BLESS 0.5 -- Not So Small, After All!  
(week of 2/7/2016)


Big Idea: Don't underestimate how God can use you to build his Kingdom

Icebreaker: Sing a few lines of your favorite song, and see who starts singing along with you first.

This week's study is the first in a new sermon & study series, called BLESS. At Point Church, we talk a lot about pointing people to Jesus. But many Christians think that all that means is, “invite people to go to church with you.” Far fewer have any idea of how they can point people to Jesus themselves. This series is meant to change that -- to give you a strategy that is biblical and effective in helping YOU accomplish the mission that God has given each of us, both separately and together. It’s a strategy of blessing!

As we move into the series, we’ll talk about doing some things that might not seem like anything significant. They’re “everyday activities”, like praying, listening, eating, telling a story. How can doing those things have a significant impact on the world?

But most of the work of God’s Kingdom doesn’t come in big, bright spiritual packages, and isn’t seen in huge events and massive gestures. In tonight’s study, Jesus tells us that the great work of the kingdom grows from small, insignificant, and hidden things that faithfully do what they were made to do.

(1) The SMALL things you do can bring large results in the Kingdom.

Luke 13:18-19 Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? (19) It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”

“Jewish rabbis and politicians expected the messianic kingdom of God to begin in splendor, hugeness and power. Jesus tells this audience, especially the officials of the synagogue, that the messianic kingdom will begin very unpretentiously. It will begin like the tiny, mustard seed, but it will grow into a great “tree.” “That the messianic kingdom of God could arrive at such greatness with such an unpretentious beginning through the Rabbi from Nazareth and His fishermen-disciples was incredible to the apocalyptic-minded Jews of that day. While Jesus Himself was in His fleshly ministry, a statistical review of His “hard” countable successes would have confirmed their estimate of failure. Jesus’ kingdom did not reach the proportions of a “tree” while He was here on earth. God’s messianic kingdom must, by its very nature, begin unpretentiously. It does not have its origin in force, but in the acceptance of His word by free choice. His kingdom is not concerned primarily with any of this world’s riches or fame, but in character and eternity.” [Paul Butler]

Q: “Bigger is better” is a common notion in our thinking. If a little bit is good, a lot is better. Suggest some ways that we see that idea being lived out in our lives.

Q: How have you seen huge things happen because of something or someone who seemed small or insignificant? [A small bit of dynamite makes a big blast; a small diamond costs a lot of money; an insignificant person can have a big impact; etc. Ask for examples of such things.]

Dave Ahl gives us a number of facts about the Middle Eastern mustard seed (and “tree”), some of which offer connections to spiritual ideas. Look through those facts in the first FURTHER STUDY NOTE below, and then explore some of those ideas in the following questions:
Q: “First, why a mustard seed? Probably because it is the most tightly packed seed of all. There is no place for air inside it. As a result it can withstand high pressures and high temperatures . . . it is not easily killed; a fire in a field will destroy everything but the mustard plants.” How does knowing the good news of Jesus help us withstand pressures and “heat” from other people while we serve God in the small ways we can?

Q: “Of the seeds sown in the East to produce edible products, the mustard seed was probably the smallest known by most people. A cultivated mustard seed does not grow into a tree naturally. For it to grow into a tree it would have to be an unusual or supernatural occurrence. Perhaps Jesus was painting a picture of a dramatic work of God, so that his listeners would envision a huge mustard tree that was like nothing they had ever seen before.” Tell the group about a work of God that has grown far beyond what you thought was possible.

Q. “The pod of seeds on a mustard plant holds thousands of seeds so one plant can give rise to hundreds more plants.” With that picture in mind, describe the possibilities present when you share Jesus with just one person. Have you seen that kind of growth happen?

(2) The HIDDEN things you do can bring large results in the Kingdom.

Luke 13:20-21 Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? (21) It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

“If you’ve never baked a loaf of bread, you may not understand the radical difference that yeast makes. You take flour, water, a bit of oil and salt and knead it together with some softened yeast. It is pretty compact at this point, and if you were to bake it now, the bread would be heavy and hard. But as the yeast begins to metabolize the sugars in the dough, it forms carbon dioxide that puffs into tiny gas pockets all through the dough. The gas can’t escape because of the elastic gluten in the flour, so these pockets of gas stay in the loaf. When the loaf finally goes into the oven, the gas expands even more as the temperature rises, until the dough finally bakes, holding the shape of those tiny gas pockets, now filled with air. And as the bread rises, the size increases many fold.

“What's the point of the parable? A small amount of yeast will leaven a large amount of flour. The tiny lump of yeast will soon pervade a large volume of dough. Small beginnings, large endings.” [Ralph Wilson]

“The Greek word for leaven is zume. It is “sour dough” in a high state of fermentation. Today’s housewife uses yeast. Such fermentation makes bread dough “rise” giving it lightness and flavor. Unleavened bread is heavy, hard and tasteless. Leaven is used in the scriptures mostly to symbolize defilement or uncleanness-to characterize the pervasive nature of evil. In this case, however, the only point to be symbolized is the infectious, contagious nature of the messianic kingdom of God. The small, insignificant kingdom provides spiritual leavening for the whole world. Quietly, silently, unobtrusively the truth of Jesus made its way into the hearts of men and women. The word of God is like leaven. It works slowly, unseen in its working, but dynamically. It transforms as it permeates.” [Paul Butler]

Q: In what specific ways have you seen the transforming power of the gospel work in YOUR life?

Q: What must be done with the Word in order for it to transform the life of an individual?

Q: Do you see the church today being the “unpretentious” but “infectious” kingdom Jesus characterized in these parables? Why or why not?
(3) Success in the growth of the Kingdom is up to GOD, not you.

Isaiah 55:8-11 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. (9) "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (10) As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, (11) so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God’s Kingdom WILL grow, no matter how small it seems at any particular place or time. Its growth will be the work of the Holy Spirit. But, as is so often true, God’s kingdom will grow because the Spirit works IN and THROUGH his people.

A mustard seed is small, but the life inside it is huge. Our individual efforts may seem small as a mustard seed, or as unseen as the yeast hidden in a loaf of bread. But rather than worrying about the size of our effort or whether we are up to the task, the scripture invites us to take even small acts in faith. By God’s grace, the results of our small acts will contribute to the increase of God’s reign.

“. . . the kingdom is growing quietly: we just need to keep it in view, knowing that God is at work while we play our part in building it. We should avoid being religious, instead living lives that are powerful and living witnesses to the love of God, showing that his rule over our lives really does make a difference. We may never see the ripples that we cause as God changes the hearts of those we point to him, but . . . we are to put people in God’s hands, not in our pockets.” [Gill Robins]

Q: Can you summarize these two parables in a simple way as to what they meant to his listeners then and what they mean to us today? [“Jesus used these parables to show that although Christianity had very small beginnings in Jesus, a day was coming when it would grow into a worldwide community of believers (roughly two billion today) and its greatness and impact would be seen by the whole world. Today, if you feel alone in your stand for Christ, realize that God has faithful followers throughout the world and your faith, no matter how small, can join with that of others to accomplish great things -- Dave Ahl]

Q: Who are some people in your past who have contributed to the kingdom in seemingly small ways that grew to be large in effect?

Q: Although Jesus’ parables were often heard by crowds, sometimes the crowd was just listening in on what Jesus was saying to his closest followers. Why did the disciples in particular need to understand these parables? [LEADER -- refer to the ideas in the second FURTHER STUDY NOTES below.]

Q: In the Isaiah passage above, God promises that his word, his gospel, will be effective and will accomplish what he intends it to accomplish. What should that mean for your understanding about how effective YOU can be for the growth of his kingdom? [LEADER -- Since God promises that HE’LL do what’s needed for the growth of the Kingdom, it should take off some of the pressure we feel to be hugely successful in our Kingdom efforts. I don’t know who said it first, but it’s true -- WE AREN’T CALLED TO BE SUCCESSFUL; WE’RE CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL!]

Q: Since you’ve come to Point Church, how has God expanded your vision of what is possible to God’s people when they give themselves to his service?

Q: In what areas do you still need your vision of the growth of his kingdom to be expanded?

NEXT STEPS: Decide on some small or hidden way that you can contribute to the growth of God’s kingdom this week. Enlist a friend to pray for you in it and push you to it this week, and then be ready next week to tell the group what you are praying it will help accomplish.
FURTHER STUDY NOTES

[Dave Ahl] The parable of the mustard seed may have been confusing to some of Jesus’ listeners, but clearer to others. Some things probably seemed “wrong.” The mustard seed is not the smallest seed, but it is small compared to the seeds of other vegetables and herbs. The black mustard bush is typically about 5 feet tall, hardly a tree that could shelter birds, although in the wild it can grow to many times that size. What is Jesus saying here?
First, why a mustard seed? Probably because it is the most tightly packed seed of all. There is no place for air inside it. As a result it can withstand high pressures and high temperatures. Also, of the seeds sown in the East to produce edible products, the mustard seed was probably the smallest known by most people. Why refer to the plant as a tree? A cultivated mustard seed does not grow into a tree “naturally,” although in the wild a black mustard bush can grow to 10 or 15 feet tall. Even so, the large closely-spaced branches capable of offering nests for the birds of the air does not seem to be possible in a mustard bush however large it grew.
For it to grow into a tree it would have to be an unusual (some say supernatural) occurrence. Perhaps Jesus was painting a picture of a dramatic work of God, so that his listeners would envision a huge mustard tree that was like nothing they had ever seen before.
But there are other aspects of this parable that are equally, if not more important. Think of these when you compare the growth of a mustard seed to the growth of the kingdom of God. The pod of seeds on a mustard plant holds thousands of seeds so one plant can give rise to hundreds more plants. In many ways a mustard plant is like a weed: it sprouts quickly but can also lay dormant for many years. Also it is not easily killed; a fire in a field will destroy everything but the mustard plants. It grows with attention from the farmer, but also grows on its own (with attention from God). As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.”
So as Jesus started telling this parable they might have been thinking, “huh, a mustard tree? Any bird sitting on its branches would crush the little bush,” but at the end of the parable those who understood it would be thinking, “Wow, the kingdom of God is amazing in the way it grows and it is really going to be beyond anything we have ever seen before.”

[Steven Cole] Luke links these parables to the preceding context with the word “therefore” (“Then” in the NIV). The word used is a word that connects the next thing talked about to the previous one.] Jesus was facing opposition and rejection from the Jewish religious leaders. You have to put yourself back into the times to understand what the disciples must have been feeling. They had left their businesses and way of life to stake everything on the fact that this young carpenter turned preacher was none other than God’s Anointed One, the Messiah. He didn’t look like what everyone expected the Messiah to look like. He wasn’t born to nobility. He didn’t have connections with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He had not been educated in their schools. He had no pedigree in the worldly sense of the term. But His powerful teaching and the miracles He performed had convinced these men that He was the one. They expected Him to inaugurate His kingdom by overthrowing the Roman rule and establishing the throne of David again in Jerusalem. But things weren’t going according to expectation. The religious leaders were not lining up on His side. In fact, they were growing increasingly hostile. Rather than trying to win them over, Jesus was boldly confronting them by calling them hypocrites, so that they were being humiliated.
The disciples might have looked at themselves, men who lacked the education and sophistication of the religious leaders, and at the way things seemed to be heading, and have grown discouraged. But these two parables show them and us that in spite of small and seemingly insignificant beginnings, the gospel will prevail. Even though there is conflict and the task seems overwhelming, God’s purpose through Christ will triumph.

[Harold Fowler] How desperately needed was this information at that historical moment! The thought that the Kingdom could begin small and arrive at greatness only through gradual growth is always a view totally unacceptable to people “itching to get where the action is.” Had a survey of public opinion been taken to determine popular though regarding the Kingdom and Jesus, it would have probably left many a serious disciple shaking his head. At this stage of the game the power block of Jerusalem were beginning to line up a stiff, growing opposition. Realistic observers could sense that Jesus had no intention of setting up a military kingdom with a fully developed power structure which would usher in a paradise of prosperity for all. And it was this very reluctance of His that would deeply trouble those who had high hopes of making a fortune in that Kingdom.