

31[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs 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 yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

44“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

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The people in the crowd were certainly in for a surprise. They were enthusiastic about the work and ministry that Jesus was doing, and they wanted to be on board. He began speaking to them with these words: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” And I’m sure they all leaned-in with anticipation. They wanted to understand... and experience... this reign of God. Now, in the other

gospels, Jesus uses the phrase, “kingdom of God,” but in Matthew he instead says, “kingdom of heaven.” It isn’t clear why Matthew made this linguistic choice, but when you and I hear Jesus say “the kingdom of heaven is like...” he is not talking about the afterlife. He is talking about God’s reign in our lives here and now.

So, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” and the crowds lean in for a clear explanation. But what he gives them sounds more like a cognitive test:

Mustard seed

Yeast

Hidden treasure

Pearl

Net

“... those things are what the kingdom of heaven is like,” is basically how Jesus ends.

Then he literally asks them, “Have you understood all this?” And they respond with what must be the most timid utterance of “Yes” this world has ever heard. No, they didn’t understand! It’s like when a teacher finishes a lecture on an advanced subject, then asks, “Any questions?” The last thing spoken that those students understood was, “turn in your textbooks to page 213.” So hearing nothing, the teacher says “class dismissed.”

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Although Jesus was spitting out these parabolic images at a frenetic pace, they all speak to a deep reality: the unexpected hiddenness of God’s reign in our lives. God’s kingdom, Jesus tells us, is tiny... even foolish. This world is accustomed to displays of power and might to define kingdoms, but Jesus was always clear that the saving grace he brings to this world is not like those kingdoms.

God's kingdom is like a mustard seed. Those things are tiny! If you drop one in sand or dirt, you are not going to be able to pick it out. The mustard seeds Jesus spoke of were the seeds that found their way into the cracks of buildings and walking paths. We often think of plants growing from sidewalks and crevices of buildings as an eyesore, but what do those plants do? They slowly crack and break apart the surrounding structure that seems to be so permanent. It can be seen as an allusion to the Roman Empire, which presented itself as powerful and permanent... but God's kingdom, like a tiny mustard seed, will work its way unnoticed into the empire, and slowly prove itself to be more lasting. Matthew uses some hyperbole when describing the mustard as a shrub or tree; the plant never grows to be that big. The point, however, is that this tiny seed and the unsightly plant it becomes paradoxically grows to be an enduring force that the powers of this world can't muzzle.

The kingdom of God is like yeast. It is so small that once it is in the flour, you're never going to see it again. Yet, it works its way slowly and transforms the whole loaf. The kingdom can change hearts. It can... and has... transformed this whole world.

The kingdom is here, but it is modest and quiet. In fact, some come across God's kingdom by accident. Like if it is a hidden treasure that is discovered by surprise. This treasure is not found in the markets, the exchanges, or the castles of power, where treasures are usually found. This treasure is surprisingly found hidden in a field. The owner of the field isn't even aware of its presence. But once you are aware of it, your heart longs for this treasure so much that you will pay any price to purchase that field.

It's like finding an item you've always longed for -- like a fine pearl -- and it is of such great quality that you'd sell everything you own to have it. And it is costly. It cost one man his life, but just so he can give it freely to you.

Because God's reign is like a fishing net. It is cast out freely, and -- if you never noticed -- most fish don't like being caught in a net. This audacious kingdom of God's mercy, love, and grace is going to be cast out and shared with all who are caught up in it, and they don't have any say in the matter.

Tiny seeds, invisible yeast, a treasure stumbled open, a costly yet free pearl, and a net of grace that fighting against is useless. Those might not be the images that we would choose to describe the most powerful and consequential movement this world has ever known. But those are the images that Jesus uses to describe it. It is the kingdom that he has given to us: tiny yet transformative, not where we would think it should be yet ever-present, inescapable. That is the kingdom that Jesus asks us to pray for. That is the kingdom that makes its way into our lives in tiny ways, transforming us and others. I can't explain how this is always done, but the promise is that the reign of God works in these strange and paradoxical ways in our lives.

“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asks. Our best response might be “sure” or “I guess so.” In reality, we probably don't understand how God's reign can be like this. But we need to understand these things well enough so that we can perceive the hidden nature of God's reign in our lives, and point others to the radical grace of such a kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.