

**Sustaining
a Lifetime
of Ministry**

**Session #3: Progress
with Pastor Colin Smith**

We are looking at the parables of Jesus in which He gives us wisdom for sustaining a lifetime in ministry. We began with expectations. We saw from the Parable of the Sower that people will respond in different ways to the Word of God. Some of them are going to be resistant. Other people will be enthusiastic, then some will receive the Word and then it's going to be crowded out. But there will be others in whom the Word of God produces an abundant harvest.

Then we looked at the theme of limitations. We saw that Jesus sows His seed in good soil and it grows. But then the enemy comes and he sows weeds among the wheat and the result is that the field, which is the world, looks a mess. So, it's natural for Christians to say, 'Oh if only we could pull up the weeds!' But Jesus says, 'Let the two grow together until the harvest.' It's also natural for Christians to feel that if we were just what we should be, the world would not be as it is. But it's a great mistake to blame the church for the state of the world. Jesus said, the weeds will continue to grow until He comes.

Today, we come to the Parable of the Mustard Seed. This tiny seed that grows to be a great tree, and the Parable of the Leaven, or yeast that permeates a whole batch of dough. Let's look at Matthew 13:31–33:

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."

These parables have been understood in very different ways. As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. You remember that Goldilocks was wandering in the woods when she came across the house that belonged to the three bears. She went into the house, and nobody was there. But there were three bowls of porridge on the table. She tried the first and it was too hot. She tried the second and it was too cold. Then she tried the third and it was just right, and she ate it all up.

The three ways that these parables have been understood could be described as 'too hot,' 'too cold,' and 'just right.'

1. Too Hot: A Prophecy of Unrivaled Success

Some Christians have understood these parables as a prophecy of unrivaled success. They think that the world will get better as the gospel spreads and the world be brought increasingly under Christian influence. Just as leaven leavens the whole lump of dough, so the whole world will be changed by the gospel. There is some truth in this view. The expansion of the gospel across the world has been blessed with remarkable success, but not with unrivalled success.

The problem with this understanding lies in the parable that we looked at last time: the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. We saw there that until Jesus returns, the enemy will be sowing weeds. Here we come to an important principle:

Always Understand Scripture in The Light of Scripture

God has spoken in Scripture, and He never contradicts Himself. So, we must not interpret one part of the Bible in a way that would directly contradict another.

In the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, our Lord tells us quite clearly that the weeds of evil will remain. 'Let both grow together until the harvest.' In the light of other Scriptures, viewing these parables as a prophecy of unrivalled success is too optimistic.

2. Too Cold: A Warning of Relentless Decline

Far from seeing these parables as a prophecy of unrivalled success, some Christians have understood them to be a warning of relentless decline. They point out that leaven is often used in the Bible as a symbol of evil. Jesus says, "*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees*" (Matthew 16:6, 12). Paul says, "*Cleanse out the old leaven...*" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Then they point to the birds that our Lord says will 'make nests' in the branches of the mustard tree. That may seem like a picture of great beauty, but remember that in the Parable of the Sower, the birds are the ones that take away the seed that was sown on the path. So instead of understanding these parables as a prophecy of growth and success, these Christians understand the parables to be warnings of corruption and decline.

On this view Jesus is warning the disciples that truth will be compromised, godliness will be corrupted, and the church will become a nesting place for birds, that is, it will be taken over by people who remove the Word of God.

Now again, there's some truth in this view. Too often the church has lost its grip on truth. And too often, genuine godliness has been buried in corruption and in compromise. But these parables are not about the church. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like...*" He's saying, here's what the rule of God looks like in the world and the reign of Christ is certainly not a story of failure and decline.

So here we come to a second important principle for understanding the Bible. Remember the first was, always understand Scripture in the light of Scripture. And the second is:

Always Understand Scripture in Its Context

Let me give you an example. What does the serpent stand for in the Bible? The answer that will first come to mind is that the serpent speaks of the devil. But then in Numbers, you have the story of the serpent in the wilderness where Moses lifted up snake on a pole and those who looked to it are healed. And in John's Gospel, the serpent is used to speak of Jesus being lifted up on a cross.

Then in Matthew 10:16, Jesus says that we are to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. It is the context that determines the meaning. So, the fact that leaven indicates

something bad elsewhere in the Bible does not necessarily mean that it has the same meaning here. In this story, Jesus says, “*the kingdom of heaven is like leaven...*” The kingdom of heaven is the rule and the reign of God and that can only ever be good.

So that leads us to our third view of these parables that I’m going to call...

3. Just Right: A Promise of Sustained Progress

Put yourself in the shoes of the first disciples as they listen to the teaching of Jesus in these parables. They hear the Parable of the Sower and they say,

‘So Jesus, we are to be sowers of the Word with You, and You are telling us that when we sow this seed, the devil will be at work snatching it away. Trouble and persecution will come to people who receive it gladly. Our message will have to compete for space in the lives of people whose hopes and dreams are already set on the things of this world. And that when the seed falls in good soil, the enemy will sow weeds, and we won’t be able to pull them up. You want us to commit our lives to this? What chance do we have?! How in the world are you going to sustain a lifetime of service with all of that against us?’

And to that question, Jesus gives us two parables that give us a promise of sustained progress. This progress comes in two ways.

a. Visible Growth in the Advance of the Gospel Around the World

“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.” (Matthew 13:31)

Here is what the rule of Christ looks like in the world. It is like a grain of mustard seed. Jesus says it is the smallest of seeds. But, “*When it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree*” (v32). Christ’s kingdom has a small beginning, but it will lead to a great outcome.

Think about the small beginning. Our Savior was poor in this world, and He was put to death beside two thieves on a cross. The first preachers were uneducated fishermen. The first truth that they preached was the cross, which was bound to raise antagonism since it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles. The first movements of the faith brought persecution.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us a social profile of the early believers in Corinth: “*Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth*” (1 Corinthians 1:26). The Christian faith began as a tiny grain of mustard seed. But the seed had life in it, and from these small beginnings, the gospel spread through the Roman Empire and then to Europe, India, Africa, Asia and around the world.

Jesus Christ is gathering a people for Himself. He’s sustaining them in faith and He is bringing them home into His presence. And He’s been doing this for 2,000 years.

Think about this. The church of Jesus Christ is the only organization on earth that has never lost a member through death. Every time a Christian dies, another member of the body of Christ is safely home.

The book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of what Christ's Kingdom will look like in the future.

...I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9–10)

The ministry you serve may be small now, but if Jesus Christ is at its center, it is part of something glorious that will last forever. So here we have a promise of sustained progress in these parables. We see the progress in the visible growth that comes in the advance of the gospel around the world.

b. Pervasive Influence of the Gospel in the Life of a Believer

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."

(Matthew 13:33)

Leaven is a substance, like yeast, that produces fermentation in dough, causing it to rise when it is baked. Every time bread was made, a piece of leavened dough was put into storage. When the next batch of dough was made, the leavened dough was mixed into it, causing the new dough to rise before it was baked.

John MacArthur says,

'When a Jewish girl was married, her mother would give her a small piece of leavened dough from a batch baked just before the wedding. From that gift of leaven, the bride would bake bread for her own household throughout her married life.'

So here is the picture: a small amount of the leaven mixed into a batch of dough will permeate the whole lump and change its entire nature. Bake it without leaven and it is hard, dry, crisp, and flat. Bake it with leaven, and it rises light, moist, fluffy, and delicious to eat.

Think about this in relation to your experience as a Christian. When God's grace comes into your heart, it is like a little leaven being hidden in the dough of your life. Think about how that began. You began to feel an awakening to spiritual things. Perhaps there was a dissatisfaction in your own life, or with the shallowness of other people around you. You saw something in Jesus that drew you. You began to read the Bible and to pray, and at some point, you trusted Jesus as your Savior and crowned Him as your Lord.

Here's what happens when you become a Christian. You begin to see how far you are from what God is calling you to be. There is a new longing for holiness in your life.

Sometimes all you can see is how far short of it you are. You are not yet conformed to the image of Christ, but the leaven is in you. And leaven is a living organism! The Spirit of Jesus lives in you and here's what will happen: His grace, like leaven, will permeate your entire life. Every part of your life, soul and body will be changed. And the day is coming when you will be like the Lord Jesus Christ.

God began a work of grace in your heart, and what He began in you, He will complete. Here is what the rule of Christ looks like in the life of a believer. It's like introducing leaven to the dough. It goes everywhere. Every part of the dough is affected. Its entire nature is changed. The rule of Christ in the life of a believer may have a small beginning, but it will end in a complete transformation.

That's a long way from our experience as Christians now! Right now, we experience ourselves to be a mass of contradictions. We love Christ and yet at the same time we feel the pull of the world, and sometimes we behave in ways that grieve Him. We trust Christ, and yet at the same time we find ourselves subject of various fears and doubts. We have this resurrection life and yet at the same time we experience in our body's weakness and decay and eventually, if Jesus has not come, we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But the day will come when the new life that Jesus has birthed within you will permeate all that you are, body, soul, and spirit. When you see Jesus, you're going to be like Him.

All of your thoughts, your affections or desires, they're all going to be fully under the reign of Christ! You will love Him completely and you will love others as much as you love yourself. When you see what you will be, you will be renewed in your desire to keep pressing forward in your pursuit of holiness now. Satan always wants to remind you of what you were. But Christ says, no! 'Look what you will be! Look at what you will become when the leaven in you has leavened the whole lump.'

The life of Christ is in you. You are a new creation and "*He who began a good work in your will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:6).

Don't be surprised when you face times of discouragement. This work of sowing the seed is really hard. We have everything against us. The world is a mess! The weeds are springing up all over the field and the people you serve may not be growing as you hoped. But the leaven is at work in them and Jesus gives us this promise. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed. The life changing power of the gospel is at work in the world. And through the gospel, Christ is gathering a people for Himself and not one of them will be lost.

So give yourself to sowing this seed. However hard the work is and however costly it may become it is gloriously worth it. When you are discouraged about yourself. When you say, 'Lord I have been a Christian 10, 20, even 50 years and I long to be more like you than I am.' Remember this: The leaven of Christ is within you. Every part of your life, soul and body will be changed. You're going to be conformed to the image of Christ. There will be a unique reflection of the glory of the Savior in you. So be encouraged. Press on in serving Christ, "*Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

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