

## “Where’s the Beef?”

Mark 4:30-32 & Matthew 13:31-33  
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### INTRODUCTION

Although I do not watch enough TV to keep up with what ads are the best and the funniest I do still notice them here and there. Because every now and then the advertising world produces a TV commercial so successful that it eventually becomes more talked about and more famous than the product it was designed to represent. For example:

-**Geico** uses a little green character, a **gecko** (and a **caveman**—so easy...)

-How do you spell R-E-L-I-E-F? **ROLAIDS**. Not so necessary after gallbladder surgery. Hurray!

-...for everything else there is **MasterCard!**

-*Where’s the Beef* (**Wendy’s**)

The phrase first came to public attention as a [U.S. television commercial](#) for the [Wendy's](#) chain of [hamburger](#) restaurants in 1984. In the ad, titled "Fluffy Bun", actress [Clara Peller](#) receives a burger with a massive bun from a fictional competitor which uses the slogan "Home of the Big Bun". The small patty prompts Peller to angrily exclaim, "**Where's the beef?**"

It has become an all-purpose phrase questioning the substance of an idea, event or product.

Where’s the beef? Where is the substance? Where’s the growth or the fruitfulness or the profit or the gain? The point of the commercial, of course, is that the one burger company promises a lot but fails to deliver. Great expectations are deflated by great disappointment. That theme is an old one. I wonder if you noticed that the same kind of question provided the occasion for one of Jesus’ parables?

Jesus heard or sensed similar complaints from his followers. Consider his disciples—they had left behind homes, families and jobs to follow him, to become disciples of Jesus the Rabbi. Understandably, they were asking, “*What’s going to become of this?*” “*What will we get out of this adventure?*”

The answer seemed to be: Not much. Almost nothing really significant was happening. Sure, a few poor people had been helped and a few sick people had been cured. But the upper classes rejected or ignored Jesus. The religious leaders opposed him. Imperial Rome seemed not to notice at all.

Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God had begun. But when a man asked soberly, “*Where?*” the results seemed pretty meager. A small band of nobodies hardly looked like a kingdom in the making. You hardly can fault these men for having moments of doubt, for wondering about the man hailed as messiah, for asking in their own ways and words, “*Where’s the Beef?*”

Jesus did not leave his disciples alone with their doubts. Nor does He leave us. Jesus teaches and encourages with his parables and his prayers. The Mustard Seed parable and the Parable of the Leaven are *twin* parables. Remember the other twins? Buried treasure and pearl of great price? In each set of twins the two parables are similar but not identical. And their points of similarity provide the clues to their meaning.

First, let’s clarify the translation. The kingdom is not being compared *merely* to the mustard seed or the bit of leaven. One gets a truer sense if we say something like, “*It is the case with the Kingdom of God as with a grain of mustard or as with a bit of leaven.*” The emphasis here is the contrast between the beginning and the end of a process or a growth cycle.

Jesus compares the kingdom with a tiny seed growing into a large bush. He compares flour unleavened and then leavened as an example of what happens in the kingdom. So the parables are not meant to represent progress or growth in a strict sense. Jesus hearers would have seen and heard the parable in a way different from a modern, western mind. We look at the growth or process of small to large. But the disciples would have compared the first stage with the last. A dead seed grows into a big bush? And then that bush shelters many birds? What an amazing **contrast**.

Notice the contrast between the insignificant beginning and the final glory—of the bush, the leavened flour and the kingdom! Think about God’s kingdom. Every Jew who heard Jesus would have readily agreed that God’s kingdom ultimately would be great and glorious. It’s God’s kingdom after all! What was not recognized nor understood was the smallness and insignificance of its *beginning*.

How strange is the start-up of this kingdom! A baby born in a manger? A would-be-king working in a carpenter's shop? Rome did not recognize this kingdom—not for many, many years. The Jewish leaders steeped in the scriptures did not see it either.

*“Although they have eyes, they do not see;  
although they have ears, they do not hear.”*

Yes, says Jesus, *“for many the Kingdom remains hidden. With me, everything begins in a small way. My work and myself look miniscule.”* Then he painted a picture of a man who took a seed... Then he painted a picture of a woman who took a little bit of leaven...

So here is the *secret* of the mustard seed that Jesus discloses to disciples then and now. God has chosen to change the world through the lowly, the unassuming and the imperceptible. That always has been God's strange strategy—transforming the world through the conspiracy of the insignificant. Author Tom Sine wrote a book about this dynamic (with lots of modern examples) called *“The Mustard Seed Conspiracy.”*

So who are the conspirators? The Mustard Seed people? They include:

- Noah**... one family builds a boat and preserves the human race
- Sarah**... gives birth to the child of promise despite her advanced age
- Moses**... a leader who could not speak
- Deborah**... Israel's only woman judge
- David**... a shepherd turned giant-killer and then king.

Who would have dreamed that God would leave the task of building the church to a rag-tag bunch of fishermen?

The apostle Paul provides an apt comment: *“God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong”* (1 COR 1:27).

It is still God's policy and strategy to work through people and events *insignificant* in order to do his work and will. He invites us to join Him in his work. He invites us, however, to join him *as* mustard seeds and *as* bits of leaven. You may labor in the shadows in this kingdom. Your work may go unnoticed. You might not think it is valuable or important.

You may not be recognized nor thanked nor celebrated. You may not see results. The work may seem like a low-yield endeavor. Still interested?

Luther once called the Christian, “*a solitary bird sitting somewhere on a rooftop and warbling his little song.*”

We all have experienced, haven't we, what it means to have no one at work or in the office or in our class at school who is one-with-us in the things of Christ? Do we not sometimes fear the surprised glance that otherwise nice and reasonable people cast our way when mention our faith or bow our heads in public?

Sometimes we feel estranged or different from those around us. We do not laugh at the same jokes or represent the same spiritual values. Yes, that's the case sometimes. Christian folk are in the minority. Oh the poll numbers and the surveys always indicate that a majority of Americans call themselves Christians. But religious affiliation and Christian commitment reflect different realities.

And Jesus teaches us (in these tiny parables) that measuring our influence numerically or quantitatively is false and misleading. Is it not ridiculous to say how tiny is an ounce of leaven in a big pound of dough? It is the little yeast that produces the change—not the bigger dough. It depends on which entity has the real dynamic and this is what yeast has and not the dough.

And this the seed has and not the soil. This is what the salt has (not the soup) and what the light has (not the darkness). What if light could think and then acquired an anxiety complex when it suddenly realized: outside everything is dark, pitch-black dark, and I am only a little light. What can I do against the vast inky darkness?

Do you ever think that way? Do you ever get caught up in the inferiority complex of the minority? I expect most of us do have such moments. And do you ever wonder what you can contribute? Are you ever discouraged because the odds are long and the difficulties too many to count?

What we need is for the Lord to give us holy *nerve* and stouthearted *boldness* to venture out into the dark. We need to learn the lessons of the mustard seed.

The first lesson is the one called **perspective**. We need to see with the eyes of faith. We need to recognize God's hidden work with eyes of discernment. Don't disregard that seed because of its size! Don't judge a book by its cover. Don't be discouraged because you are in the minority.

Instead of asking, "*where's the beef?*" ask yourself, "*where's the seed?*" Where is the seed of God's activity in your life, in your relationships, in your circle of influence?

**Example:** reading the signs (CHAT: Church Hill Activities & Tutoring)

The second lesson is called **participation**. We must also learn to walk in the steps of faith. It's not enough to recognize God at work. Let Him put *you* to work as well. God honors those who move forward in faith. He rewards those who are planting seeds and leavening bread dough.

Sometimes we balk at participating because the work seems, well, *small*. We want bigger or better or nobler work. We want to be challenged or stimulated or recognized for doing great things. But God may call you to little things before He gives you something big to do. Indeed He may only have little *things* for you to do—but noble they are in his purposes.

Remember, God can always use one person. He used Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and St Francis in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He used Luther to ignite a Reformation. And Calvin to build a theology. God called William Carey, a shoemaker, to bring the gospel to India. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to show us discipleship in the modern world. Join us for VBS!

**Example:** Afghanistan—Christy & Betty Wilson, Tom & Libby Little

**Story:** planting a church

*Blessed* are they who imitate the mustard seed. *Blessed* are they who work and bear witness as leaven. *Blessed* are they who sow and plant and water trusting God to bring the increase. For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. "*Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master.*"