The Mustard Tree and the Leaven — The Short Version

Paper 7 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 7. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

Two short parables

One day Jesus sat down by the Sea of Galilee and told seven parables. Two of them take up four verses:

> "Another parable He put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.'Another parable He spoke to them: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.'" (Matt. 13:31-33)

Most teaching you will hear on these two verses runs one way. A tiny seed becomes a huge tree, so the church began small and grew enormous. A pinch of yeast works through a whole batch of dough, so the gospel quietly changes everything it touches. Small start, big finish. Two parables of encouragement.

This paper reads both as warnings. Not warnings about the world — warnings about what would happen to the church, and in particular to one body of teaching inside it.

What the parables are about

Here is the thing to get straight first, because everything else follows from it.

The parables are not about the kingdom itself. They are about **the message** concerning the kingdom.

Jesus said so. These two are the third and fourth of seven He told that day, and He explained the first one Himself. In that first parable a farmer scatters seed, and Jesus tells us what the seed is: "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19). Then He hangs each new parable on the one before it — "another parable," over and over — without ever changing the subject.

So the sense running through them is *the message about the kingdom continues on like* a farmer, like a mustard seed, like yeast in dough.

And the four do not happen one after another, like chapters. **They run side by side.** Each one explains the one before it, all four started while the apostles were still alive, and all four have been going on ever since.

The mustard seed: a plant that became something else

Mustard was an ordinary crop. It grows from a famously tiny seed into a tall bush with a lot of thin branches — eight feet or so at best. That is what a mustard plant is supposed to become, and Jesus says exactly that: when it is grown, it is "greater than the herbs."

Then the sentence keeps going. It "becomes a tree."

A mustard plant does not become a tree. Not in Israel, not anywhere, not then and not now. **A seed that outgrows its own kind is not a seed doing well.** It would be like planting tomatoes and getting an oak.

So what does a tree mean? Scripture is remarkably consistent: **a tree stands for a nation, a government, a political power.** Trees go out looking for a king in Israel's oldest parable (Judg. 9:8-15). Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree and Daniel tells him, "It is you, O king" (Dan. 4:22). Ezekiel calls Assyria a cedar and then watches God cut it down (Ezek. 31:3-6). Jesus Himself calls Israel a fig tree (Matt. 21:18-19).

Put that together and the parable is not about a church getting big. It's about **a people called out of the world becoming a power in the world** — which is something God reserved for the age to come, not this one.

And then the last line. "The birds of the air come and nest in its branches." Those birds already appeared in the first parable of the day, where Jesus named them: they are the wicked one's work, snatching the message away before it can take root (Matt. 13:4, 19). In that parable they were flying overhead. Here **they have moved in.**

What Mark and Luke add

Mark tells the mustard seed too, and he never uses the word "tree." He says the plant "shoots out large branches," and that the birds nest "under its shade" (Mark 4:30-32).

That sounds like a softer version until you check where else Scripture puts creatures in a tree's shade. Every single time, it's a kingdom. The bramble bidding for a crown offers the other trees one thing: "come and take shelter in my shade" (Judg. 9:15). Nebuchadnezzar's tree is where "the beasts of the field found shade under it." Assyria's cedar is where "all great nations made their home" in its shadow. **Mark drops the word and keeps what the word meant.**

Luke has both parables, and he puts them in a scene the others don't mention. Jesus heals a woman who for eighteen years has been bent over and unable to straighten up, right there in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The man in charge is furious — not at the devil who bound her, but at the day it happened on. He won't even address Jesus; he turns to the crowd and lectures them about the schedule. Jesus answers him with one word: **"Hypocrite!"** (Luke 13:15).

That word matters, because Luke already used it. One chapter earlier: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).

So Luke tells you what leaven means, shows you the man who ran the synagogue doing it, and then — in the same scene — has Jesus compare the kingdom to a mustard seed that became a large tree

and to leaven hidden in dough. **A reader who has Luke 12:1 in hand cannot hear Luke 13:21 as good news.**

Leaven: what the word meant to anyone listening

Jesus does not explain "leaven," and He doesn't need to. Everyone listening had been raised on one meaning.

Leaven is yeast — something foreign worked into dough to make it rise. The night Israel walked out of Egypt, God commanded that it be removed from every house for seven days, and the penalty for eating it was being **cut off from the nation** (Exod. 12:15, 19). It was barred from what the priests brought to God (Lev. 2:11).

The New Testament keeps it exactly there, and the three Gospel writers each give it a definition:

- **Matthew says it's doctrine.** The disciples think Jesus is talking about lunch, and Matthew says they finally understood He meant "the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12).
- **Mark attaches it to a politician.** "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). Herod was no theologian; he held civil power.
- **Luke says it's hypocrisy** (Luke 12:1) — a man teaching one thing and being another.

Paul uses it twice, both times for disaster: tolerated sin in a church, and a church talked into earning its standing by law-keeping. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9).

Scripture never once uses leaven of something good.

Three measures of meal

Leaven has to be hidden *in* something. The parable says what: three measures of meal — ground grain, the stuff bread is made of.

And bread, in Scripture, stands for the Word of God. Jesus said it to the devil in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

But not the whole Word. The parable is fourth in a run whose subject was named in the first one — **the word of the kingdom.** So what gets corrupted is one particular body of teaching: the coming kingdom, what it takes to enter it, and what is waiting for those who press on toward it.

Notice the other thing the parable says. The leaven was **hidden**. Not announced, not voted on, not debated — worked in quietly by someone who didn't want it found. Which is how this actually happens. No church ever took a vote to stop teaching the word of the kingdom. The subject simply stopped coming up, then stopped being known, and then stopped being recognized when somebody raised it.

The same thing said twice

Everything above was spoken before the church existed, to twelve men who had no idea there was going to be one.

Years later Jesus said it again, from the other end — seven short letters to seven real churches (Rev. 2-3). The first is Ephesus, the best-taught church on record, and already something has gone out of it: "you have left your first love." The last is Laodicea, and there is not one good word in the letter. That church thinks it is rich and needs nothing, and Jesus calls it "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."

He also calls it **lukewarm** — and here is a detail worth knowing. Yeast works fastest in dough kept lukewarm. Too cold and it goes dormant; too hot and it dies. The one condition in which leaven thrives is the exact condition Jesus names.

Then the letter ends with Jesus standing outside His own church, knocking:

> "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Rev. 3:20)

Read who that's addressed to. Not the church — "**if anyone**." The letter goes to a congregation, and the door gets opened one person at a time.

What happened in history

For about three hundred years being a Christian was illegal in the Roman world, and Christians were sometimes charged with treason for speaking of a King other than Caesar. Persecution only made the church grow.

Then the walls came down. Constantine stopped the persecution. In 380 an emperor made one faith the official religion of the empire, and within a dozen years his laws had outlawed the old pagan sacrifices. **At that moment the church was holding governmental power — the one thing a tree stands for.**

The empire fell. The arrangement didn't. England wrote it into constitutional law in 1534 and has never unwritten it, and where no church is established the same instinct simply works by alignment instead. The tree is still standing.

What happened to the teaching is the second half. Over those same centuries, the responsibility for knowing what Scripture says got handed upward, one step at a time — to one man over the assembly, then to a line of succession, then to trained specialists, then to councils and canon law. **Every step made the ordinary Christian a receiver instead of a reader.**

That's how an error can last fifteen hundred years. It's a game of telephone where nobody ever goes back to check the first message. And the sad part is not that the men in those positions were frauds. Most were sincere. A sincere man can pass along what another sincere man handed him, and nobody ever opens the book.

Walk into almost any church today and listen for teaching on the coming kingdom and what's at stake in it for a Christian. You will hear the same silence in a conservative church and a liberal one. **That silence is what the fourth parable said would be there at the end.**

What this is not

This is not a reason to quit going to church. Scripture tells Christians not to forsake assembling together (Heb. 10:25), and nothing here changes that. Notice that Jesus never tells the man in Laodicea to go find a better church. He tells him to open the door where he is.

This is not an attack on one denomination. The paper traces the same pattern on both sides of the Reformation, including the King James Bible's own translation rules. Conservative and liberal churches are equally silent on the word of the kingdom, which is the one thing they have in common.

This is not a claim that the Bible got corrupted. The leaven got into *teaching* — what gets preached and handed down — not into the text. Your Bible is sitting open in your own language, which is exactly why this is recoverable at all.

This is not about losing your salvation. What's at stake in these parables is fruit, and reward, and a place in the coming kingdom. A person who has trusted Christ's finished work is secure forever, and that question is not on the table here.

Why this matters

If you have sat in churches for years believing what you were told, and something still doesn't line up between Sunday morning and the New Testament you read at home — that feeling is worth trusting. The parable predicted it.

And it tells you where the remedy is. Not in finding a cleaner institution. **In the text, which you already have.**

The Bereans checked an apostle against the Scriptures, and Luke calls them more fair-minded for doing it (Acts 17:11). Do that with this paper too.

The door in Laodicea opens one man at a time. Open it.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.