



Parables of Growth

Matthew 13:24-33

1. The Kingdom of Heaven Will Increase (verses 31-32)

2. The Kingdom of Heaven Will Influence (verse 33)

For the past few weeks we have been looking at the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago we looked at the purpose of the parables. Last week we looked at the parable of the sower. This week, we will read a few more parables: the tares, the mustard seed, and the leaven. I will not spend much time on the parable of the tares this week, since Jesus explains this parable in our text for next week. But this morning we will look closely at the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Let's begin reading at verse 24, ...

Matthew 13:24-35

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he *said, 'No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"" He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES." He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened." All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable, so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD."

In each of these parables, Jesus is communicating something about the kingdom of heaven. He says, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field" (verse 24). Then in verse 31, He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." And finally in verse 33, He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven." In each of these parables, Jesus takes a common illustration of life and compares it to the kingdom of heaven. Fortunately for us, Jesus explains the first parable. After hearing the parable, His disciples had come to Him saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field" (verse 36). Jesus then explained the parable for them. But unfortunately, Jesus didn't explain the other two parables. I say that this is unfortunate, because there has been a great difference in interpretation of these passages ever since Jesus spoke them, especially on the parable of the leaven. My plan this morning is to look at the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. Next week, we will look at parable of the tares and Jesus' explanation of it.

Let's begin with the parable of the mustard seed.

1. The Kingdom of Heaven Will Increase (verses 31-32)

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES." (Matt. 13:31,32)

Once again, we meet with some familiar elements. There is a sower. There is a seed. There is a plant that grows. However, things are a bit different in this parable than in the others. We don't have a bunch of seeds growing. We only have one seed, which grows into one plant. In this parable, Jesus emphasizes how small the seed is and how large the plant grows. Jesus describes this mustard seed as "smaller than all seeds" (Matt. 13:32). Jesus describes that plant as "larger than the garden plants" (Matt. 13:32). In fact, the plant is so large that "the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." Such is the growth of this plant. This phrase about the birds is quote that appears elsewhere in the Bible. It is used in the Old Testament on three occasions (Ezek. 17:23, 24; 31:6; Dan. 4:12), and each one points out how big and expansive a tree is.

There are skeptics of the Bible who like to point out that the mustard seed isn't actually the smallest of all seeds in the world. With a little research, you will quickly find out that the mustard seed is about 1/20th of an inch in diameter. There are petunia seeds that are 1/50th of an inch and some begonia seeds that are 1/100th of an inch. There is the orchid seed that is so small that you need a low power microscope to see it since it is dust-like in size. You could go even further and talk about the microscopic spores of mushrooms and molds. Once the skeptics have given their little lecture in botany, they often say, "There are two options. Either Jesus wasn't omniscient, and therefore not God. Or Jesus was a deceiver, and therefore not God." To these arguments, I simply say that the first-century farmer knew of no seed

smaller than the black mustard seed (*Brassica nigra*) that Jesus used in His illustration. Furthermore, the first-century farmer would know that this plant would often grow to a height of 10 feet, certainly large enough to hold nests for birds. [\[1\]](#)

You only run into difficulty in understanding Jesus' statement if you start to think that Jesus is giving a lecture on botany to 21st century scientists. But, as we saw last week, Jesus wasn't lecturing on botany. He was using the commonly known experiences of the day to illustrate a spiritual truth. And the truth here is that the kingdom would start small and grow big. In Jesus' day, the mustard seed was well known as a small seed, which made it a very appropriate illustration. On other occasions, Jesus used this mustard seed as an illustration of something small. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus told His disciples that they couldn't cast a demon out of a boy because of "the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you." His point was that if your faith was ever so small, it would create ever so large results. When the disciples of Jesus said, "Increase our faith," Jesus replied, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you." (Luke 17:5-6). Again, the point is the same. Faith that is small, even as small as a mustard seed, will create fantastic results.

In our parable this morning, Jesus contrasts the smallness of the seed with the largeness of the plant. Here is the point of this parable: The kingdom would start small and grow big. Or, as I have put it, "The kingdom of heaven will increase."

This is certainly contrary to what many thought would take place when the kingdom of the Messiah would be inaugurated. The Jews were expecting the Messiah to come in glory and power and release them from the rule of the Romans. This would require quickly gathering together a rather large army to fight against Rome. Israel would then be great, mighty, and free at last. There is plenty of Scriptural support for this. Psalm 110 speaks about how Messiah will come and "shatter kings in the day of His wrath." Psalm 2 speaks about how Messiah will take a rod in His hand and break the kings of the earth like earthenware. These things will come, in the future. But, Jesus was teaching about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. It is like a small seed that slowly grows into a large bush, where it can even be called "a tree." You can't see a plant grow; it just does it slowly. Over a period of time, the growth becomes obvious.

Certainly the kingdom of heaven started small. Think with me about the story of the Christian Church down through the ages. Jesus walked the earth, as a gentle, loving Lamb. He healed diseases and preached the gospel. There were times when the crowds around Jesus were quite large. Many people were coming to hear Him teach and to see Him heal. Yet, when they heard and understood His message, many were no longer interested. John 6 records for us a great example of this. Jesus had just fed 5,000 people. Many people were following Him because Jesus had fed them. But, things changed when he began speaking of spiritual things. Jesus told the crowds that He didn't simply give bread, but that He was the bread of life. He told them that to live, you need to eat His flesh and drink His blood (John 6:53). Jesus said that no one can come to Him, "unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). As a result of his teachings, "many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66).

There were times when Jesus was popular even among the Pharisees. Luke 14 records for us the story of when Jesus went to eat with "one of the leaders of the Pharisees" at his house (Luke 14:1). When Jesus came, He began to notice those who were invited and challenged them in their love for God. He said,

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment comes to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

Needless to say, this didn't help Jesus win any popularity contests. Though Jesus gathered the crowds with His miracles and charisma and teaching abilities, He also turned many of these crowds away with the demands of discipleship. The cost of following Jesus was so high that at His death, not a single follower stood up to defend Him or appeal for His release. One of His closest friends, Judas, had betrayed Him. One of His most faithful followers, Peter, had denied Him three times. Jesus died alone!

When the kingdom began, it began small. When the kingdom began, it was like a mustard seed, being smallest among the seeds. But it didn't stay that way for long. It began to grow! While Jesus was still in the tomb, the handful of remaining disciples of Jesus had gathered together in an attempt to figure out what they would do next. When Jesus was raised from the dead, He appeared to these disciples and to more than 500 people at one time (1 Cor. 15:6). He spent most of 40 days with His core group of eleven disciples. During this time, His topic was "the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). He was telling this small group of men, "you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Act 1:8). He was teaching the parable of the mustard seed. At the time Jesus was teaching His disciples, the group was small. But, he told them that He was telling these disciples that they would impact the world. The testimony of His kingdom would spread from the city of Jerusalem. It would go south to the region of Judea, then up north to the region of Samaria, and it would keep spreading until they reached the remotest part of the earth. The kingdom of heaven would grow to be large!

This has happened. The mustard seed that was planted at the crucifixion of Jesus has spread to the entire world. The church of Jesus Christ has spread to every continent in the world. The church of Jesus Christ has spread to every country in the world. There are but a few pockets of people who are still unreached with the gospel of Christ. Though the actual number of these people-groups is around 11,000, many of these groups are very small. So, for the vast majority of the world, the kingdom of Christ has its presence in those places. In some places it is strong, flourishing, and advancing. In other places it is weak, struggling, and trying to survive. But, the point is this: the kingdom started small when Jesus died in Jerusalem, and it has increased and spread to much of the inhabited world.

There were times when things looked bleak. During the first 300 years of its existence, the church was highly persecuted. During these 300 years, Christianity was declared to be a political crime in the Roman Empire, which included most of the inhabited world. At times, the law was ignored and Christians were tolerated. At other times, the law was enforced and Christians were severely persecuted. There were ten waves of persecution under various Roman emperors. Listen to what happened under the reign of these emperors. [\[2\]](#)

Nero burned Rome and blamed it on the Christians. He would crucify Christians to mock the death of their Savior. He would sew other Christians in the skins of wild beasts and let them face mad dogs in the arena. He would often burn Christians alive.

Domitian (81-96 A. D.) considered embracing Christianity to be a crime against the state and condemned many Christians to death, including his own cousin.

Trajan (98-117 A. D.) declared that anyone confessing to be a Christian should be "punished."

Under the reign of **Marcus Aurelius** (161-180 A. D.), heathen slaves were tortured into testifying that their Christian masters were engaged in wicked behavior, so that they could capture and punish Christians.

In the days of **Septimius Severus** (193-211 A. D.), Christians were burned daily, confined in prison and beheaded.

Decius Trajan (249-251 A. D.) published an edict to all the governors of the provinces to return to the pagan state religion under heavy penalties. Christians had property confiscated. They were sent into exile. They were tortured and threatened in various ways to lead them to deny their faith.

Valerian (253-260 A. D.) continued on with great persecution of the church. But he encouraged the killing of Christians.

You may think all the persecution so far was bad enough. But under **Diocletian** (284-305), all former persecutions of the faith were forgotten in the horror of how great it was under Diocletian. So many Christians were killed under his rule that the wild beasts refused to attack the Christians (because they were tired of eating human flesh), the bloody swords became dull and shattered, and the executioners grew weary.

Things looked pretty bleak, small, and insignificant. Yet, in all of these waves of persecution, "the church as a whole ... came forth purer and stronger" ^[3] By the end of the third century, the Christian church had increased in size and influence to the point that soon afterwards Constantine declared the Roman Empire to be a Christian state! Why did the church grow like this? Why did it grow even under the strictest of persecution? Because the kingdom of heaven was like a mustard plant, which had to grow. The great historian, Phillip Schaff said,

"No other religion could have stood for so long a period the combined opposition of Jewish bigotry, Greek philosophy, and Roman policy and power; no other could have triumphed at last over so many foes by purely moral and spiritual force, without calling any carnal weapons to its aid." ^[4]

This is the nature of the kingdom of heaven. It started small, but has grown big. Here is the great point of application for us this morning: **Don't despise the day of small things.** When the early apostles were in the upper room and scared to death that they would face the same fate as their master who had been crucified, I think they had no concept of the impact that they would have on the world. After Jesus ascended to heaven, these apostles scattered and saw the early church explode. You will never know the impact that you may have on the kingdom of heaven.

I thought this week of Monica, the mother of Augustine. He was a wayward son, living in his sensuality and lust. He was pursuing all different types of religions and philosophies. He was a free-thinking, pleasure-seeking college student. And Monica prayed for her son constantly. By God's grace, in answer to her prayers, he was converted and became one of the most influential theologians that the church has ever known. Only time will tell the impact that his godly mother had upon him. If you are a mother with children, perhaps your greatest contribution to the kingdom of heaven will be the godly children and your prayers for them. So mothers, be faithful in your ministry to your children. Be faithful in praying for them. You never know how God will use them to increase His kingdom.

This week I thought about the story of a man who lived in London in the 1850's. This man wasn't educated. Nobody knows his name. This man wasn't a pastor, but was a faithful Christian. One snowy day he was called upon to preach because the weather had prohibited the pastor from preaching. The man wasn't much prepared. He took as his text Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." In his preaching, he didn't even pronounce the words correctly. His sermon went something like this,

"My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' Ay! Many on ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Some on ye say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's workin'.' You have no business with that just now. Look to *Christ*. The text says, 'Look unto Me.' 'Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!" ^[5]

If you attended this service some 150 years ago, you might have considered it to be a waste of your time. There weren't many people in attendance due to the weather (there were about 12-15). The preaching was simple and repetitious. But, in that service, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was converted. He was converted when that preacher looked right at him and said, "Young man, you look very miserable. And you

always will be miserable--miserable in life, and miserable in death--if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved. Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but to look and live." Charles Spurgeon said, "I saw at once the way of salvation." [6] Spurgeon came to be one of the greatest preachers that ever lived. His ministry at the Metropolitan Tabernacle during the last half of the 19th century has impacted untold millions of people, including several men here at this church who are currently reading through some of his sermons together. It all started in a church service with 15 people, with an uneducated, unprepared preacher. You never know what word you might speak that will fall upon good soil ears.

I remember going back to Knox College for my 10 year reunion. One of my classmates walked up to me and said, "Steve Brandon, I'm glad I saw you, because I wanted to talk with you this weekend. I've become a Christian. I remember that one of the things that really turned me around was a conversation that we had on West Street just outside of the Sigma Nu house late one night. We were talking about Christianity and I had recently read something by C. S. Lewis, which I quoted. You then turned the entire conversation to me and said, 'Do you believe what he wrote?' I said, 'Well, of course not.'" Now, you need to know that this man was a philosophy major. And philosophy majors don't believe anything, because they often believe everything and are so confused. He went on to say that one comment really convicted him and he began to think of things. A few years after college, he repented and believed upon Christ. He told me that he was a deacon in his church and playing in the band/orchestra at his church. It was one small comment to this man that helped him see his lack of faith. I barely remember the conversation that we had. Yet, years later, this tiny mustard seed grew into a tree. You will never know the impact that you will make. And so I say, "Be faithful in the small things."

God has and will continue to grow His kingdom from small things. So often we are prone to only involve ourselves in those things that we think will have measurable results. If it doesn't seem significant, we won't involve ourselves in it. One snowflake doesn't make much of a difference, but a bunch of snowflakes can shut down a city. The ministry opportunities that you have might appear to be insignificant, but when you add them all up, you will find that God has created a mustard plant. To Him be the glory. Are you doing your part?

Let's look at the next parable. ...

2. The Kingdom of Heaven Will Influence (verse 33)

He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened." (Matt. 13:33)

The story is simple enough. It is a story about a woman baking bread. There was a woman with three pecks of meal. It is debated as to exactly how much this is. I won't bore you with the details of the debate. The NIV translation simply calls it "a large amount." It was somewhere between 6-10 gallons of meal, which translates to somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 pounds of dough. Now, that would make a lot of bread! But this size of dough wasn't so unusual for the people of Jesus' day. Perhaps you remember when the three men came and visited Abraham and Sarah to tell them of how a child would be born to them. On that occasion, Sarah prepared this same amount of meal to make bread cakes (Gen. 18:6). It was three pecks of meal! So, Jesus wasn't speaking in exaggeration here, but it still was a large lump of dough. The woman put leaven into this big lump of dough. She only needs but a few ounces of leaven to leaven the whole lump of dough. The leaven begins to consume the sugars in the grain and create a carbon-dioxide gas that is trapped in the dough. Thus, the dough begins to rise. Eventually, the leaven has leavened the whole lump.

The story is easy. The interpretation is hard. If ever we wished that Jesus had given an interpretation on a parable, it was this one. There are basically two lines of interpretation. One would take this parable in a negative sense to mean that the leaven is a bad influence that will come into the kingdom of heaven. Another would take this parable in a positive sense to mean that the leaven is a good influence that will come upon the world. The first interpretation says that the meal is the church and the evil influence of the leaven would come and infect the church. The second interpretation says that the meal is the world and the good influence of the leaven would come to influence the world. There are very well respected men who take each side of these interpretations.

Either interpretation could be right, for they both communicate something that is true. It is true that the church is infected by the world. We live in the world. Our worldly desires and philosophies are brought into the church and affect us. On the other hand, it is true that the church influences the world. Think about the first several centuries of the church. The church was persecuted; Christians were and tortured and killed. And yet, the Roman Empire became a "Christian" empire.

I was talking with one man about the struggle that I was having this week interpreting this text. He said, "Well, why don't you just preach both of them." I responded, "Well, that would be nice, except that it would be terrible hermeneutics." By that I mean that we believe that the Bible has only one interpretation. The Bible may have many applications, but it has only one interpretation, what the original author intended for it to say.

Let me take you through a little Bible study that I believe will help you to see the meaning of this parable. The biggest reason for the negative interpretation is that "leaven" is used in conjunction with evil in the Scriptures. Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus will warn His disciples saying, "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6). In 1 Cor. 5:8, Paul describes the leaven that "leavens the whole lump of dough" as "malice and wickedness". In Gal. 5:9, Paul again uses it in a negative sense describing the wickedness of legalism.

Then, those who interpret this parable negatively claim that a symbol is only used in one way in the Scripture. They proceed to interpret this parable to mean that the world will infect the church with evil. In making this claim, they neglect the fact that Jesus is described as a lion, the Lion of Judah (Rev. 5:5). Satan also is described as a lion, the "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). [7]

To this argument, they respond, "Yes, but in parables, one symbol always must mean the same thing." That claim neglects the fact that Jesus uses "seeds" to represent different things, even in this context. In the parable of the sower, the seed is the word of God. In the parable of the tares, the seed is people (either sons of the kingdom, or sons of the evil one as in verse 38). In the parable of the mustard seed, the seed appears to be the beginnings of the church. So, I don't think that leaven has to be represent something evil simply because it is

mentioned in evil contexts every place else.

If you think carefully at the other uses of leaven, you will discover that leaven doesn't mean "evil." **Leaven means "influence."** Isn't that what leaven does? It "influences" the meal that is surrounding it. If you put this into the context of other uses of this word, it makes perfect sense. Beware of the "influence" of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:6). Beware of the "influence" of "malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. 5:8). Beware of the "influence" of legalism (Gal. 5:9). So leaven doesn't have to mean "evil." It is simply used often of an evil influence.

Furthermore, if you believe that leaven is always evil, you need to deal with the first half of verse 33, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven." Is the kingdom of heaven, "evil"? I don't think so. Will the kingdom of heaven influence for evil? I don't think so.

I believe that the proper interpretation of this parable is to interpret it just like our previous parable: **the kingdom of heaven will influence the world** for the better. Like a slowly growing plant, so also does leaven influence. Just as the leaven works on a lump of dough to influence it, so also will the kingdom of heaven work on this world to influence it.

The obvious question of application in this parable is this: **are you influencing the world?** Are there those around you who are different today because of your presence among them? The yeast works on the lump of dough as it breaks down the sugars in the grain and produces carbon dioxide. When this takes place, the dough changes for the better. I would much rather eat leavened bread than unleavened bread. Is the dough in which you live being changed for the better? Is Christ transforming your life to such an extent that he is transforming the lives of those around you?

A Christian will influence those around him or her. This concept is throughout the Scripture. It is true within the family. Paul speaks of a man or woman who is married to an unbeliever. Yet, within this close union, the unbeliever is "sanctified." Listen to what Paul wrote, "the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband" (1 Cor. 7:14). I don't believe that this means that they are saved from the wrath of God. Indeed, just a few verses later, Paul says, "how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Cor. 7:16)

But, I do believe that the believing spouse has a sanctifying influence on an unbelieving spouse. This is because believers are like leaven that will influence those around us. Here are a few ways that this might happen. Evil magazines are thrown out before a husband ever has a chance to see them. A sweet mother turns away a wrathful response, by a gentle answer (Prov. 15:1). A faithful man gives no reason for an unbelieving wife to go out looking for something better. In each instance, the spouse is sanctified through the influence of his or her believing spouse.

I think of those with unsaved husbands or wives in our midst. Is your presence in your marriage influencing your spouse? It should be. Is your presence in your home influencing your family to holiness and righteousness? Is your presence of positive spiritual benefit to those in your home? Or, is your family repulsed by your selfish behavior?

Christians influence Christians in the church. Consider the following Scripture: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The picture here is of the gathering church. And those in the church are stimulating and prodding each other on to love and good deeds. This might be through example when they see your service of love and are encouraged to imitate it. This might be through words of encouragement. Maybe at the end of the service when it is time to sweep up, you see someone just standing there and you get a broom placed in your hands. Someone says, "Hey, do you know how to work one of these things? Why don't you give it a try." Or maybe one member of the church says to another member of the church, "Hey, I noticed how you are really reaching out to James. I appreciate that." This will encourage the ministry to continue on. This might be through organizing some opportunities. Someone might come up to another and say, "Hey Martha, let's go over to Mary's house and encourage her. I know that she needs some help with her housework, as she has been sick this past week and she will really be helped by our presence with her." This might be through phone calls, or notes, or emails.

Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us that we ought to be about thinking of ways in which we might stimulate others to love and good deeds. It doesn't just happen. You need to invest some time in thinking how we can help others do good deeds. By the way, I believe that this is one of the strengths of Rock Valley Bible Church. We don't have a lot of programs here at Rock Valley Bible Church, but we do have stimulating Christians. And I can only tell you that as the church continues to grow, this is the area that we need to work extra hard on maintaining. It is easy to get more people and run a show each week. But this isn't the church. The church is Christians influencing other Christians to love and good deeds. This means that you can't just sit back and enjoy the ministry of God's people in your life. It means that everyone of you need to be active in your part to do what you can with those around you.

Think of how yeast works. It affects that which it touches. Whatever it touches needs to be what touches others. And it needs to keep going. I heard recently of a church of about 300 people where it took a visitor coming back three or four times until anyone would say hello to them. Now, this doesn't happen here. I believe that we do a very good job at welcoming visitors into our midst. But we need to even go beyond that. We need to go beyond Sunday morning. As time goes on and people come back to the church and continue to attend, you need to be with them outside of Sunday. We aren't a church filled with activities every evening of the night. That means that you are freed up to be with each other during the week. Create excuses to be together with a good purpose, that you might stimulate each other to good deeds. Nothing thrills my heart more as a pastor than hearing of other families doing things together outside of church.

Christians also influence the world. Perhaps this is at the heart of Jesus' parable of the leaven. Christians ought to have a purifying effect upon the world. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. ... You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14). Today we could add, "You are the leaven for the world." Salt will make things salty. Light will make things brighter. Leaven will influence those around you. I pointed out when we went through the Sermon on the Mount that we are salt and light. Jesus didn't tell us to "become salt to the earth." Jesus didn't tell us to "become light for the world." As we shine forth in the world, we are to so influence the world that the

world of nonbelievers "may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Think about this. Jesus said that unbelievers will glorify God because of the influence of Christians in the world. Leaven ought to have the same effect. And so I ask you, "As you rub with the world, do you make any effect upon the world?" Do people speak differently around you? Do people act differently around you? Are people aware of your love for God? Or, does all remain the same around you? Has your leaven gone bad? Perhaps you aren't leaven. We are the leaven that will influence the world.

Let me just take a moment to explain one practical opportunity we have right now to engage in influencing those around you. We are going to be having a cookie exchange here at Rock Valley Bible Church on December 14. It works like this. You bake five dozen cookies. If ten of you are involved with this, then on December 14th, you split up your five dozen cookies into 10 different portions of six cookies each. Then you take those cookies home and mix them all together to form a nice variety pack. Then you wrap them up nicely and put a little bow on top of the plate of cookies and place a Christmas card on the plate. Then, one evening near Christmas time, you bundle up your family and walk next door and ring your neighbor's doorbell and give them a nice plate of cookies and wish them a merry Christmas. In that process, you are reaching out to your neighbors. You are making your Christianity an issue. They may even invite you in for a cup of hot chocolate or something. Then, when it comes summertime, they might smile at you across your fence as the family that gave them some nice Christmas cookies. They will probably hope that they will get another batch next Christmas.

It was a wonderful time of reaching out to our neighborhood in an attempt to focus our neighbor's attention upon Jesus this Christmas season. We did this for several years when we lived in DeKalb. I remember being invited into several homes to talk. For one of our neighbors, it was the only time that we every stepped foot into their house. We began to talk with them about our lives, which meant that the topic of our church came up. This family was really interested in our church, so we had a chance to share with them about the church and about Christ. They weren't really going to church. She was interested in spiritual things, but he wasn't. It was an opportunity to bring up spiritual things with our neighbors. At that time, I wasn't pastoring a church; I was working at a hospital. Perhaps you will leaven your neighbors this Christmas season with a pack of cookies. Sign up for the cookie exchange. It is a great opportunity for outreach in the world--in your neighborhood.

Are you influencing the world? If you are a believer in Christ, you are leaven and you will influence others. The kingdom of heaven will increase. It is a mustard seed growing into a mature plant. Are you doing your part in the increase of God's kingdom?

In all of this we need God's help. The burden of my message this morning is proclaimed in the hymn, "Lead On, O King Eternal." The second stanza finished like this, ...

For not with swords loud clashing, Nor roll of stirring drums,
with deeds of love and mercy the heav'nly kingdom comes.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 23, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] - See Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, volume 4, pp. 324-5; and <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-aia/mustardseed.html> and <http://www.idolphin.org/unruh/mustard.html>

[2] - Schaff, Philip. History of the Christian Church. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994. All of this information was taken from volumes 1 and 2 of this excellent series. Here are specific page numbers for each emperor (Nero, Vol. 1, pp. 381-382) (Domitian, Vol. 2, p. 44) (Trajan, Vol. 2, p. 46) (Marcus Aurelius, Vol. 2, p. 55) (Septimius Severus, Vol. 2, p. 57) (Decius Trajan, Vol. 2, pp. 60) (Valerian (Vol. 2, pp. 62-63) (Dietian (Vol. 2, p. 68).

[3] - Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 75.

[4] - Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 77.

[5] - Spurgeon, Charles. C. H. Spurgeon: The Early Years. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985. pp. 87-88.

[6] - Ibid.

[7] - After the service, a twelve year old girl in our congregation came up to me and told me that she had thought of another instance in which a symbol is used both positively and negatively. She said that Satan is called a "serpent" and Jesus' disciples are to be "as shrewd as serpents." What a joy it is to have young people tracking with the preached word of God!