

Introduction

One of the most deadly animals in the world is the golden poison frog. Each one carries enough toxin on average to kill 10 to 20 men. That's quite a punch considering this creature only grows to about 1.5 inches in size. It can be a deadly mistake to disregard something simply because it is small. Being small in size does not mean insignificant.

Goliath found that out a little too late when he faced young David. He scoffed that the Israelites would send a youth to face him in battle and that with only a sling and several stones. But it was Goliath who was slain that day. He disregarded the young man, but David was not deterred.

This morning we come in our study of Matthew 13 to two parables told by Jesus, both of which highlight the importance of not underestimating the kingdom of God based upon appearance. The important lesson of the parables is that the world may disregard the kingdom of heaven but the kingdom will not be deterred.

[Read Text; Pray]

Matthew 13 collects together a series of parables Jesus used in his preaching to declare important truths of the kingdom of heaven. His use of the parables was to hide the truth from those who did not really want it while blessing those who did. The first parable in Matthew 13 is "The Parable of the Sower." The lesson of the parable is that most of the people who hear the word of the gospel will reject it in one way or another. The second parable, "The Parable of the Weeds," portrays the lives of those who accept the gospel as being difficult. They live in the midst of hostility from those who resist the gospel. One could imagine the perplexity of the disciples at this point. If there be but few who join the kingdom, then it will be small. And if living as citizens of the kingdom means living in the midst of hostile forces, then it will be hard. Is there, then, any hope for those who belong to the kingdom? Will it prevail? Will it survive? With these two parables, Jesus answers with a word of assurance. The kingdom, despite

its appearance and despite its enemies, is in fact unstoppable. It might be disregarded by the world, but it will not be deterred.

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus paints a picture of

I. Unstoppable Expansion.

The kingdom of heaven may bear the appearance of insignificance before the world, but it will unstoppably grow to such enormous proportions that it will be a blessing to the world. The main features in this parable are the seed, its size before it is planted and after it grows, and its use when it is grown. Before it is planted Jesus notes that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds.

Bible critics point their fingers and point out that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds. No it is not. But two things are going on here. One, Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point. Two, Jesus is not talking about all seeds anywhere in the world but all seeds used in gardening in Palestine during those days. His point is that among the garden plants the tiniest seed becomes the largest of the garden plants which in fact grows to a point where, as a tree, it provides shelter and a place of rest. The mustard plants of Palestine were known to grow to be 12-15 feet tall and indeed birds built nests and found shelter in them.

So what is the point? Look at a mustard tree and you see a living illustration of the kingdom of heaven. It all starts from a very small seed. It is so small it seems insignificant. It could be easily disregarded, written-off, overlooked, neglected, ignored. When the garden teams are chosen, it is the one seed nobody wants because what could it do? The kingdom preached by Jesus is embraced by relatively few. Most will not give it a chance. The people were all excited about the miracles and such, but when it came to the essence of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, it was unimpressive to the public. Largely they were unwilling to invest their lives in that. John 6 recounts how Jesus spoke frankly to those who were following him. Verse 66 says, "after this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." But for all the lack of public following, Jesus is saying by this parable that his kingdom would not stop growing. It would not stop expanding. It would grow and expand until it outstrips the significance of all the other kingdoms of history. It may not look like much

in its initial stages, but when it culminates the kingdom of heaven will be the greatest of all the kingdoms. John reports in Revelation 11 a time when loud voices in heaven say, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

In this world, not loved by this world, the kingdom appears like a mustard seed kingdom. The seeds of the other kingdoms seem to promise so much more. But do not be fooled by the cover of the book. The kingdom of heaven will succeed all the rest and take them over.

And not only that. This is the kingdom which promises rest and blessing. The picture of the birds of the air nesting in the tree is telling. It harkens back to two specific instances in the Old Testament. Nebuchadnezzar beheld in a dream a large, strong tree, very tall, with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit. Under it the beasts of the field found shade and in its branches lived the birds of the heavens. Interpreting the dream, Daniel said, "the tree you saw . . . it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong." Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon had flourished and brought prosperity upon numerous peoples of the region. In another instance, Ezekiel the prophet recorded the Lord's depiction of the kingdom of Assyria as a tree: its height reached to the clouds; it was taller than all the trees of the field; it had beautiful branches and forest shade. Are you surprised that Ezekiel 31 reports that "all the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs." The thriving kingdom became a blessing and a refuge to its neighbors.

These accounts would have been well known to Jesus and the disciples. And the message would have been unmistakable. The kingdom of heaven, though presented as a mustard tree, is depicted with less glamour but with the same result of shelter and blessing but emerging from a mustard seed. The kingdom of God though unimpressive in a worldly sense will in fact be a source of blessing to the entire world. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the tree was chopped down, but not this mustard tree. It will bless the world and it will remain.

In the parable of the leaven, Jesus paints a picture of

II. Uncontainable Influence.

This parable is short, simple, and clear. People would know exactly what Jesus was describing. Everybody knows that leavened bread is the best. Have you ever eaten homemade bread right out of the oven? . . . with a little butter melted and running down your chin as you put it in mouth? There is nothing like it. Leavened bread was prescribed for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread to depict Israel's flight from Egypt and its new start. Normally, however, everybody ate leavened bread, and it was a main dietary staple. So everyone knew that the ladies would put the leaven down in the flour, its work unseen but unmistakable, so that the leaven would have its impact and the dough would rise. The key elements of the parable, besides the leaven and the flour, are the location and the result.

The leaven is hid in the flour. The idea is not that the leaven is purposely put out of sight, but that it is placed in the midst of the flour. As such it is overshadowed by the flour. But the unstoppable result is that the leaven spreads and impacts the entire amount of dough.

In what way is Jesus saying that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven? It is located in the midst of the world. It grows intertwined with the weeds. It is largely disregarded. People look at the world and they see flour. But there is an influence that the kingdom exerts on the world that is unmistakable and uncontainable. It cannot be stopped. In the context of the parables, the message is pretty clear. The world may largely reject the gospel. The world may antagonize kingdom citizens. The world may be unimpressed with the kingdom, but it cannot remain unaffected by it. The influence of the kingdom will be there. Its citizens are salt and they are light, and they have a transforming influence on the world. The message of Jesus to his disciples is simply to hang in there, be who they are called to be and the world will not be able to withstand its influence.

Now I want you to take from both of these parables some

III. Unavoidable Input for your life.

Here are some real life lessons from these parables we need to apply to our lives.

A. Never despair over how the kingdom is disregarded.

I couldn't help seeing the news this past week. Melissa and I were away at the annual conference for the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. Each morning as we ate breakfast there in the hotel lobby, CNN was staring us in the face. If all I knew was what was reported by CNN, I would conclude that there is one thing going on in the world worth talking about. The house Democrats are conducting an impeachment inquiry into President Trump. That is ALL they were talking about.

But the world is so much bigger than what is reported by any news agency. If our perception was based only upon what is regarded by the world, we would have a terribly skewed view of reality. For example, which would you say is a bigger problem in America, homicide or suicide? Almost every morning the local news reports another homicide that happened overnight. Rarely does the news report suicide unless it is some famous person. But, get this, suicide occurs twice as much in America as homicide. And as for the church, about the only thing the news reports in regard to the church is some scandal. Think of all the steeples and church buildings you see in Milwaukee, but is the world aware of lives that are actually being changed, souls that are being rescued from hell and reconciliation taking place between them and God? Does it even care?

In the past 6 weeks, right here in this room, we have been witness to what is absolute most important in the lives of human beings as 6 have professed Jesus as their savior and lord through baptism. But it largely unnoticed by the public. I am not complaining here. I am not pleading for news coverage. I simply want you to get your perspective right as you look out on the world. As a whole, the world disregards what is truly most important. But the disregard of the world has NEVER stopped the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus meant it when he said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The kingdom of heaven does not have to be regarded by the world to do its work. It WILL increase. It WILL expand. It WILL become bigger than all the garden plants, no thanks to the world but all to the glory of God.

Followers of Christ, be encouraged by this truth. Do not look to the future with dismay or apprehension. The world has always been captivated by

things that distract rather than the things that really matter, but it cannot stop the kingdom of heaven from expanding either in power or in number. Paul said of the Jews that they seek signs and of the Gentiles that they seek wisdom. The cross of Christ is not what they seek, but it is what we preach. Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And Christ will not be deterred. His kingdom will come. Just keep holding on. Just keep following on.

As encouraging as this is to the follower of Christ, it is a great warning to the one who does not follow Christ. Do not listen to the world. Do not follow after what it follows. Don't disregard the kingdom of heaven just because it is the course of this world! When the kingdom of heaven reaches its apex all other kingdoms will be subject to it. And you will be too, unless you have come to join in. There is no greater and no more important movement or project to be involved in than the kingdom of heaven and there is no greater mistake than to fail to come be a part of it.

B. Realize that God does not operate to impress human beings in terms of the things that the world values. The kingdom of heaven is not like the largest of garden plant seeds but like the smallest. It is not like the flour but like the leaven. It is the least impressive outwardly and the least noticed outwardly. And yet in the end, the kingdom of heaven is sovereign over all others and exerts an uncontainable influence upon all others.

Human beings are prone to place our confidence in big things, physically strong things, and people who make loud boasts. The Bible is constantly warning us not to put our confidence in them. I think of Psalm 33 which depicts God looking down from heaven upon the hearts of man. And he sees what they trust in. The psalmist cries out, "The king is NOT saved by his great army; a warrior is NOT delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a FALSE hope for salvation, and by its great might it CANNOT rescue."

In Deuteronomy 7 and in other places in the OT, the Lord God explained to the nation Israel why they were chosen by him. It was not because they were mighty or great or numerous or impressive. The Lord says in fact in Deuteronomy 7 that they were the fewest of all the peoples. God does not

start with the mighty and powerful. He does what he does not to exalt human power and ability but to exalt his power. So God works powerfully through the things that are not in order to shame the things that exalt themselves. He exalts humility and takes down human pride.

When God sent his own Son into the world, he did not send him into some wealthy and important family. He sent him into the home of a carpenter. His earthly father could provide nothing better than a stable in a small inconsequential town for him to be born in. He had to flee to Egypt and then was raised in a town of bad reputation. He did not have an endearing appearance. He was unloved by society. Even when he brought much joy and relief through healing and kindness, he was despised and rejected. And at last he was treated to the most ignominious form of death—crucifixion. You know Jesus compared himself to a seed. He said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” Jesus was just a seed, a grain of wheat, and death is the most “disregardable” thing a man can do, particularly if he is put to death as a criminal, but in death Jesus brought life to those who trust in him. He was despised and forsaken as one from whom men hide their faces. He was oppressed and afflicted. Who would want to be his friend? But he bore our griefs. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that brought us peace, and by his stripes we are healed. Oh, that your faith and hope and confidence are in this disregarded and despised Jesus! He is unimpressive to the world, but he is the king who will reign over all. All nations and peoples will become a footstool for his feet. He will rule over all. Be reconciled to God through the sacrifice of the King or suffer eternally under his righteous wrath.

C. Be faithful in the little things. Since God is pleased to work through the small and unseemly to grow his kingdom and impact the world, it should encourage us to persevere whenever we feel like we do not really matter. Ever feel like you are one of the little people? Like you are off in your corner of the world and you don't matter very much because there is not a whole lot of people gathered around you? You're a Sunday School teacher with only a couple kids in your class. You are part of a small church that is overlooked by the rest. Or in the context of the church you do not have one of those roles that every one recognizes. It just doesn't feel like you

have a lot of opportunity for world-wide impact. Do not let it get you down. Come back to the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Remember it is not the proud and loud who enter the kingdom but the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek. In the parable of the talents, the master entrusts to his servants varying amounts for them to manage. When the master returns he calls the servants to account. To those who have been faithful, he says, "You have been faithful over a little." Don't worry about how much has been entrusted to you, just be faithful with it. God uses our little to accomplish much. Since we were going to be nearby, Melissa and I took the opportunity of our trip last week to stop by and spend last Sunday in Batesville, Arkansas at Faith Baptist Church. That is the first church I served as pastor. I am thankful for them. They put up with me in a lot of learning and growing. It was a little church in an unlikely location. And it still is. But God is at work. A number of those who were present last Sunday came up to me and Melissa and were telling us ways in which God worked in their lives through us. Back in the day it sometimes felt like we were in the middle of nowhere with little opportunity. But testimonies we heard assured us that God was at work doing things only he can do. If you feel like you aren't doing much, maybe you need to check your faithfulness to steward what God has entrusted to you, but don't underestimate the power of God to do great things through small people with little opportunity.

Conclusion

Lord Kelvin is a renowned Scottish scientist from the 19th century who opposed Darwin. John MacArthur tells that Lord Kelvin once suspended a large piece of metal from a cord in his laboratory. He formed small pea-sized paper wads and systematically propelled them at the metal weight. For some time it seemed that the paper wads had little to no effect. However, over time the steel weight began to sway back-and-forth. The paper moved the metal!

The world seems a massive metal weight. And when the world looks at the kingdom of heaven it sees paper. But God uses paper to move the metal. It has an unstoppable impact. It may look unimpressive and small, but the world cannot repress the kingdom. Neither can the world elude the impact of the kingdom of heaven. You may feel at times like a paper wad. Truth

be told, that is pretty good estimate of your power. But God. Allow God to press you against the resistance of this world, and it will move. You will have impact for the glory of God.