

INTRO:

Alright friends, come on back...Hope that gave you a chance to just enjoy something of the *simple hospitality and surprising grace* we want to characterize these gatherings.

So, this might come as a surprise, but many have begun noting that, at least here in the West/certainly in a city like ours, we are perhaps, closer today to the time of Jesus than we've ever been. And I know that sounds crazy since of course the world was a very different place 2000 years ago. But at least by one metric, things today are very similar. And that is: WE, like those whom Jesus encountered when He arrived, seem to be toggling between discouragement and disinterest/discouragement and disinterest. I'll tell ya, the more I talk with folks, the more I find that, on the one hand, we're discouraged...specifically at ALL the ways, it seems like, everyone and everything around us seem to brow-beat with these messages of needing to be better and do better. Just this week/through things I'm reading, conversations I'm having, even music I listened to, I was told in some form or fashion that I need to: Be a better listener, better leader, better husband, father, pastor, friend, EVEN a better eater...And to be sure, ALL of that is true, especially the last one. The problem is: telling me/telling you, "BE better" doesn't actually MAKE us better. As C.S. Lewis famously said, "*No (one) knows how bad (they are) until (they've) tried very hard to be good.*" On the one-hand, we're discouraged. And on the other/perhaps not surprisingly, a lot of us/maybe YOU, are disinterested. Or maybe better said, numb to YET another message of some new tip, trick, technique or teacher who's gonna supposedly make us better if we just buy-in! On two separate occasions this week I was meeting with Pastors around the city. And these are guys that are just some of the best leaders and most joyful, Spirit-filled people I've ever known. But at one point in BOTH meetings, someone said something to the effect of: "*If I get told that I need to go to one more conference, read one more book, do one more ministry thing, because THAT'S the thing that's gonna change everything, I'm out!*" And to be sure, that wasn't said out of laziness or a desire to do nothing. It was said out of the disinterest that comes when you feel like you've tried everything! And we all have our own version of "another conference" right?...It seems we're toggling between discouragement and disinterest/collapsing or checking-out! ***Are you there this morning?***

Well if you are, I've got good news for you: These Parables we're looking at each week as a part of our "***Upside Down***" series/you understand, Jesus delivered em to folks toggling between the exact same things - On the one hand, Jews discouraged by the never-ending religious rules and regulations that seemed to continually communicate to them their inadequacy and inability. And Gentiles disinterested/even numb to any supposedly new message of hope, GIVEN the years of brokenness they'd experienced at the hands of the Romans. Jesus gave these parables to help YOU if you're in anyway discouraged or disinterested, recalibrate your understanding of what is, so that you can be freed up to live...as is!...So **Let's Pray** and then we'll hear the reading of: Jesus' ***Parable of The Mustard Seed and Leaven***...**Let's Pray**...If you have a Bible or Bible App and I hope you do, follow along as we hear the reading of God's word together: **Tanya** reads...

TEXT:¹

Hey, can we thank BOTH **Tanya/Colin** AND God for the reading of His Word?..So as you see, we're looking at two short parables about mustard seeds and dough. Not exactly flashy topics, BUT as I've titled this message, "**Small Is Big and Slow Is Fast,**" topics, which despite their seeming INsignificance, I really believe can contribute SIGNIFICANTLY to combatting the discouragement or disinterest you might be facing today. Cuz notice, with both these parable Jesus says, "*The kingdom of heaven is like...*" Which is to say, His rule and reign/His power and presence as the King is like, He says...on the one hand, a "*seed,*" which despite beginning small - mustard seeds were considered some of the smallest seeds of the time, to the point that word "mustard seed" became synonymous within Jewish circles FOR "smallness"² - despite beginning small this seed ultimately grows large enough to provide wonderful blessings of things like security and shade for birds. On the one hand Jesus' rule and reign/His power and presence is like that seed He says...And then on the other, He says it's like "*leaven that gets put into 3 measures of flour by a baker.*" And we are talking a professional baker here. Not a mom or something doing a cooking project with their kids during COVID. 3 measures of flour is the equivalent of 16 5lb bags or 128 cups of flour, that with water, would produce over 101lbs of dough. This is a commercial enterprise here...And if you recall from both the "*parable of the sower*" a few weeks ago, and last week the "*wheat and weeds,*" in which Jesus attributed the farmer to God and the field to the world, you recall, He's speaking universally with these parables. The same is true here. This mustard seed and leaven/which He says IS *the Kingdom,* has been sown or baked we could say, into the world...His rule and reign/His power and presence even now growing and permeating all of life! You say, "*well then why isn't life better?*" Because, as He shows us, His rule and reign didn't come as we expected/ya know with pomp and circumstance or even apparent strength and power. Rather it's begun, like this seed: small/slow/ in the case of the leaven, literally at times, unobservable, since Jesus says it's "*hidden*" in the flour. AND YET, in the end, He promises that it'll produce utterly unexpected/even **upside-down** impact and blessing - the mustard-seed growing into a plant that blesses ALL around it, and the leaven having such comprehensive impact as to permeate everything!... **Ya see?**

In giving this parable, Jesus is again, I think, providing a corrective to what we deem powerful, important or essential. ESPECIALLY, when you consider the fact that THIS parable is one of the few recorded not only here in **Matthew**, but also in **Mark** AND **Luke**. And in EACH Jesus gives it in response to some question or concern that the Kingdom He's saying He's revealing/the Messiah He's claiming to be: is too small, too weak or just too slow...In other words, it's almost like Jesus knows our hearts! And He sees that we're in such a frenzy about how to fix our lives/ fix the world, that it's not only causing us to demonize each other and depress ourselves, but miss out on the delights He has for us. And so, as commentators have noted, in order to intentionally surprise, Jesus turns things **upside-down** and continues talking here not about swords, but seeds/not about big-time leaders or something, but leaven. EVEN stops talking as we

¹ A large portion of this message adapted from various thoughts and insights provided by "6. Time To Take Our Lumps (Parables #3)", April 28, 2021 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000519052167>

² SBK Strack and Billerbeck: Kommentar vein Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrash - D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 317

saw him do in the previous two parables about any kind of judgment. He simply shows how, in the economy of His kingdom, *small...is big...and slow...is actually fast.*

Which before we get to why that's good news as it relates to discouragement or disinterest, it just reminds me that, if what we do/what we're about ever aims-for or garners a lot hype/if we're ever front page news or featured on @SouthieLineGirls...it's probably not the kingdom *amen!* Cuz that's not how the power of the King works. Jesus, you understand, was born to peasant parents, on the outskirts of a no-name town, in the presence of no-name shepherds and outcasts. He lived for 33 years, only 3 of which we have any record about, because the other 30 were lived in relative obscurity. Most of us can't imagine living 30 minutes in obscurity without posting online...THEN when He did go public with His ministry, He told people He came to "*serve rather than be served.*" He never really had a ton of followers, and those He DID have/most of em, by the end, UN-followed Him/even betrayed Him...And then to the disappointment of the many who wanted an action-figure type of Messiah, He didn't bring swift cleansing to the world. Rather, He said repeatedly His mission was to "*go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...be killed, and on the third day be raised,*" so that He could, quote, "*give His life as a ransom for many.*"³ In other words, not clean up the world, but forgive it! Start small/slow, but END big/fast! Bring a kingdom, just not one of right-handed power built with force, strength and charisma, since THAT kind of "kingdom," as we see all the time, only ever leads to division, digging-in, camps, cancelling out, and assessing who's to blame. No! Jesus' kingdom/He's again telling us here, is one of left-handed power - of a King, who in descending from His throne, taking on humanity and ultimately dying for the rebels of His kingdom, becomes small...SO THAT those rebels/US might ultimately live under the shade of His provision and presence. THAT is a kingdom, which if received, really can combat discouragement or disinterest.

Let me give you 2 ways: **First, It Frees You To Just Slow Down:** Ya know, it seems a lot of our discouragement is just a function of believing that WE gotta make things happen. Ya know, "be the change we wanna see," find the right "work-life-balance," implement those 5 steps to a better marriage, spiritual growth or financial peace, AND...do it yesterday! *Anyone feel that?* Yeah, and sadly, entire denominations have been built on this kind of thinking when they say/albeit from good intentions, things like,⁴ "*what ya REALLY need is not just to trust Jesus, but receive a second baptism of the Holy Spirit,*" or "*worship on Saturday as opposed to Sunday, cuz that was the original Sabbath,*" or "*partake in certain sacraments,*" "*read certain books, homeschool your kids, listen to certain preachers, get accountability, learn Greek and Hebrew, THEN.*" And that's not to say those things are bad. Books, preachers, accountability, Sabbath, CERTAINLY the Holy Spirit, are great! It's just that the Kingdom Jesus is describing here is NOT one of being given a bunch of garden tools or baking ingredients and told, "*good luck! Hope you can make something grow/make something tasty.*" No! You understand, He's telling us/AS much as this wars against our inner-winners and inner-attorneys: Your abilities/your efforts don't change the kingdom. The kingdom's already been sown/already been baked-in. Nothing you do can fix,

³ Matthew 16:21, Mark 10:45

⁴ Insight adapted from Luke—Part 29: Small Seeds, Narrow Doors - MATT CHANDLER, October 4, 2008 - Luke 13:18 - Matt Chandler, "*Small Seeds, Narrow Doors,*" in *Matt Chandler Sermon Archive* (Village Church, 2008), Lk 13:18.

speed-up, slow-down or separate the work of God in Christ! It's already been sown/already leavened. Like, if you've ever baked bread, you know that once the leaven gets in the bread, there's no going in and getting it out. AND there's no speeding up the process. REALLY, the only thing you can do is be patient and TRUST that it's working. Ya can't fast-track-it! Not to mention, IN this parable, we're not the farmer OR the baker anyway. We're the field/the dough. And so from that perspective, Jesus is telling us, "*even if you wanted to fast-track things, ya can't.*" Just like a field or dough, you and I aren't producing anything apart from Him being sown and leavened into us! Which is why later in **John 15:5**, Jesus says, "*I am the vine; You are the branches...apart from me, you can do nothing.*" Later in **Acts 17:28** and **Colossians 1:17** the Apostle Paul says it this way, "*in Christ we live and move and have our being.*" "*HE is before all things, and in HIM all things hold together.*" Think about that! So your hurried activity and mine to make things happen and get things done, you understand, it does NOTHING to aid OR detract from the work of Jesus. All it MIGHT do is just keep you from ENJOYING Jesus and His Kingdom. Which is why **Hebrews 12:8** reminds us that we don't make, create or advance the kingdom. We, as it says, "*gratefully RECEIVE it.*"

Friend, when you really understand and take that in, it doesn't lead you then to do nothing/ become some kind of sedentary sloth masquerading as righteous. No! It leads you to now do EVERYTHING...FROM a state of rest rather than FOR it! In other words, it **frees you to slow down**/frees you from thinking, if you don't take breaks, and work long hours, and willingly loose sleep THEN you'll get around the bend, onto the next season, have an empty inbox, and FINALLY be able to rest... Which we all know, practically-speaking, never happens/the inbox always has something in it/we never get EVERYTHING done, and in the meantime, people who keep working FOR rest, tend to burn out along the way.⁵ Cuz as they say, "All work and no play doesn't just make 'Jack a dull boy;'" it makes him an emotional time-bomb/an attitude-train-wreck.⁶...Friend, the rule and reign of Christ/the kingdom having already been sown and baked-in invites you to simply **slow down** and trust that He's not only AT work as the risen/ascended Savior, but by His perfect life and substitutionary death on the Cross, He's DONE the work necessary for you to enjoy the love, righteousness, justification, salvation and rest that all your attempts to make things happen are aiming at anyway...At the very least, it just frees you from having to get caught up in the hype of people, programs, policies or products that always demand new, different, bigger, or better. And in that way, it really can combat discouragement!

But **Second and Finally, It Frees You To Not Just Slow DOWN, but be Filled UP**: See, not surprisingly, if our discouragement isn't a function of trying to make things happen, it's definitely a function of worrying about what will or WON'T happen right? We have this, what physicans have termed, anticipatory anxiety⁷ or fear of what will or could happen. We millennials call it the "Sunday Scaries," where we're looking at our calendars and to-do lists for Monday or some big life change on the horizon and already feeling our stomach churn and blood

⁵ <https://seedbed.com/sabbath-living-rest-rather-rest/>

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/searching-for-grace/>

⁷ <https://www.healthline.com/health/anticipatory-anxiety>

pressure rise. And obviously beyond the physical effects, that kind of fear wreaks havoc on your spiritual life/DEPLETES you of spiritual vitality. Cuz as Corrie ten Boom said, *“Worry doesn’t empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength.”*⁸

But friend that’s the beauty of what Jesus is also saying here: It’s not JUST that His presence and rule has been sown into life, even IF in sometimes unobservable ways that require your trust, but that EVERYTHING He’s doing IN life/both the seemingly good things AND the seemingly discouraging things are bringing about, as He describes, flourishing/growth/a leavened-rising, if you will, that’ll supply you and those around you innumerable blessings. In other words, Jesus’ promise that what might look small and slow/even discouraging, but which will assuredly result in big and fast later; that promise frees to not just **slow DOWN, but be filled UP with hope!**

Ya know, there’s probably no better illustration of this than the Apostle Paul, who said in *Philippians 1:19*, *“I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ THIS, meaning the discouraging imprisonment he was experiencing, WILL turn out for my deliverance.”* How do you get filled up with that kind of hope? Is that just Paul being positive/ *“God’s gonna get me out of this we just pray. What doesn’t kill ya makes ya stronger.”* No! Cuz he’s not saying, *“God’s definitely gonna deliver me from prison.”* He’s saying, *“God MIGHT deliver me from prison, but He also might not. But that’s not gonna change the hope I have for deliverance.”* Cuz Paul understood/you understand, ultimate deliverance isn’t about being freed from prison or ANY other set of discouraging circumstances in your life. It’s about being freed from the condemnation of your sin and into the forever secure/loving presence of God...like a bird able to make it’s nest in the branches of a fully grown mustard seed! THAT’S the hope that filled Paul UP and allowed him to combat immense discouragement!

CONCLUSION:

Cuz see Friend, at the end of the day, that’s REALLY the invitation of this parable here: Jesus inviting you to decide how do you wanna deal with your discouragement and disinterest: Do you wanna keep scurrying about, filled with pressure, worry and anxiety thinking that if you just find the right “garden tools” or “ingredients,” as it were, you’ll be able to make life work for ya...OR do you wanna be free from having to put together the grocery list; bring about the growth, and make things happen as you just trust, be patient, enjoy what is and what’s to come, BELIEVING that Jesus isn’t calling you to greater resolve or effort...but to Himself...as the one who’s been sown into and leavened throughout all of life!...*Let’s Pray...Amen!*

⁸ Insights about fear, anticipatory anxiety and Corrie ten Boom quote from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/overcoming-fear-future/>