
The Kingdom Parables

DAVE BAST

Suppose you knew for sure, absolutely for sure, that the winning ticket in a three hundred fifty million dollar lottery drawing was hidden in a certain place, and it just so happened that the building where it was was for sale and you were the only person who knew about the ticket and exactly where it was? Now, the property was pretty expensive, but you figured out that if you emptied your bank account, cashed in your retirement fund, sold your house, furniture and cars, you could just swing the purchase. Would you do it? Of course you would. That is a no-brainer. But then, why aren't people doing whatever they have to in order to find and enter God's kingdom? For that matter, why is God's kingdom so hidden to begin with? We will think about that, and several other short parables today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; so today we have come to the second in a seven-part series on the parables of Jesus—parables, as we pointed out last week, that often mystify, and sometimes confuse their hearers, and that is really part of their purpose. It is not just an earthly story with a heavenly meaning so that we can figure it out and remember it and pass it on to others. It is supposed to be unsettling; it is supposed to make us think. Parables are sometimes like time bombs that will go off and explode our common notions and understandings about God, and that is all part of the message of the parable we looked at last week.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we mentioned, too, Dave, in that first program that we would be looking at two parables of the kingdom, two parables of grace, and two parables of judgment. So, this is the second one on kingdom parables, the sower; and today, as you mentioned, we are going to look at four, I think, fairly short parables that come kind of one on top of the other in Matthew 13, and they are all going to be about hiddenness and smallness; and so I think ultimately in this program we are going to have a chance to think about even our own selves and our own lives. I think we all feel kind of invisible sometimes...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We all feel small and insignificant: I'm a nobody. God cannot do much through me. Well, stay tuned. We are going to be talking about how God seems to like to do great things through little people—little things—hidden things; but it overturns how we usually think about success, right?

DAVE BAST

Isn't that the truth? And including in the Church. I mean, we love big. We love celebrity. This is our culture. This is our society. You know, just once, Scott, I would like to hear somebody introduce a guest preacher by saying: He has never written a book. His church is pretty small and insignificant; it is in a little town out in

the middle of South Dakota. No one has ever heard of him. He doesn't preach to great crowds, but here he is this morning. Let's listen to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, that doesn't happen, does it? We don't invite people...obscurities...to step into the limelight, including in the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right. Well, indeed, we have probably never heard a speaker introduced that way, or a preacher; but here is something I will bet we have done before. Every once in a while, you hear about a minister who was at a large church in the middle of a city like Chicago, and then he takes a call to a little church in the country...in Nebraska. What do we say when we hear that? We say: Oh, he must have messed up...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He must have gotten into trouble. Why would he go backwards in his career, going to a smaller church when he was already at a large one? That must mean trouble; but, these parables Jesus tells are going to overturn that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there we go. There is the subversive nature of parables; and let's listen to a couple of them. We are stringing together four really little ones and they all come from Matthew 13, as we mentioned, which is the chapter of kingdom parables—parables that focus on the kingdom. We started with the longest and biggest, the parable of the sower. Now we are going to read a couple back-to-back, just little ones.

So, we pick up the reading in Matthew 13:31:

Jesus told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

SCOTT HOEZEE

³³He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

DAVE BAST

So, there they are; very short, very succinct, very to the point; but they are both about little things...almost microscopic, invisible things: A mustard seed. Scholars tell us that it took about 750 mustard seeds to form just a gram; and leaven or yeast: Tiny, tiny, little bits of powder that nevertheless can work their way through pounds and pounds of flour in order to make bread.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and actually, in Jesus' day they probably didn't have the powdered yeast we have. They probably had like a sourdough starter that they just would always keep going in the kitchen, and they would take off just a small, little chunk of that starter; and I think one of the main things of the yeast parable is that it instantly disappears. You instantly can no longer distinguish it from all of the rest of the ingredients; it is just gone, but it is in there doing great things.

DAVE BAST

Right. Furthermore, that starter comes from invisible microbes floating through the air; so they would just put out a dish of something...these invisible things would start working in it. So, you literally could not see it, and when you put it in the loaf it disappears. So, both of these parables obviously invite us to think about tiny beginnings: The God of the tiny; the God who will start doing something that to human eyes seems laughable almost, it is such a small thing: A cup of cold water given in Jesus' name, for example, as he refers elsewhere in the Gospel. A single act of kindness. A simple testimony or story or sermon, maybe, that is shared; these little things that in the world's eyes don't seem to amount to much, those are the ways that God works and brings his kingdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and in fact, it might even be a little more radical than that. You know, it would be one thing, I think, if you said to somebody: You know, that little, kind word you said to somebody in the narthex at church Sunday morning—that little thing—that had great results; but Jesus says: What is like that mustard seed, that if you had only one in your palm you might not even be able to see it? What is that yeast that disappears completely? It is the kingdom of heaven, he says. He is taking the biggest thing you could possibly think of—the kingdom of God itself, or the kingdom of heaven, as it is usually called in Matthew's Gospel—that is the biggest reality of them all and he is saying that in this world that huge reality looks like no more than one dinky little seed or a little, little, teeny bit of yeast that disappears immediately into the larger lump of dough. The biggest reality of them all, in this world and by the standards of this world, often looks like the least significant...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is quite an amazing comparison!

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is quite amazing. It is all about the God who does not despise little things and invites us to consider how great they are. The God of the tiny, the God of seeming weakness, the God of little beginnings that result in great ends, the God who delights in using little people and little, anonymous acts; people like you and me, in other words; not the famous, not celebrities, not the big shots, not the stars—so different from the world's way—that is the point that the New Testament makes, that is the point Jesus makes in his parables; and we want to follow that a little bit further, which we will do in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program of a planned seven-part series on some of the parables of Jesus; and in this program, we are looking at four very short parables. We just looked at the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast or the parable of the leaven; and what Jesus is saying is that God's kingdom in this world is going to look small. The kingdom is the biggest reality of them all, but in this world it is going to look insignificant, but that does not mean it will not do and produce very significant results.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, you think of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, The Lord's Prayer; most of us know that. We probably learned it as children; but one of the very first petitions in the prayer is: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So, the question is: How does the kingdom come? That is what Jesus is getting at in the two little stories that we read. How does the kingdom come; and you might think that it comes as a big deal. It comes with fanfare: This is God we are talking about. What is the kingdom? It is God's presence; it is God's rule; it is God's power. The kingdom of God isn't like the

kingdom of England or the kingdom of Spain. You cannot see it on a map; but wherever God is at work, wherever God is bringing change and renewal, wherever God is recreating and fixing a broken world, there the kingdom is coming; and our tendency is to think: Well, it has got to be big; it has got to be like with public relations; it has got to be on the evening news; and Jesus says: No, no; as great as it is, it is happening quietly, it is happening slowly, it is happening behind the scenes; it is a hidden, hidden thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it will permeate the world, right? Frederick Dale Bruner...a wonderful commentator on scripture, in particular on Matthew's Gospel...Bruner says: You know, Jesus' point...in particular in this parable on the yeast...Jesus' point is not that the whole world will be converted, but that the whole world will be reached, right? So that...

DAVE BAST

Yes, like the leaven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is going to go throughout the whole dough; and so, it is going to have an influence all over the earth one way or the other; whether or not people believe that message; and you know, Dave, what this gets at...and here is another thing I think we sometimes forget...but in all of scripture, Old Testament and New, God has this tendency to work through the little people, the quiet people, off in the corners of the world. I mean, he decides to start the nation of Israel and he picks a childless pair of senior citizens, Abram and Sarai, out in the middle of nowhere. He picks David, who is the runt of the litter, right? Earlier than that he picked Moses, who was the least eloquent speaker in Israel. God all along is doing things that Paul will talk about in Corinthians—I Corinthians 1—that God likes the apparent weak and foolish things of the world because through them he does great things.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in fact, Paul says there that he [God] chose them to bring to nothing the things that are big and proud and fancy and boastful. He intentionally chooses what is weak and what is lowly and what is despised in order to shame the proud and the mighty and the powerful. That is God's way of doing things. It is very different from ours. So, in a sense, these little parables are confidence boosters, I think, for us. Do not despise little churches or little ministries or little projects or little campaigns because they do not make the news—they do not make headlines. Do not tell yourself: Well, I cannot do much; you know, who am I? I am kind of a nobody. Because God delights to use exactly those things and those people. It is okay if it doesn't make a big splash. Someday the mustard seed will grow into a tree big enough for birds to nest in, Jesus said. Someday the leaven will permeate a 60-pound loaf and make it rise. So someday, as Isaiah says in his prophecy, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. It is coming; it is going to be big; but meanwhile, it might be small.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in terms of these parables of littleness and so forth, Dave, I think we have two temptations. One of them you just said. One temptation is for the average believer to say: Well, I am no Billy Graham. I am just a little...you know...I am not eloquent. I cannot witness to the Gospel; I cannot help reveal the kingdom. No, do not despise yourself for being ordinary and common, or among the weak and the foolish of the world, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians. That makes you God's kind of person, through whom he is going to do great things. So that is one temptation, to kind of downgrade our ability to be used by God. The other temptation the Church faces here, though, is that we want to adopt worldly techniques to get the Gospel across. God's Word says: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts in Zechariah 4; but sometimes the Church has said: We need a little more might; we need a little more power; we have to be influential in Ottawa and in Washington and in London. We have to have our own lobbyists. So, we are tempted not to trust God's silent, hidden, quiet kingdom ways, but to get out ahead of God and do it with drums rolling and swords clashing and so forth. Jesus said that is not how it goes.

DAVE BAST

That is such a great point, Scott; and Church history is littered with bad examples of Christians using worldly means and worldly power; sometimes literally weapons and arms and armies. You think of the Crusades or you think of the Inquisition or the witchcraft trials back when, where we really thought that we could use physical coercion or physical power or the world's ways of getting things done in order to advance the kingdom of God. God has pretty clearly judged all of those things, and we are still experiencing some of the negative consequences of trying to rely on that kind of power to bring God's kingdom.

So, hopefully we have learned something, but I sometimes wonder when I look around at a lot of what passes for contemporary Christian efforts. They do seem so much to be organized along slick, promotional, public relations; all that kind of stuff; again, using the world's methods.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. You know, I once saw a little child whose mother had a flowerbed going, and the little kid was impatient with how slowly the flowers were growing, so she tried to hurry them up by pulling on them...

DAVE BAST

[Laughter]

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, you know what? You cannot make a flower grow faster by pulling on it. All she did was uproot them and killed the whole enterprise; and I think that in itself is a little parable for the Church. You cannot bring God's kingdom through violence because Jesus said that is not how it is going to go. That is not how it *is* going. Trust God's method of the slow, the humble, the quiet. If Jesus accomplished salvation by dying on a cross, what a weird thing it is to take a cross into battle...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

With the world, because that is the opposite of the message of the cross.

DAVE BAST

Well, we have a couple of other quick, brief parables from Matthew 13 that we want to look at. We have had to be a little bit selective. If we chose them all, this would be about a 15- or 20-part series; but we want to turn to two more kingdom parables from Matthew 13 in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, we said we had a couple more parables to get to, and we want to do that right away. Here they are from Matthew 13:44:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again; and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴⁵And again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

DAVE BAST

So, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, as we learned it growing up; or the valuable pearl...the exceptionally valuable pearl. Right off the bat, it is not too hard to figure out basically what Jesus means, or who is who and what is what. Surely, the kingdom is the treasure and the pearl, or perhaps we could say God or Jesus himself is the treasure...the pearl; and it is hidden and it needs to be purchased.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, I have always kind of been struck here. One of the things we are going to say in this segment, Dave, is that if we really know how important the kingdom of God is, and being a part of God's eternal kingdom, we will give up everything to be in it. It should be that much more important to us; and these two characters in these two almost, you know, one-sentence parables here, that is what they do. They find something of such great value, they get rid of everything else they had and get that one thing as well. Of course, there are lots of elements of Jesus' parables, and we won't see all of them in this series, but that sometimes can throw us off. I always kind of thought, you know, if you went to a garage sale one day and you were looking around and you found a purse on sale for \$1.25, an while you are inspecting it you see a roll of hundred dollar bills tucked in the lining of the purse, would you just shut the purse, pay \$1.25 and walk away? That seems a little underhanded, but that is what the first one does. He finds this great treasure in the field. It doesn't belong to him. He reburies it. Doesn't tell the owner a thing, and buys it; but I think...you know, I don't want to over-extend the imagery, but I think it is Jesus saying: You should do anything and everything you can to make sure you get that treasure in your life because it is that much more valuable than anything else you could ever imagine.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is hidden. It is like that lottery ticket, you know, that somehow you discover hidden some place; maybe someone else threw it away, but most people aren't even going to look at it as a treasure. They are going to look at it as junk, like the purse at the garage sale. Somehow or other, the acquiring of the kingdom—the entering of the kingdom—begins with recognizing its true value, and the fact that it is worth more than everything you've got. In fact, it is worth everything you have to get rid of it in order to obtain or acquire the kingdom, and you are getting a good deal to boot.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is interesting about the first parable particularly in Matthew 13:44, is that we are told that when he goes to buy the field, he does it in joy, right? There is rejoicing here. There is a deep, deep down joy; and probably...it is not stated as explicitly in the parable of the pearl of great price, but you assume that if you have been searching for a particular gem—a particular pearl—your whole life, when you find it you are going to be pretty happy...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are going to be filled with an unspeakable joy; and it is the joy that you feel over the kingdom that makes you want to do anything and everything you can to acquire it; and I think that is the key point. Some people are going to stumble across the kingdom and find it boring, or just unremarkable, but for those who have been touched by grace and have been given the eyes of faith, we see the kingdom wherever we run across it and are filled with the joy of the Lord.

DAVE BAST

See, that is the thing. That is the hiddenness of it, I think. So, the pearl merchant, he has been looking all his life for this pearl—this one pearl—the perfect pearl; and when he finds it, he recognizes that everything else he has ever acquired, as valuable as they might have been, they are junk in his eyes compared to that inestimable pearl that is the be-all and the end-all, the perfection. No matter what else they have acquired, no

matter what other experiences they have had, to actually come to know God—to experience the life of God—to become part of what God is doing in the world...and incidentally, that is the only thing that is going to last into eternity...it is eternal life, too...that is what the kingdom is all about. Everything else becomes of lesser value in comparison. So, it is really no sacrifice to give it up if that is what it takes to enter the kingdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, because the kingdom is... As we said in an earlier part of this program, Dave, the irony of these parables of hiddenness and littleness and the invisibility of yeast and the tininess of seeds is that what we are talking about here is actually the biggest reality of them all: The kingdom of God. That is the only one that will last. That is the only one that is going to matter in the end; and if you know of that kingdom, if you recognize that it is filled with the things of God, even though they often are in conflict with the patterns of our world and the way we calculate merit in what we find to be valuable; people find all kinds of completely worthless things to be incredibly valuable to them in this world. They devote their whole life to perfecting their golf stroke, or they devote their whole life to a certain level of their investment and retirement portfolio. None of that matters at all. None of that lasts. Only the kingdom will; so when we find it, we are willing to give up all to be in it; and it sometimes does cost us all.

DAVE BAST

Well, not sometimes. I would say it always costs us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I mean, Jesus said unless you are willing to give up everything...unless you give up everything, you cannot be my disciple; but here is the point, I think. We are all spending our lives on something. You are giving your life, literally, for the sake of something. The question is, is it something that is going to last? Is it something valuable enough to justify the investment of your life? There is a wonderful line that I came across years and years ago. It is from the journal of Jim Elliot, when he was a young student at Wheaton College, and a very keen Christian, he wrote in his journal: It is no sacrifice to give what you cannot keep in order to gain what you cannot lose. And Jim Elliot, of course, became well known in Christian circles when he was martyred along with four other men trying to bring the Gospel to a remote tribe in Ecuador in the 1950s; but that is so true. We are all going to give our life for something. The question is, is it valuable enough to justify?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; well, and it reminds us of the famous line of Jesus: What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul? Obviously you cannot give anything in trade for your soul; and our souls are secure in the kingdom of God, the greatest of all treasures, the greatest of all realities; and by grace it can indeed become ours.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture here on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope that you will join us again next time as we gain a greater understanding of grace through Jesus' parables about the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. We also encourage you to connect with us on our website, groundworkonline.com; and there you can suggest passages and topics for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-kingdom-parables>

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