, most of the interpreters who have written and preached the following parables give us, what I would call, “a white-washed, sanitized interpretation” of the two parables we find in vv. 31-33. Let’s read those verses.

Concerning the parable of the Mustard Seed, the most widely-held interpretation is simply that while the Kingdom would start small, it would grow exponentially into something very large. On the Day of Pentecost, there were 120 believers, and today some 2.5 billion people claim to be Christians, and they can be found in every nation around the world. And most interpreters say little to nothing about the birds resting in the branches of this mustard plant that has become a tree.

I think far more is at work here than meets the eye. In each of these parables, Jesus gives us a large truth based on a small thing. In the first parable we see that small birds teach us that the evil one seeks to **consume** the gospel seed before it can do its work. In the second, we see that Satan wants to **counterfeit** the children of the Kingdom with his own children who will pretend to something other and something more than they really are. For a time, they may look, and act, and speak like Christians, but they are not really followers of Christ. They are nothing more than counterfeits.

Let’s move to the story of the mustard seed. Here we see:

1. **A LITTLE SEED TEACHES US THAT KINGDOM GROWTH WILL BE CORRUPTED.**

Let me make a few observations. While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed to be found, it is still exceedingly small. When the mustard seed is planted, it does not really grow into a tree. It becomes a small bush. In Israel, some mustard plants do grow long shoots, but they are not capable of supporting nesting birds; so, what is Jesus really saying?

Before I answer that question, let me say that in Scripture, the figure of a tree often represents a person or an entity of power. In the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar, the leader of the Babylonian Empire has a dream of a tall tree, and the birds of the air find nesting in the limbs of that tree. Daniel tells him, “King, you are dreaming about yourself.”

In Ezekiel 31 the prophet says that Pharaoh towers among the trees of the forest and the birds of the heavens make their nest in its boughs and under its shadow live all great nations, but the prophet warns that judgment is coming. That tree would be cut down. It would be judged for its wickedness.

Then, in Revelation 18:2, we hear an angel call out, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird . . .” The angel announces judgment upon Babylon. Babylon represents the anti-Christian world system that “seeks to entice and seduce the believer” to turn away from God. “It symbolizes the concentration of the luxury, vice, and glamour of this world. It is the world viewed as the embodiment of ‘the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the [pride] of life’” (1 John 2:16).[[1]](#footnote-1)

John might have viewed Rome as the Great Babylon. Where might it be found today? Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, New York City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles? I think you might find a little bit of the Great Babylon in Enid, OK.

What is worse is that I think Jesus is saying this godless display of power can be found right in His own Kingdom. His Kingdom will grow so large that evil birds will find a home there. The Reformers, Luther, Calvin, and the others said, “That is the Catholic Church led by the Pope, who they viewed as the anti-Christ.

I don’t take that position. That seems to be a bit extreme to me. Personally, I think it may be Nashville and the leaders of the SBC. No, I’m kidding, but only half-kidding.

Through the centuries the Church, in various places and at various times, has wielded enormous political influence and even civil power. Kings have bowed before Popes.

The Kingdom has come to resemble an ungainly tree with each branch representing a different denomination and faction. Like different sized branches going every which way, we are split and divided into competing organizations and entities. There are all kinds of religious groups who teach weird, unbiblical things. The Kingdom has become a home for evil.

The one question and objection I hear more than any other from unchurched people is, “Why are there so many different churches and denominations?” The best answer I can give is, “Jesus warned us that would be so?”

The presence of evil, however, does not necessarily mean the complete absence of good. Like the field, which has both wheat and weeds, the tree can house both good and bad.

My caution to you is, **“Be careful** which branch you choose. Make sure you find a spiritual home where the Bible is taught faithfully and truthfully and followed obediently.

Let’s look at another little thing that teaches a large lesson. We find it in v. 33.

1. **A LITTLE YEAST TEACHES US THAT KINGDOM INFLUENCE WILL BE CONTAMINATED.**

I am convinced that this parable of the leaven or yeast in the batch of dough is also widely misunderstood. This parable does not teach, like many assert, that the Church is going to exert a positive influence throughout the world.

Think through this little story. Jesus was very specific about who was doing the baking and even how much flour was to be used. He said, “Three measures of flour” were used. Why was He so specific?

In Genesis 18 three guests came to Abraham to tell him that his wife Sarah was going to have a son by that same time next year. When those guests arrived, Abraham didn’t know who they were or why they had come, but in his culture, you were to show hospitality to guests. He went to his wife and instructed her to prepare bread using three measures of flour.

In the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we find various passages in which the Jews were instructed about how to prepare grain offerings. They were given a very specific and precise amount of flour that was to be used. They were also told it was to be made with no yeast.

I think this woman was supposed to be making a grain offering, but she pulled a fast one. Jesus doesn’t say she put yeast in the dough. He says she hid it as if she didn’t want anybody to know what she was really doing. And that yeast, which is a symbol of evil, worked itself throughout the dough.

Every time yeast or leaven is used symbolically in the Bible it represents an evil influence. Warren Wiersbe wrote, “Sin is like yeast: It quietly grows, it corrupts, and it ‘puffs up’” (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

During His ministry, Jesus warned against the yeast of **the Pharisees,** the yeast of **the Sadducees,** and the yeast of **Herod**. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul compared **immorality in the church** to yeast that works itself throughout the bread. Then in Galatians 5:9 Paul compared **the legalism of the churches** in Galatia to yeast that works through the whole batch of dough.

In the story Jesus told, the dough represents the fellowship of God with His people and the fellowship of God’s people with one another. In the church we share life and love with one another.

The yeast of false teaching and wicked practices, however, contaminates that fellowship.

* **The yeast of** **the Pharisees was hypocrisy.** Hypocrisy tears a church apart.
* **The yeast of** **the Sadducees** **was rationalism.** They didn’t believe in miracles or the resurrection or life after death. Liberal theology has torn many churches apart and rendered them lifeless and dead.
* **The yeast of Herod was materialism.** Many in our churches today are held captive by the desire for things and riches. Paul warned that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Materialism has ruined many in the church.
* **The yeast of sexual immorality is equally destructive.** Many denominations today are even defending homosexuality as a valid alternate lifestyle. They are pushing for the ordination of homosexual ministers, for the redefinition of marriage, for the legitimacy of sexual relationships before marriage. Such actions are killing the witness of those churches.
* Finally, **the yeast of legalism is killing churches.** Many are teaching the opinions of man instead of the clear word of God. We can’t satisfy God with man-made rules. Salvation is by grace through faith.

Years ago, Pastor Ray Stedman preached a message on this parable. He entitled his message, “The Case of the Sneaky Housewife.” He pointed out that the right person was doing the baking. She was occupying her rightful position as the woman of the house, but she carried out her rightful responsibilities in the wrong manner.

In the same way, there are many men who have been put into places of leadership by God. They are pastors. They are teachers. The have both the right and the responsibility of teaching God’s people, but they are carrying out their rightful responsibilities in the wrong way. They are teaching error. They are influencing God’s people in the wrong direction.

For that reason, the lesson of the yeast is, **Be Watchful!**

Satan is the enemy of the Kingdom, and he is wreaking havoc by consuming the good seeds of God’s word that is being sown, by counterfeiting the people of the Kingdom, by corrupting the growth of the Kingdom, and by contaminating the influence of the Kingdom.

There is one more little thing I find that carries a large lesson. Rather than being something Jesus said, it is something that is said about Jesus. Look at 13:34-35. A parable is a little story that carries a large lesson.

1. **LITTLE STORIES TEACH US THAT KINGDOM TRUTH MUST BE**

**COMMUICATED.**

Jesus both popularized and mastered the use of parables. They really were not widely used before Jesus. The Greek word for *parable* is made up of two parts: *para* means “alongside.” It is found in such words as *paraprofessional, paramilitary, parachurch.* A paraprofessional works alongside a lawyer or doctor or some other professional. A paramilitary organization works alongside the regular military. A parachurch organization does ministry alongside local churches.

The second part of the word parable is the Greek verb *bolay.* It means “to throw.” A parable is a story that is thrown alongside a situation so as to provide comparison/contrast. It illustrates truth in a powerful and visual way. We say that a picture is worth a thousand words, and by using parables, Jesus painted pictures of the truth He wanted to convey.

A popular way of defining a parable is that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus used things that were common to the people around him. They knew about wheat and weeds and mustard seeds and yeast.

However, not everyone got the real meaning of His parables. Often, the people went away scratching their heads and shrugging their shoulders. Sometimes, His stories concealed the truth as much as they revealed it. The reason is that you have to work at it. More than once, Jesus’ parables went against the grain of the notions that were commonly held. He made people like tax collectors and Samaritans, the hero of his stories. These were the very people that the Jews loved to hate.

We are separated from Jesus’ parables by both time and culture. We haven’t always caught the true meaning of what Jesus said. I think I have illustrated that in today’s message. We need to bow before the Holy Sprit and ask Him to be our Teacher. Instead of just parroting what we have heard or read, we need to listen for the voice of the Spirit.

These little stories contain large and important lessons regarding Kingdom truth that should be communicated accurately and often. That means **we need to be mindful.** We need to pay attention. That is why Jesus said again and again, “He who has ear to hear, let Him hear.”

The Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn once wrote, “If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

The African-American preacher Tony Evans was making much the same point when he said, “If you want a better **world,** composed of better **countries,** inhabited by better **states,** made up of better **counties,** composed of better **cities,** inhabited by better **neighborhoods,** illuminated by better **churches,** made up of better **families,** then we need to become better **people.** It all starts with personal responsibility!”

Without a doubt, Satan is a terrible threat to the work of the Kingdom, but I would venture to say that the greatest threat to the progress of the Kingdom isn’t him; it is me, and it is you.

Are you where you need to be in your relationship with Christ? Are you where you need to be in your spiritual maturity? In other words, are you saved, and are you growing?

Jesus used these little things like mustard seeds and yeast and stories to teach us large lessons about:

* Being Careful
* Being Watchful, and
* Being Mindful

If we will do those things, Satan will not get the victory, and Jesus will be able to use us in amazing ways to accomplish His work.

1. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997, Eleventh Printing, Originally 1940), 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)