

**Jesus' Parables: Wheat and Weeds,
Mustard Seed and Leaven**
Matthew 13:24-43

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Imagine with me today that you and your family have gone to Ottawa for a vacation. It's a rainy day so you're not going to do outdoor activities. But everyone decides they want to go shopping. (So if you don't like shopping, imagine that you actually do just for the purposes of this exercise) You have two choices of where you can go.

You could go to the Rideau Center in downtown Ottawa. This multi-level shopping complex combines the best of French and English culture. Some stores contain the latest fashions from Paris. Others cater to the multiple ethnic groups that live in and around the downtown area. You can look out of the center at the famous Chateau Laurier hotel and the Rideau Canal. The American Embassy is just across the corner. The outdoor market and multiple patio restaurants surround the mall. You may see a politician or two doing their shopping or an ambassador from another country. Some of Ottawa's wealthiest citizens live just down the road in Rockcliffe and might stop in at the center for lunch. It buzzes with crowds of people from all over the world. Going to Rideau Center is much more than going shopping. It is an experience where you might rub shoulders with the movers and shakers in our nation's capital.

Or you could go to the local suburban mall near your motel. It's a one story flat mall with older architecture. It has some stores but quite a few unleased spaces. The shoppers are from the local community. No tourists regularly go here. If you look out of the mall you can see a parking lot and some houses. No one from Rockcliffe makes the trip out nor do the movers and shakers. The mall is so quiet that you would lower your voice when talking to a family member because everyone could hear what you say. Going to this mall is more an exercise in perseverance as you try to find a store containing items you need. If you go to this mall, you go to shop. There won't be any unusual experiences or superstars walking around. Which place would you most likely select for a day of shopping?

Or to put it another way, which would you rather be part of – something triumphant, large and making a huge impact OR something that looks like it's declining, small and making limited impact? Take churches for example. Some are growing, large and seem to impact many people. Others are in decline, small and making a slight impact. Take cities for example. Some keep gaining, growing and servicing more people. Others are losing, declining and servicing less people than ever before. Maybe you're part of a small business in an industry where a multinational corporation

has worldwide name recognition and continues to grab more market share. You wonder if your little business will survive.

We can face this same challenge as individuals. We all know someone who seems to be more successful, popular, triumphant or influential than us. We know someone who does something better than we do or has something that we don't. Maybe you're retired and have lost that name recognition in your field to that younger guy. Maybe you're unemployed and see others happily employed. Maybe you live in a small home and compare it to people who live in larger homes. Maybe you're career has plateaued while a colleague's career continues to sky rocket. Maybe you have struggles with health and can't do a lot compared to that healthy person who seems to be everywhere doing everything. Maybe you're disabled in some way and constantly compare yourself to people who have the ability you don't have. Maybe you're divorced and compare yourself to happily married people or you're single and see a happy couple. Or you're a single parent and you compare yourself to two parent families. Maybe you're quieter and conclude you have no influence compared to the popular social butterfly. Or you're going to an unknown college while another person goes to a prestigious, well-known university. Or you're a minority among the majority. You may wonder "what is the oint of keeping the faith and staying strong for Christ when it looks like we're losing when all the exciting stuff seems to happen elsewhere?"

But does the reality of these situations mean we actually are part of the losing, declining and insignificant group? Not necessarily. Where you are in your life right now could be part of something that will utterly prevail, ultimately succeed and eternally transform the lives of millions. That something is the kingdom of heaven where God is constantly at His work.

Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven throughout the Gospel of Matthew? We learned that the kingdom of heaven describes a new era of God's reign brought in by Jesus' ministry. Jesus repeatedly impresses upon His disciples the unique nature of the kingdom of heaven. It is unlike any earthly kingdom. Some of Jesus' statements reveal this.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:6) Not the rich? Not those powerful and strong in spirit? "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Persecuted – that shouldn't happen to someone who is victorious with a huge influence and following. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father in heaven." The

kingdom of heaven is an upside kingdom compared to the world's kingdoms. And appearances can be deceiving. Just because something looks victorious, large and influential does not mean it will have lasting influence.

Today we are going to see another unique feature of the kingdom of heaven. If we understand this feature, it will help us continue in our lives and faith even if externally, it may seem like we're declining, small and have little influence. So today we're going to answer 3 questions. What is this unique feature of the kingdom of heaven? How does this feature show itself? In light of it, what response is called for from the followers of Christ?

Matthew 13:24-43

Matthew 13:24-43 (ESV)

²⁴He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

³¹He 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. ³²It 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."

³³He 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."

³⁴All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables;

I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴²and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

What is the unique feature of the kingdom identified in these parables? The kingdom of heaven advances in hidden ways. God's kingdom moves forward in obscure, unconventional and unexpected ways. The people hearing Jesus' parables that day knew how earthly kingdoms advanced. A king would build up a nation's economy and army. Then the king would lead his army against other nations. He would conquer and absorb these nations into his empire. Everyone had to submit themselves to this supreme king. You knew the successful kings by their fame or their face on a coin or their soldiers on your street corner. That's how earthly kingdoms advanced.

Jesus comes along and proclaims "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." But few know His name outside of Galilee. He certainly doesn't have his image on the local money. And He has no army. So it didn't look like His kingdom advanced in any significant ways. But appearances can be deceiving. The kingdom of heaven advances in hidden ways.

How does the kingdom of heaven advance in a hidden way?

1) The Wheat and Weeds

We find the first way in the parable of the wheat and weeds or tares. Jesus talks about a man who plants good seed in the ground. So this parable differs from the one we did a few weeks ago where the seed represents the message of the kingdom and the soils varied in their receptivity to the seed. Here there is good and bad seed. The farmer plants good seed in a field. But then an enemy comes along and plants weeds among the wheat. This was a problem throughout the Roman Empire because we have record a Roman law against planting weeds in another man's fields. Someone could plant weeds in his enemy's freshly planted fields to destroy his crop.

This was no ordinary, harmless weed that you could easily identify the moment it came out of the ground. Likely Jesus' referred to the darnel plant which looks like wheat in its early stages. The darnel's roots would also intertwine with the wheat's roots. On top of all this, the darnel was poisonous. So if you had enough darnel seed in a field, you could ruin an entire crop.

As the two types of seed grew, the difference between the plants became more obvious. The farmer's servants see this and ask what happened? The master immediately concludes an enemy did this. Then the servants ask if the master wants them to go out and pull up the weeds. The master says no because in pulling up the weeds, you would also pull up the wheat. So he commands the servants to let both grow together until the harvest. Then the reapers will gather the weeds into bundles and burn them. But the wheat will come into the master's barn.

Jesus interprets this parable for His disciples in verses 36-43. He identifies no less than 7 images in his parable. The farmer is the Son of Man or Jesus himself. The field is the world – not the church – but the whole world. The good seed represents the children of the kingdom of heaven. The weeds symbolize the children of the evil one. The enemy is the devil. Harvest often symbolizes the end of the age or judgment day. Jesus identifies the reapers as angels.

So in what way does this parable show the hidden advance of the kingdom of heaven? **Though the children of the kingdom must coexist with the children of the devil now, they, God's kids, will be gloriously revealed at the final judgment.** Though we must coexist with evil now it does not mean God's program has failed. He will reveal our faithfulness on the last day. Christ's coming would not result in an obvious, crushing victory of good over evil. Yet the kingdom of heaven advances in and through the lives of its children until the last day. Now think about how much of a shock this might have been to Jesus' first listeners. They expected the kingdom of heaven to turn the world upside down. John the Baptist's ministry seemed to indicate a very near judgment of unbelievers by God. John stated back in Matthew 3:10 – "even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." That sounds like imminent judgment. The people expected that when Messiah arrived, there would be a sudden, dramatic and complete overthrow of evil and the kingdoms of men. Messiah would become king. The Jews would attain international prominence. God's cleansing would be complete.

But here Jesus' reveals that the disciples need patience until the fruit ripened for the delayed final judgment. Instead of a cataclysmic disruption of society and an immediate, obvious division between the children of light and darkness, things would go on apparently as before. The Romans were still in power when Jesus' died and was resurrected. Evil still existed. It seemed like the kingdom of heaven's advance had stalled.

But it hadn't. It continued to advance in the hearts and lives of men and women first in Galilee, then in Jerusalem and now to the ends of the earth. The kingdom of heaven is still hidden today. Jesus does not visibly reign over the world. There is no worldwide recognition of Him as king of kings and lord of lords. But His kingdom advances quietly compared to the publicity surrounding celebrities and world leaders.

But then look what will happen on Judgment Day. Verse 40 "Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and lawbreakers and throw them into the fiery furnace." That will be an earth-shattering moment. The angels will

divide the children of the devil from the children of the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven's triumph will permeate the scene. Christ's angels will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and law breakers.

Can you imagine a kingdom free from all causes of sin and all law breakers who have never repented before Christ? No more temptation – no more law breaking – no more corruption – no more bribes – no more injustice – no more abuse – no more silencing and slandering of those who speak for Christ – no more persecution – no more pain – no more sorrow. Sin and those who rejected Christ will be decisively dealt with in that moment. They will be assigned to a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They will suffer sorrow for their rejection of Christ and unending frustration.

But what will happen to the righteous or children of the Son? Verse 43 – “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” So the hidden growth of the kingdom will be universally displayed. All the Christians who carried on living God honoring lives quietly and despite mocking and isolation will shine like the sun. All those who persevered in a ministry that was obscure and not often noticed will shine like the sun. All those who resisted the temptation to go along with the crowd will shine like the sun. The triumphant, massive, life changing advance of the kingdom of heaven through history will shine like our sun on a cloud free day. So today, despite our need to coexist with evil the kingdom advances. Despite the fact that it may look like evil is winning, good will win in the end. Though there has not yet been a decisive victory of good over evil, that day will come. In the meantime, the kingdom advances.

How else does the kingdom of heaven advance in hidden ways? **2) The mustard seed (13:31-32)** Jesus describes another way with the parable of the mustard seed in verses 31 and 32. The mustard seed was the smallest seed in farming at that time. In proverbs, it symbolized something very small. But the smallness of the seed does not limit the possibility of growth and advance. In fact, it grew to be largest among the garden plants where birds could actually nest on it. The plant had an insignificant beginning. But it resulted in the greatest of shrubs or plants.

So the hidden ways of the kingdom of heaven are shown with the mustard seed. **The kingdom starts insignificantly but grows to the glorious worldwide reign of God.** The kingdom started small but will grow to be an eternal empire. This might also shock Jesus' listeners. Remember they expected the sudden, dramatic change in the status quo with the arrival of the Messiah and His kingdom. But Jesus' starts His ministry away from Jerusalem in the obscure region of Galilee. It would be like Him coming to Canada and starting his ministry in the North West Territories. He is not well

known by the time of His death. Nor is Israel catapulted to the stage of world power. Yet the people must continue to walk faithfully and patiently with God while the kingdom grows.

The third way the kingdom of heaven grows in hidden ways is found in the one verse parable of the leaven in verse 33. **3) The leaven (13:33)** “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” Three measures is about 40 liters. So this would be enough bread for 100 people. Leaven or yeast in the Bible usually symbolizes evil that works its way through a person or through a group of people. But Jesus turns the symbol around to make it more memorable. The leaven or yeast works through this flour to bring a huge return. **The kingdom works in unseen ways that bring monumental impact.** The woman took the leaven and hid it in 3 measures of flour until it was all leavened. So when you first observed the flour with the hidden leaven, it would look like nothing was happening. But then you would see the dough form and rise into loaf after loaf of bread.

We see again how this applied to the original situation. One commentator notes “the Jews rightly understood that the arrival of the kingdom would mean the transformation of the order of things in this world. But Jesus’ arrival did not bring the expected immediate, external, dramatic change. So the parable teaches that we must not let the present, unremarkable form of the kingdom fool us from understanding what will be its final result.

I find it striking that Jesus’ himself carried out His life in quite a hidden way. He ministered in the North West Territories of Judea which was a faraway province from the capital of the Empire. The Roman Caesar of that time never knew His name. Though many in the region followed Him, by the time of His death, few knew His name outside of the country. But within 20 or 30 years, there was such widespread disturbance because of the name of Christ that edicts were issued to address those who followed Him. The Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in the 300’s. Now, it has spread to nations and people groups in every corner of the world.

Yet – the kingdom of heaven’s advance still is not recognized in the power places of our society. No president or Prime Minister can affirm the advance of Christ’s kingdom without fear of impeachment or dismissal or severe backlash. The church and Christ followers are becoming more and more marginalized today.

Yet this does not mean the kingdom of heaven has stopped advancing. Another commentator writes “*for the disciples there was the natural impatience to see God’s kingdom in all its glory, and the total defeat of all that opposed it. To them, and to us today, Jesus points out that the full growth (harvest, mustard plant, leavened dough) is assured*

from the moment the seed is sown, however unpromising its appearance and whatever opposition it may meet in its development. The way of God is not that of flashiness but of ultimate success. Little is great where God is at work. That includes your life & my life – whether it be one act of faith; one decision of obedience; one person influenced; one promise kept – that’s the kingdom of heaven advancing in and through you.

So the kingdom of heaven advances in hidden ways. It requires Christ’s followers to coexist with evil until Judgment Day. It starts small but builds towards something far reaching and eternal. It works behind the scenes but makes life changing impact on those who receive it.

What response does this require of followers of Christ?

The kingdom of heaven’s hidden advance requires a patient, no-quit, Spirit-empowered continuation in our journey of life and faith. If we look at our lives or our accomplishments or our church or our faith solely from the world’s perspective, we may as well give up. We are not famous. We are not popular or widely approved. You don’t see t-shirts on the street saying SVBC or people mentioning our name in coffee conversations. Nor should we aim for that.

We need to pray and depend on the Spirit to help us resist the pull towards belief that the only people that matter are the triumphant, successful influencers. Instead we plead for patience to persevere and keep walking by faith in our neighborhoods, in our circles, at our work, in our families, with those people we connect with until Jesus returns in a way for all to see. I pray that for all of us here today – that knowing the kingdom advances in hidden ways enables us to be okay with not being well known.

This does not mean that we affirm complacency. We need to respond to the part God calls us to play in the advance of His kingdom. But we can rest in the fact that we might very well be in the center of God’s will despite relative obscurity or smallness. We’re on the side that will ultimately triumph in the end.

When the Nazi’s occupied much of Europe in the early 1940’s – millions came under that regime’s brutal rule. When people began to realize what was going on, underground resistant movements developed. There was the French resistance, Dutch resistance and even resistance within Germany itself. The people who participated in these movements may have not seen liberation. Many were imprisoned and died for their small acts. They hid Jewish families – they refused to pass on information that would help the Gestapo or secret police. They sheltered shot down airmen.

Each day arrival of liberating forces. All these small acts along with the advancing armies added up to a weight the tyranny could not withstand and it finally collapsed.

When you & I continue on faithfully with the Lord, we resist the enemy as we wait for the Lord's triumphant return. We may not see it in our lifetime, but through us, He continues His advance until the time appointed when evil will be ultimately and finally overthrown.

These parables reminds us that the glorious kingdom of the future is present now in hidden ways except to we who have been given eyes of faith. So two questions for you to ponder today. First, are you a child of the Lord or a child of the devil? If you don't know Christ, today is the day of salvation. Second, would you like prayer for strength to persevere in the faith and life while the kingdom advances in hidden ways, please raise your hand and I will pray.