

THE MUSTARD SEED — THE LEAVEN

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:31-33

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air and lodge in the branches thereof. Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

Thine, O Lord, is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
 forever and ever.

We live in an age that worships bigness. We live in a day of supermarkets, and giant corporations. Such words as stupendous, colossal, and gigantic have been used about so many motion pictures, so many government spending programs, so many industrial developments that the words have largely lost their meaning. Yet we still pin our faith on armies numbering in the millions, on superlatively large fleets of fighter and bomber planes, tanks, submarines, and battleships, on our gigantic stockpiles of bombs and guns and shells. We worship bigness. We still believe that the side with the biggest armies and the most colossal supply of weapons wins, in spite of the many plain facts and lessons of history, that "the bigger they are the harder they fall," and in spite of the fact that we pray, "Thine, O Lord is the kingdom, and the power..."

Conversely, though we live in an age that worships bigness and power, we also live in the atomic age -- the age which deals with the smallest known divisions of matter. The atom is a tiny thing; yet it is divided and subdivided into neutrons, protons, and electrons which are still smaller. We have discovered that the force or energy which holds these tiny fragments of matter together is the most powerful thing in the universe -- a force so tremendous that it beggars such puny words as gigantic, colossal, and stupendous. One of the scientists who worked on the development of the first atom bomb said back in 1945 that the force in one ounce of matter is equivalent roughly to the entire energy output of the great power plant at Boulder Dam for a whole month! The power of the atom bomb is fantastically greater than the power of the great "block buster" bombs of the last war. Yet the block buster weighed several thousand pounds, and we are told that an atomic bomb can be carried in a suitcase. Here in our own time is another demonstration of an old but hard-to-believe truth -- that true worth and value, and even true power do not necessarily depend on bigness.

The parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven both illustrate the worth and the value of tiny things, and the great potentialities of power which are often hidden away in small, unobtrusive forms. The mustard seed was reputedly the smallest of all seeds. By Jewish law and custom mustard was not supposed to be grown within the relatively small confines of a garden, but was regarded as a field plant. When planted in a field, the plant grew to a height of eight to ten feet -- large enough for the birds to nest in. The mustard seed -- one of the smallest of seeds -- has within itself the life and power which enables it to expand and grow and increase its size in almost a spectacular manner. In this growth it takes the materials of the soil in which it is planted, and transforms and transmutes that soil into a living organism which gives shelter to the birds of heaven.

So it is that the comparatively small, insignificant, quiet life of the kingdom grows from a small beginning, transforming and transmuting the world in which it is placed and the lives with which it comes in contact, until it reaches such a size that all nations of the earth may find shelter and sustenance under it. The kingdom is

like unto the grain of mustard seed, in that it contains unsuspected power in a small and unobtrusive form.

The parable of the leaven is a companion parable to the parable of the mustard seed. The organisms which give leaven its power to expand and enlarge and lift and change the whole lump of dough, are too small to be seen by the human eye. When we see them singly through a microscope, it seems unbelievable that anything so tiny should exert such power. But although leaven is small, invisible, and insignificant, it can take three measures of meal (and these measures were "seahs" of about a peck and a half each; three of them would make more than a bushel of meal) and quietly lift it and change it and expand it, making it into the raw material from which is produced bread -- the food of man.

The Jew of Jesus' day had largely lost the old concept that their example was to be the salvation of all nations, and had adopted the policy of keeping studiously apart from other nations and other peoples. By this parable of the leaven Jesus frowns upon this concept. By this parable he shows that the ideals, the ethics, the morality of the kingdom must be taken to the world -- must be "hidden" in the world by tiny individual bits of leaven, until the leaven permeates and brings to revolutionize the whole lump. The material things of the world are not unimportant; but they need to be changed and lifted up by the leaven of the kingdom.

The leaven of the kingdom must be placed in the lump of the world by vital, dedicated people who will fit themselves for service, place themselves in key positions, and then speak out by word and by example when the time of decision comes. This is the thesis of a little book published a few years ago, titled, "You Can Change The World." Oftimes when the great mass of people lie apathetic and inert like a lump of dough, one voice speaking out at the right time and place can revolutionize the whole situation. One man fired with Christian ideals can often change the course of history he can often sway men and furnish the leaven which vitalizes the groups of which he is a part -- his community, his labor union, his social crowd, his business associates, his church.

The leaven of the kingdom is likewise spread by vital, dedicated, key groups, Christianity was begun by Jesus and eleven disciples. Even a small church which could demonstrate the ideals of the kingdom today in practical economic, social, and political action, could revolutionize the world. Even so small a group as the family way produce an atmosphere and supply a leaven which will reach out to the entire neighborhood, and may work out from there slowly and imperceptibly to change the world. It is worth remembering that Jesus -- and nearly all good men -- have been the products of good homes.

The leaven of the kingdom is working, and has been quietly working for centuries to change the world. Observe how the attitude of the world towards slavery has changed. In Jesus' day and Paul's, there were more slaves than free man; but we have come a long way from Paul's letter to Philemon about the slave Onesimus, to the recent decision of the Supreme Court requiring equal educational opportunities for those only a few generations removed from slavery. Little by little, the leaven of the kingdom is showing us the futility of modern war in which nobody wins. Perhaps some day the leaven will permeate the lump thoroughly enough that we shall demand the abolition of war as we have of slavery.

Are you leaven, or are you just a part of the lump? If you think that leaven is not needed, consider whether you would like to live in a community or in a world which knew nothing of the teachings of Jesus, or the teachings of the Bible -- a world ignorant of all Christian concepts of God, of morality, of justice, of truth, and righteousness -- a world where all such concepts were rooted out of our sociology, economics, and government. The leaven has been working, is working now, must keep on working until the whole lump is leavened. And you can help to change the world.