Encouragement When Frustrated with the Progress of God’s Work
Matthew 13:31-33

For a time in my life, one of the most difficult questions for me to answer totally honestly was “How are you?” How can that be hard you might think? It wasn’t that I was trying to deceive or hide anything, it was just I didn’t have a simple answer that would cover everything and still be totally accurate. Most times I am a jumble of feelings. I’ll be excited to see some significant faith step in one of your lives – and close by I get frustrated with someone’s sin or selfishness. Another day outward things will go terrible, but later God opens my eyes to something He is doing. So how am I? Discouraged or encouraged? I’m both! Being an analytical person at heart, how does one answer the question “How are you?” in a totally truthful, accurate, open, & authentic way when multiple different things are going on inside?

I tried always answering positively regardless of how I felt – like when you are miserable and the phone rings – in the cheeriest voice you answer “Hello”. That just led to false conclusions in people. So I tried sharing some negative feelings first, let’s be authentic. But that didn’t work because people were giving me sympathy when I was actually doing fine. Finally, I tried listing several feelings I had, but that took so long by the end, I just was talking to myself. So I came up with my 80% rule which says unless Neal is really miserable (which is less than 20% of the time), I am going to say something positive because every other answer gives a false impression to people. You will notice that Eeyore uses a different scale than I do.

This is similar to this area of encouragement we have been talking about. Most days you & I are neither totally encouraged nor totally discouraged – we experience some level of each every day. So we have been focusing on how Jesus encourages His followers in the book of Matthew – not to falsely think we can get rid of all discouragement, but to add more encouragement in the journey. Last week, we skipped two short parables in the middle of our reading which we want to do today. Our question this week is, “How does God encourage us when we get discouraged and frustrated with the progress of God’s work?”

PROPOSITION: God’s work often seems to start out small or insignificant but it grows to become significant and encompassing.

I. Where do we tend to get discouraged with the progress of God’s work?

Let’s start by quickly identifying where we can get discouraged with the progress of God’s work:

A. When God’s work seems little or insignificant

The first place that comes to my mind is when we have been putting a lot of effort into serving Jesus, but there seems to be so little result. Maybe it is in the family, at school, at the workplace, in witnessing or in the community. You’ve probably felt this as you continually try to help someone who has a big problem. You pour a lot of time, effort and sacrifice into that person for Jesus, but no major change seems to come. Yes, there are small positive steps happening, but compared to the problem, they seem so little.
B. When we can’t see God’s work at all

A second place that seems to trigger a lot of discouragement is when we can’t see God’s hand at work in a situation at all! Like some of the current moral battles or an antagonistic family. You may be discouraged in your prayer life right now because you have been praying fervently for something, but you have not seen ANY evidence of God’s work there yet.

C. When God’s work leads to greater problems

A third place that seems to trigger deep discouragement is when we do see God work powerfully, but then many negative consequences come into our lives. One of the first baptisms we did at the church, the man honestly said, “I repented and committed my life to Jesus – pregnant pause – then everything got worse.” How is that for a testimony that will encourage people to trust Jesus! But it is true life. People who become Christians in persecuted lands have a far harder life after they make Jesus their Savior and Lord. Deep discouragement and frustration can easily arise when we cooperate with God’s plan, then see negative push back around us. It is in these kinds of situations Jesus’ wants to encourage us through His words today.

II. God’s work starts small

Matthew 13:31-32

A. Normally we think of God’s work starting BIG

READ v 31-32. Jesus tells us that when God works (the Kingdom of heaven) it often starts out looking very small – like a mustard seed planted in the first century Middle Eastern fields. THAT is not how we normally think is it? When we pray for someone’s healing we want a dramatic change – like me walking freely around when I needed the motorized wheelchair a year ago. Normally we think of God’s work being BIG. After all, He is God and big is what He does so we know He is God. He freed over a million slaves from Egypt, opened the Jordan River at flood stage, caused the walls of Jericho to fall down after some noise, healed the lame, sick, & blind, rose from the dead. But BIG is not the only way God works. In fact, Jesus tells us here that the primary way God is going to bring His rule into this broken and sin-filled world will seem slow and small – not big, instantaneous and spectacular.

Why compare God’s working to a mustard seed? Because, v 32 tells us, it is small – “the smallest of all seeds.” Now some will say, “See Jesus is incorrect here. There are orchids in the Amazon whose seeds are so small they are like dust – it takes 35 million to make one ounce. If Jesus is wrong here, then how can we trust Him anywhere else?” Don’t let these kinds of statements rattle you, they are based on false logic – they are trying to change the context. The context is a farmer in the first century. Jesus is taking an everyday situation they knew to teach a point, not do a botany research paper. And yes, the mustard seed was the smallest seed 1st century farmers normally planted in fields.
The point is not the kind of seed, but the contrast between the start and the finish. Jesus is probably referring to the black mustard seed which produces a bush 8-12 feet high! Big enough for birds to perch, roost or rest in. That is a lot bigger than your tomato, onion or pepper plants! Jesus’s point is simple – God’s work may seem small or insignificant at the start, but in the hands of God it will grow significantly – more than the other powers or influences we see today. The way God most often works is to start small and then, over time, bring a greater result than we would expect!

B. Recognize the power of small things in God’s hand “pathetically insignificant”

So we will be encouraged when we recognize the power of small things in God’s hand. God takes the “pathetically insignificant but sacrificial” and grows it to amazingly levels – like Jesus taking the little boy’s 5 loaves and 2 fish and multiplying them to feed 5,000. It is not just that Jesus’ Kingdom will come and be great, but there is a direct connection between the small beginnings & the glorious future. Let’s say you parked over at the Opera House today as a sacrifice for Jesus’ work here. Then on the way walking here, you passed 3 people walking the opposite way. You smiled and said “Hi” to each of them. None seemed to acknowledge you. It would be easy to walk into this building and wish you could point to something big God has done through you – but that would be about us! Instead, God wants us to see those small things as something God can use powerfully. Leisa just had a staff person share she remembered Leisa being her substitute teacher once and helping her understand a math problem. That was a long time ago! We don’t know when our smile will encourage someone or our leaving more room in the parking lot for visitors & the hurting will make a difference. Small things in the hand of God are powerful!!!

C. Seeing God’s hand right now

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So it is important that we regularly notice what God is doing around us, especially through the small efforts of others. Think back to the late summer when we were all collecting change for the slum kids in India. When we dropped those pennies, nickels, dimes & quarters into the blue globes, it didn’t feel like we were doing something earth-changing – but God took those small actions and can do far more with them than we think or imagine. We got a glimpse of that just from the total. The globes tended to have between $12-$25 in change in them – yet we sent over $19,100 for the slum kids’ ministry in India. Going from $20 per globe to $19,100 is quite a multiplication – and it wasn’t because we mobilized enough people – only $2,000 came from the actual change in the globes, which was incredible itself. God continued to trigger things inside and outside the church until it multiplied exceedingly. The more we see God’s hand in small ways multiplying things now, the easier it is to see life differently. One of the phrases we had before we added a second person to staff was, “We are fortunate to be a small church because we run out of resources more quickly and get to see the hand of God more powerfully!” Instead of lamenting what
we couldn’t do, we committed to sacrificially give our pathetically insignificant to God for His work believing He can multiply it. And He DID!

III. God’s work can penetrate anything or anyone
Matthew 13:33
Which brings us to the second parable – God’s work is going to penetrate everywhere, yet we are not going to always see how. READ v 33. The result here is more pervasive than what we could imagine in the beginning.

A. How can what is happening make any positive difference

*Were you surprised by the amount of flour? READ v 33.* To be perfectly honest for the first 50+ years of my life I only pictured a lady making a small batch of dough to make a couple loaves of bread. Some of your translations say “three measures” but without someone telling you how much that is you’ll not get the immensity of Jesus’ message here. The commentaries will give you different amounts for how much “3 satons” is – from 22.5 pounds to 60 pounds. I lean towards this amount being 39.4 liters or 50 pounds of flour – enough bread to feed over 100 people – that is a big SuperBowl party!

- How many here have made a batch of dough using at least 50 pounds of flour?

So we are talking about a very, very big batch of dough. Now I have made that amount of dough – in fact more than 100 times because I worked at a pizza place. And it was all by hand. Picture this gigantic dough ball we would mix in one of those small dried yeast packages. Well, they didn’t have those nice packages back then. Instead they would keep just a tiny amount of dough from the day before as the leaven. You never saw the actual yeast or leaven! How could something so small totally permeate that big amount?

How could very scattered Christian house churches make any difference in the immense empire. How can our little action of smiling at someone on the way to service or parking in an away lot make any difference considering all the big problems in our nation and world today? Easy! God can take our small action and set off a chain reaction that can permeate anywhere or anyone so His work advances. The mustard seed suggests extensive growth, while the yeast suggests intensive transformation. The yeast doesn’t grow; it multiplies and permeates, so a small amount, which we can’t even see, changes the whole batch of dough – even 50 lbs worth.

B. Don’t look at the smallness of what is now but the power behind it

SO, don’t look at the smallness of what is done now, but the power behind it. When you show sacrificial love – the key isn’t us, nor their immediate reaction – the key is God who can cause something in our effort to multiply. We don’t need to lament more people aren’t helping in some problem area – we need to simply do something
right and godly for Jesus in that area and let God use it His way. We can’t plan that out and we can’t always see it, but we can be working in the right direction. I’ll illustrate that from early church history in a moment, but first let me say that not everyone interprets this parable this way. I do because I believe it best fits the context, flow and message of the 7 parables here. Those who disagree do so saying, “Leaven (or yeast) is always used in the negative in the Bible so here the yeast must refer to sin.” The problem is leaven is NOT always used negatively in the Bible – twice the Hebrews are told to bring LEAVENED BREAD for an offering to God. Also, all the times it is used negatively in the gospels there is a qualifier added like leaven of the Pharisees. Enough of my over-explaining.

C. The role of small, but sacrificial actions on the explosive growth of the early church

How could the church grow from 125 people gathered after Jesus died to become the predominant faith in the Roman Empire when that government regularly tried to stamp it out? God used the sacrificial actions of unknown believers over a period of time in a way that wasn’t immediately seen. One way was through response of believers to terrible situations. While Rome was unmatched in power from Jesus’ day until the 300’s, it was brought to its knees by several devastating epidemics. The one in 165 A.D., during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, was probably the first appearance of smallpox in Europe. Wars were cancelled for 2 years, some cities and towns in Italy lost so many people they were abandoned. It is estimated that 25-35% of the entire Roman world died during that epidemic, including the emperor himself. In 251 A.D. an equally devastating epidemic hit the Roman Empire – this time it was probably measles. At its height 5,000 people a day were dying in the city of Rome alone. One half of the city of Alexandria, Egypt perished. In the Roman quest for world power and domination, these epidemics did what no foreign army could – stop the wars and cause the powerful to quake in fear.

What does one do when 1/4th to ½ of the people around you are dying? The Romans ran, abandoning their family & friends who were infected and left the dead bodies unburied. But Christians did something counter-cultural. They went in to care for the sick and dying knowing that they would probably die. They didn’t know how to stop an epidemic, but they did know how to show Jesus’ love in the midst of one. How could the church grow when Christians put themselves in such danger?

1. The crisis shocked the faith of the non-Christians at that time. Their old beliefs could not answer why this disaster happened, nor provide any meaningful hope, comfort or direction in these tough times.

2. As terrible as these epidemics were – they clearly demonstrated the superiority of Christianity as nothing else could. Our Christian faith brings hope for the future even in the darkest times – we are not dependent on everything going easy to have a meaningful life.

3. The epidemics led to sacrificial acts of compassion by believers. They didn’t worry about themselves but joined God in His work of reaching a lost world. Those acts were seen by others and while multitudes of Christians died caring
for others, their basic nursing they did saved far more sick who were believers or would become believer.

4. Finally, the epidemics caused social bonds to be broken that were keeping people from becoming Christians. You know how some people want to believe but family or peer pressure keeps them from it. That was completely broken. So through the sacrifice of Christians— they didn’t try to save their lives but losing them for Christ sake – the percentage of Christians greatly multiplied after these epidemics from more Christians surviving and more becoming Christians. In your outline I’ve mentioned 4 small actions you can take today and let God use them like yeast as the animosity in our culture shakes around us.

D. Small actions today which God multiplies

1. Maintain friendships with people who disagree with you
2. Get excited enough about God’s future so you can release today’s worries
3. Join Jesus in His work today regardless of the obstacles
4. See those fear producing situations as an opportunity for Jesus to grow His church.

Conclusion:
Let’s just conclude with the greater picture we now have of these parables. Imagine you were living about 40 years after Jesus died. You have seen some remarkable things: thousands of people, including many Gentiles, have come to faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. You’ve heard how the gospel has been spread to areas of the empire you didn’t know existed and there were churches in towns you had never heard of. That’s exciting.

But compared to the Roman Empire, the church seems so small and insignificant. Rome has the power and the influence. As you secretly head to the evening worship service (you don’t have Sunday off), the church leader reads Matthew 13:31-33 – it is the only gospel your church has. The leader then challenges everyone to believe Jesus’ words— what seems small and humble now will be large and glorious. That the message of Jesus will penetrate the entire world even though it looks so pathetically small now. You still can’t imagine how, but you leave encouraged because you do believe God can do far more with little than any of us can see, think or imagine. And you stop expecting an immediate change.

How much more excited we can be today when we have seen evidence of the church growing large and the yeast permeating the whole world. Over 2 billion now claim to follow Jesus alone— it is by far the largest faith in the world. It has penetrated every area of the world. This wasn’t from some grand human plan, but small things that average Christians did which God multiplied and used far beyond our imagination! Keep giving those smiles for Jesus!