

LifeGroups 3.0—Compelled by Love Matthew 13:31-33

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Once upon a time big used to be better. Big planes used to be better than small ones. Big cars used to be better than small ones. Big speakers and stereo systems used to be better than small. Big meals like the buffet used to be better than small. Even hair. Big hair—better. And in the world of church? Big became equated with good. We bought into the idea that big churches were inherently better than small ones.
- And then something happened. Enron (big) tanked. WorldCom (big) failed big. The World Trade Center came crashing down. Almost overnight small became the new big thing. Small cars now rule the production line. Ipods verses a stereo system? JetBlue versus American or Delta Airlines? No competition. Netbooks. Small local farms. You name it. Small is everywhere.
- But in the world of church the presumption is that big is where it's at. Most churches are trying to get bigger, do things bigger. Bigger productions. Bigger shows. Bigger events. A go big mentality is not necessarily bad when it comes to church. But generally speaking, when I think about the evangelical church here in the states, we have applied the Wal-mart or Best Buy model to this thing called church and we have, and I think, will continue to pay a terrible price for it.
- But not us. Not here at Grace. We're about the opposite. We're about intentionally trying to get smaller. Not because we want to jump on some bandwagon, join some fad. And not because we don't want to grow. We do.
- We want to intentionally become smaller because small is the way God operates. Small is how God is glorified. In God's economy small is where it's at. A baby is born in a small backwoods manger. One man pours his life into a small group of twelve. Five loaves and two fish. It's David not Goliath. It's little children coming to Jesus. God whittles down Gideon's army until it's small enough. It's the widow's mite. And in **Matthew 13** it's a mustard seed. It's yeast.
- This morning I want to suggest to you that part of being on the mission Jesus launched means understanding how to do small and valuing small...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Being on the mission Jesus launched means cultivating the kingdom in small batches**
- Before we delve into **Matthew 13** I need to redefine some terms for you. Kingdom of God. Church. And mission. If we're going to cultivate the kingdom in small batches through LifeGroups we have to know what it is we're cultivating. We've had these three terms floating around the last ten weeks and I haven't done a good enough job helping you understand the nuanced differences between them. Here's how they all fit together.

- Very simply the kingdom of God is defined as God’s kingly rule and the sphere in which his rule is experienced.¹ Wherever God’s rule takes hold so that people increasingly live under God’s rule instead of self-rule, that’s the kingdom. So the Kingdom of God and this thing called church are different. “The Kingdom of God births the church in its wake.” The church is a gathering of those who live under God’s rule. In other words, whenever God’s rule takes hold in the lives of people the church comes to life—because the church is people, right?
- And the mission and church are different too, right? That’s what we’ve been talking about all these weeks. There can be a stagnant, dying church that’s not on the mission Jesus launched.
- And the mission and the kingdom aren’t the same either. The mission is to do what Jesus did; spread the kingdom, grow the kingdom, cultivate the kingdom. When Jesus gives the Great Commission in **Matthew 28**, *go and make disciples* and teach people to obey. What does that mean? It means we’re to teach people how to live under God’s rule. But the mission itself is different than the kingdom. The church can be on mission but if God’s rule isn’t received by people then the kingdom hasn’t come to life.
- What we see in scripture is that there are points of intersection between all three—kingdom, church, and mission. When the church, the people of God, gets on the mission and demonstrates to the world with words and actions what it means to live under God’s rule the church becomes an instrument of the kingdom; the custodian of the kingdom.² And when through the missional activity of the church more and more people begin to live under the rule of God and experience the blessings of God’s rule in their lives the kingdom grows.³ And when the kingdom grows the church grows. Do you see how all these kind of work together?
- We’re really good at church. Christians, generally speaking are pretty good at gathering. We’re becoming increasingly good at being about the mission—at scattering to reach people. Now it’s time to add the third piece of the puzzle. LifeGroups 3.0. Church, mission and now kingdom. **Being on the mission Jesus launched means cultivating the kingdom in small batches.**
- And to do this though we’ve got to understand small. We’ve got to understand the importance of small and how God uses and works through small things. Small has profound implications for us and how we do church while on the mission Jesus launched.
- Just think about a few of the benefits of small. Not only is small more flexible, more agile, more adaptable than big. Small can be more relational. Small is more easily sent than big. Small can permeate more easily than big. LifeGroups are about us trying to become smaller, to make it easier to be on the mission Jesus launched. And about us **cultivating the Kingdom in small batches.**

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 111.

² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 863-4.

³ Grudem, p. 864.

Transition

Let me see if I can explain why we need to shoot for small. Look at **Matthew 13:31**. Listen. *He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."*

Main Points

- Remember, everywhere Jesus goes he tells people about the good news of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is like this. The kingdom of God is like this. **Matthew 4:23**. *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom.* It says the same in **Matthew 9:35**, **Luke 4:43**, **Luke 8:1**, **Luke 16:16**. Jesus' message was a kingdom message.
- Even in **Acts 8:12**, even after Jesus the message the early church shared as it carried on the mission Jesus launched was the message of the kingdom, not just eternal life. *But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*
- The good news isn't just eternal life. If the only good news you have for people is eternal life then your gospel, your good news is a stripped down, truncated version of what Jesus brought to people. Eternal life is just a small part of the good news. What we have to share with people is so much broader, wider, more expansive, better news than that. The good news is good news of the kingdom. It is the good news of God's ever expanding rule and influence that extends to all of life.
- And the kingdom is hard for us to grasp which is why Jesus tells parables about it to help explain it. In **Matthew 13** Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven. By the way, *kingdom of heaven*, that's Matthew's Jewish term for the kingdom of God. The Jewish people didn't like even saying the word God and Matthew is sensitive to that so he calls it the kingdom of heaven. Kingdom of heaven, Kingdom of God, same thing. By saying kingdom of heaven Matthew doesn't mean something that happens only in heaven. No. God's rule, which is in full swing in heaven, breaks into our world when Jesus comes. Jesus brings the kingdom to earth. And Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like something.
- Look at the text. *It's like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."*
- When the rabbis of Jesus' day tried to teach people about something small they used a mustard seed to illustrate. The mustard seed was proverbial for smallness.⁴ Jesus intentionally chooses the mustard seed as an illustration of the kingdom because he wants his listeners to think small. Jesus says that the kingdom is like a tiny little seed that grows into a plant of 10 to 12 feet tall. It grows from something tiny to become

⁴ Carson, *Matthew*, Expositors Bible Commentary.

the largest of garden plants; large enough that birds can nest in the branches of the plant.

- So what’s Jesus’ point? Remember, he’s trying to tell us what the kingdom is like. Jesus’ point isn’t about the greatness of the kingdom as if Jesus’ were saying “the kingdom is really great, expansive, big.” Although that may be true that’s not the point. Because the overall size of a mustard plant isn’t really that great—even if it is the biggest plant in the garden. If greatness, if size were the point here Jesus would have chosen something different as an illustration.
- Instead, Jesus’ point about the kingdom has to do with the tiny small beginning of the seed and the end result—a mature plant. Jesus’ point in saying the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed is to show his followers that the kingdom begins small and ends mature. The emphasis is on smallness and maturity. In other words, “though the initial appearance of the kingdom may seem inconsequential, the tiny seed leads to the mature plant.”⁵

Transition

Jesus makes a similar point in the second parable. Look at [verse 33](#). *He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."*

- In this second parable Jesus speaks about the transforming power of the kingdom. Though small, even inconsequential, like yeast, the kingdom ends up permeating—transforming the larger batch of dough. *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."*
- In both parables the emphasis is on the smallness of the beginning. The seed starts small. Super small seed. The yeast starts small. Have you ever held yeast in your hand? But in the end the small seed matures. In the end the small yeast changes, transforms the dough into something different.
- These aren’t just cute stories. Jesus is telling us something incredibly important about nature of the Kingdom and how the Kingdom operates. And the lesson for us is in how we do church is that small is where it’s at. If we want people to experience the kingdom we have to go small. The kingdom begins small. Not large. Not with fanfare. Not loud. Not big. But quietly and from small beginnings—which is consistent with how God has shown himself work throughout all the rest of the bible, right?
- See, here’s the goal. See every follower of Jesus on the mission. That’s partly what LifeGroups are about. Get the church on the mission. But it’s so much more than that. Because once you’re on the mission you have to ask the question “what is the mission about?” And the answer to that question is the Kingdom. The goal with LifeGroups is the Kingdom. The mission is about the Kingdom. **Being on the mission Jesus launched means cultivating the kingdom in small batches.**

⁵ Carson, *Matthew*, Expositors Bible Commentary.

- But how does that happen? It has to happen in a way that's consistent with what the kingdom of God is like. And Jesus says the kingdom starts small. If we want to see something consequential happen we have to go small like the mustard seed and yeast. We have to cultivate smallness. The small beginnings of the Kingdom doesn't just refer to the initial inception of the kingdom through Jesus' ministry. It's now. It's here in this city, in this county, in lives and places where God's rule is nowhere to be found.
- The goal through LifeGroups is to plant small places where the Kingdom becomes tangible—real for people. Places where people who are under self-rule and reaping all the consequences and pain and heartache of that self-rule can see little glimpses of God's kingdom here on earth. That's the mission. Cultivate small, little, under the radar places where the kingdom becomes tangibly real. The mission is to **cultivate the kingdom in small batches**. If you want to see people become followers of Jesus and see their lives transformed, think permeating power of yeast, they need to see from you first-hand experience of how living under God's rule has changed your life.
- Author [David Neff](#) says it like this, and I agree. “God likes small beginnings. He likes to work in hidden ways that are easily overlooked.” He's right. Not big productions. Not big shows. Not big events with fanfare and noise. The transforming power of the kingdom is lost among the big things we love so much. People don't need big. They need small. That glorifies God. The right kind of small can really change lives.
- [\[Slide #3\]](#) Let me try to graphically depict what we're shooting for here. I didn't make this chart up. This comes from a book by [Hugh Halter](#). I think Halter's right on. He says that the Kingdom of God becomes tangible for people when three things come together: communion, community and mission. Community is our togetherness as the body of Christ—it's church. Mission is what we've been talking about in this series—the mission Jesus launched. And communion is our connection with God through worship and prayer. All three are needed in any given LifeGroup.
- See what happens when the three ovals converge right there in the middle? When community, communion, and mission converge in a LifeGroup the Kingdom becomes tangible, real. If we want influence in our culture we need to **cultivate the kingdom in small batches**.

Conclusion

- We want to intentionally become smaller at Grace because small is the way that God has chosen to make his Kingdom tangibly real to people. Not that God can't or doesn't use big or that big is necessarily bad. By his grace God does and can use big. But if we're really serious about wanting the kingdom, which is what we pray for, right? *Thy kingdom come*. Then we have to learn how to do small, value small.
- *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 of the air perched in its branches." 20 Again he asked,*

"What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."⁶

- The goal in all of this LifeGroup stuff is the Kingdom. People need to see and taste and touch and experience God's rule come to roost here on this earth—in you, in small witnessing communities that choose to live under and demonstrate the blessings of God's rule. It's through small things that God chooses to work and glorify himself. In God's economy small is where it's at. Are you ready to go small? Are you ready to cultivate the kingdom?

⁶ Luke 13:18-21