

“Eyes to See”

Reading: Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Let's start by making it clear that sixty pounds of flour is a *lot* of flour. Most of the flour you buy today will come in five-pound bags, so this batch of dough Jesus mentions as an illustration of the kingdom of God uses twelve bags of flour. Bread in Jesus' time would be mixed by hand, of course, so this must be one energetic baker with a lot of time on her hands. I think the most bread I've mixed by hand at one time was a double batch that made four good-sized loaves and would have used about two and a half pounds of flour, and that took enough kneading that I thought my arms were going to give out. Sixty pounds of flour — and He's just talking about flour here, not including the water or whatever other ingredients they might add — it's an absurd amount of flour, enormously huge, something that you would probably see in an industrial bakery today, but would be completely ludicrous for a single baker mixing by hand.

And yet Jesus is absolutely correct in His understanding of baking. Even a tiny amount of yeast, microscopically small, if it's introduced to that dough and given enough time, it will work its way through all sixty pounds of flour. Then you've *really* got a problem, of course, once that much dough starts rising. But that's what yeast does. As long as it's being fed and refreshed from time to time, it will just keep growing and spreading and raising however much dough you give it.

That's just one of a series of short, to-the-point parables Jesus gives us to describe the kingdom of God. It's a string of similes, pulling out qualities of the kingdom and illustrating them in more relatable terms. You're not quite familiar with what it's like when God is really being honored, so here's what it looks like in more recognizable terms. Here the kingdom is something unexpected, something unseen, maybe even something hidden, that nevertheless has an enormous impact or value. It's like that invisible yeast, hidden in the dough, that can raise sixty pounds of flour. It's like that tiny seed that almost magically grows into a large plant. It's like a buried treasure, or one perfect pearl that is worth selling everything for once it's been discovered.

Hidden, but extremely valuable. Difficult to see, but extremely powerful. So much of coming to God involves opening your eyes to see the ways in which God's kingdom is like and unlike the kingdoms we're familiar with in our world. Salvation means bowing the knee in recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, so we shift our allegiance from one kingdom to another; we make Him our Lord instead of someone or something else. But this new kingdom is like and unlike what we're used to, because the kingdoms of this world are shoddy imitations of the real kingdom of God, so they get some things kind of right and a lot of things really wrong. The kingdom of God is like the kingdoms of this world in that it is powerful and effective; it does things and accomplishes change like yeast raises dough. The kingdom of God is like the kingdoms of this world in that it is valuable and costly; it's worth spending time and energy for, and it's worth investing ourselves in like that treasure hidden in a field or that pearl of great price.

But the kingdom of God is also unlike those other kingdoms, so Jesus has to explain it. But it's also unfamiliar to us, so Jesus has to retrain our thinking by using things we are familiar with. This is where things start getting confrontational, because our world and everyone in it struggles with what it means to be effective. How do we shape the world around us? How do we have an impact on other

people? And how much of an impact *should* we have, anyway? And therefore much of history, whether we're talking about world history or your own personal biography, is made up of this back and forth struggle of one personality pushing their power on another, or forcing their priorities on another, or working to change another. What is my life for? What is my kingdom for? What meaning and influence and power should I have?

And the kingdoms of the world almost invariably teach us that power and effectiveness and meaning and influence must be visible if they are real. Don't just claim that your life is worth living; back it up by showing me your toys and your wealth and your perfect family and your photos of an amazing vacation in an exotic place. Show me how much fun you're having and how much people like you. We insist on the seen things for our kingdoms. Our nations have flags and parades and monuments to instill patriotism and pride. We use threats and posturing and displays of force to let other kingdoms know what we want them to do. Being effective and meaningful means having power over others, and power means showing off what you can do for all to see. And so we judge the value of our political kingdoms and our personal kingdoms based on what everyone can see, and we put ourselves and others into slots in a hierarchy based on those visible signs of power.

But sometimes it's the unseen things that you have to watch out for. It's the hidden forces that are sometimes the most powerful. They may not be the quickest, but they can literally change the face of a planet. You can certainly see the moon, but you can't see the gravitational forces at work between the moon and the earth. That's unless you're on the shore, in which case you can watch as the moon's invisible pull literally moves the entire ocean. A drop of water doesn't seem like anything, but dripping for long enough can carve a channel through a mountain. You can't see where the wind comes from or where it goes, but you can sure feel its effects. And Jesus is pointing us to this important reality about His kingdom: power works differently here, effects come about in unexpected ways, and change comes through the barely-seen.

And so the action of God in your life and my life today regularly surprises us. He does not confine Himself to predictable and measurable cause and effect. He may speak wisdom into your life through the lips of someone you've just met. He may use something as seemingly nonsensical and impotent as prayer to slowly and gradually make you more like Christ. He may use a hundred-year-old song that you don't really like — or maybe a two-year-old song that you don't really like — to reveal you deep truths about Himself, and He may bring you to the heights of worship. He may use you to speak encouragement and love and hope into the life of someone who is sliding into the darkness. He may even meet you at a meal of bread and wine, and show you how much of Himself He has given for you.

You see, in this kingdom, God works a lot like yeast does. It seems ridiculous to think that such a small organism could have such an impact on so much dough, but it can, and without that yeast you'll never get your bread to rise. His kingdom works a lot like a treasure in a field, and you'll find something of priceless value in the last place you expect it, and probably when you're least looking for it. The kingdoms of the world don't think you can build a kingdom like that, but God does it anyway, and His kingdom will outlast them all.

In our reading from Romans for today, Paul fills out more of this unexpected working of God's kingdom. It is by dying that Christ saves. It is the tragedy of the cross that proves God's love for us,

and the unexpected resurrection of Christ from the dead that proves God's power and Christ's Lordship. Paul speaks of God's foreknowledge and predestination; He had a plan all along to save His people and to call humanity back to Himself, and that plan has always been at work, even when everyone thought it was lost. What this means is that if God often enjoys working in unexpected ways through unseen methods, our circumstances do not define our course. We trust God more than we trust our circumstances, regardless of whatever else is happening, because we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We need eyes to see the hard-to-see workings of God's kingdom. He likes to work in ways we don't expect, so we need Him to train us to look in the right places. Jesus often said, in the midst of His preaching in parables, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." The point was that the truth of God was not immediately obvious. He wasn't keeping it from them, but He wasn't handing it to them on a platter, either. He wanted them to strain their ears to hear it, to strain their eyes to see it, to chew on it before they tasted it. The truth is that God is at work here and now, in this place, in our midst, in your life and mine, and in this community in places we aren't. We need to be perceptive, watching for God's work, and we need to remember that where God works, there is change. He loves using unseen forces because they are often the most powerful in the long run; in your life, if God is at work, He will change you to become more like Christ.

This table is one place where God works in unexpected ways and through unexpected means. It is not for the faint of heart. It is not for the complacent. It is not for the merely curious. It is open to all who will come, absolutely, and the grace that will meet you here is freely offered for the taking. But be sure to come with your eyes open. Be sure to come here aware that you'd better be looking intently at your own life, because the word of God that is made flesh here will be searching you. Be ready for that. Be sure to come here with your eyes open, looking for how God might call you to respond, because He might expect you to forgive, or to be reconciled, or to repent, or to give, or to love, or to commit, or to sacrifice. Do not expect the unseen forces at work here to be safe or predictable or feeble.

Benediction: As you go, remember that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore go in His unexpected power to live in that love and share it with others.



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