

June 10
Lesson 2 (NIV)

PARABLES OF GOD'S

JUST KINGDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 78:1-8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:24-43

MATTHEW 13:24-33

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³¹ 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 seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

³³ He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”



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KEY VERSE

Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn..—Matthew 13:30

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the central idea about God’s kingdom in the lesson’s three parables.
2. Contrast Jesus’ understanding of God’s kingdom with the misunderstandings commonly held by Jews of the first century AD.

3. Tell which parable of the three is most challenging to him or her and explain why.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Different Kind of Riddle
- B. Lesson Background

I. Parable of the Weeds (MATTHEW 13:24-30)

- A. Secret Sabotage (vv. 24, 25)
- B. Damage Discovered (vv. 26-28)
- C. Temporary Coexistence (vv. 29, 30a)
Weeds to Whom?
- D. Eternal Separation (v. 30b)

II. Parable of the Mustard Seed (MATTHEW 13:31, 32)

- A. From Tiny Seed (vv. 31, 32a)
- B. To Large Tree (v. 32b, c)

III. Parable of the Leaven (MATTHEW 13:33)

The Big Impact of a Little Leaven

Conclusion

- A. Wait with Patience
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. A Different Kind of Riddle

Most of us enjoy the challenge of a good riddle. The best riddles challenge our minds to solve a problem of language and logic. They can prove hard to solve but are also hard to forget. We may puzzle over them for days trying to solve them. When we discover or learn the answer, the best riddles surprise us. We realize that they have exposed our assumptions, our normal ways of thinking. These riddles challenge us to consider how often we may miss the truth because we assume something that is not true.

Jesus is known for having taught in parables, a form of speech much like a riddle. Although his parables used commonly understood images and everyday events, they forced listeners to rethink their understanding of how God was working in the world. The parables combined familiar details with the demand for serious reflection.

Today's text is a selection from a much longer discourse that consists mostly of parables. The lessons Jesus taught in these parables challenged widely held (mis)conceptions of how God was to bring about his kingdom.

B. Lesson Background

Parables are prominent in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The term *parable* translates a Greek word that indicates a saying or story implying a comparison. Jesus' parables always involved such comparisons. The key to their interpretation is observing the comparison that Jesus intended. That intent is signaled by the details of the parable, its context, any explanation that Jesus offered, and the parable's role in his wider teaching.

Each parable in today's text begins with some form of the phrase "The kingdom of heaven is like." The term refers to the fulfillment of God's promise to reverse the course of human life, establishing his reign in place of the tyrannous, selfish reign of sin and death. It is a kingdom, as Jesus later told Pilate, that "is from another place" (John 18:36).

For Jesus' audience, God's promise of a future kingdom had a strongly nationalistic focus. Many in Jesus' day expected God's promised kingdom to bring about the defeat of Israel's enemies, meaning the pagan empires that had ruled God's people for generations (compare Acts 1:6). God's kingdom, in other words, was expected to be a political and military kingdom like any other, only one ruled righteously and in submission to God.

What Do You Think?

How do we avoid errors regarding allegiances to God's kingdom and to earthly nations?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding errors that see such allegiances as completely compatible
- Regarding errors that see such allegiances as completely incompatible

One way Jesus challenged this expectation was through parables. These gave a very different vision of God's promised kingdom. The sudden, decisive action of a powerful military ruler was not Jesus' picture. He used instead comparisons to farming, which involves patience, trust, and the passing of time. Rather than depict dramatic, obvious events that would capture the world's attention, he spoke of subtle but powerful processes that were hard to see except by the eye of faith.

Earlier in the context of today's passage from Matthew 13, Jesus had delivered and explained a parable about a man sowing seed in a field. The message of the kingdom of God is not something that yields instant, universal success. Rather, it often seems unsuccessful at first, as people respond without persistent faith to the good news of the kingdom. For those ready to hear and heed, Jesus explained his teaching. For others, the seeming difficulty of the message itself seemed to turn them away from belief. God's kingdom, Jesus taught, would divide people. Such divisions are apparent in the parables of our text as well.

HOW TO SAY IT

Corinthians Ko-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Galatians Guh-lay-shunz.

Leviticus Leh-vit-ih-kus.

I. Parable of the Weeds

(MATTHEW 13:24-30)

A. Secret Sabotage (vv. 24, 25)

²⁴ **Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.**

This parable seems, at first glance, to be like the previous one in that both involve the sowing of seed. But the similarity is superficial. Here it is the *seed* that is *good*; in [Matthew 13:8](#) it is the ground that is good. Other differences present themselves as well.

Jesus’ contemporaries are familiar with agricultural terminology. Seed is spread by hand as a farmer walks through a field. With a sack of seed over his shoulder, he sows seed over cultivated ground—ground prepared to receive it. Seed is typically sown in the autumn, in anticipation of the winter rains that allow it to flourish. Wheat and barley are the staple grains planted in this way.

²⁵ **“But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.**

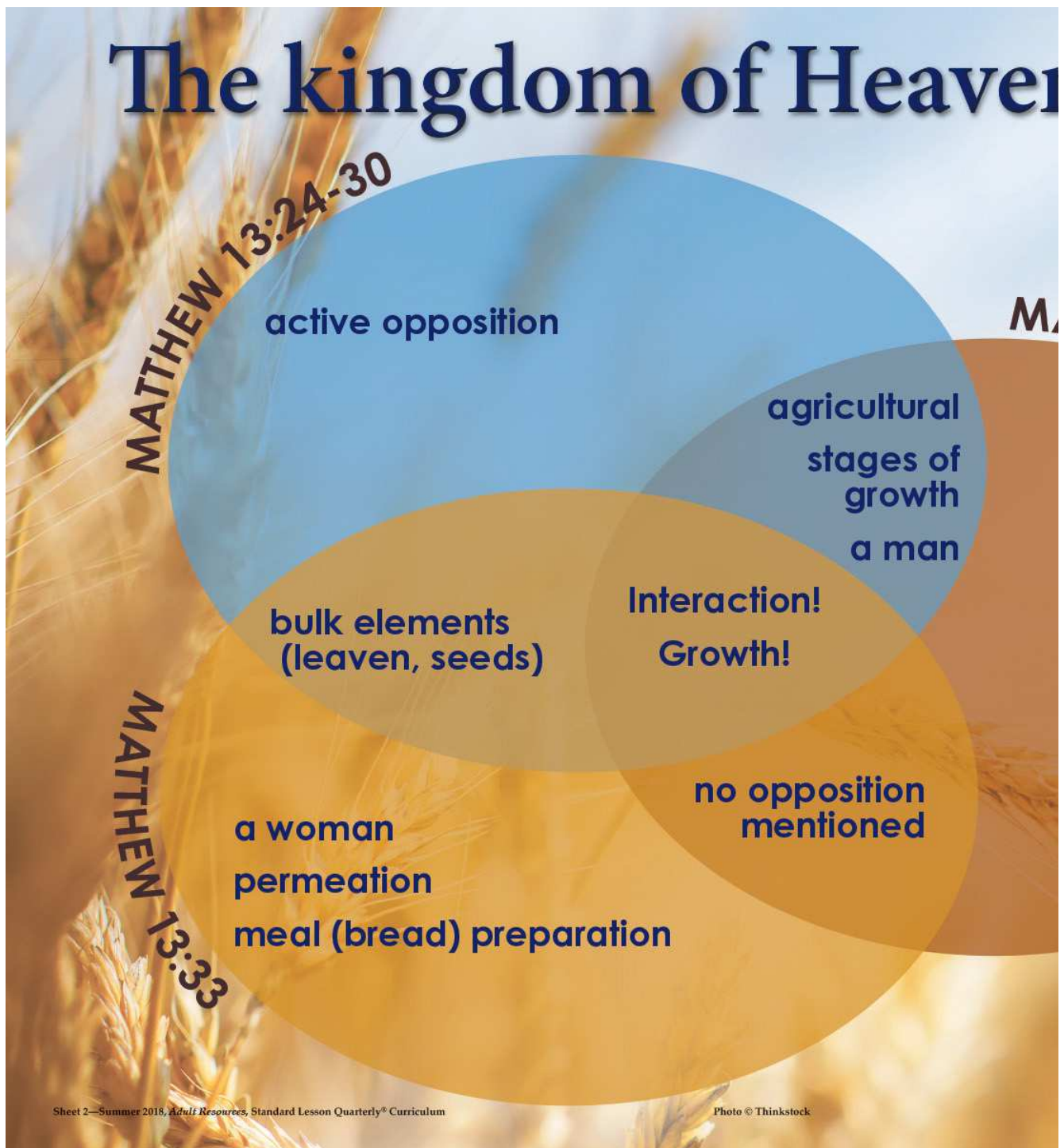
An *enemy* of the farmer now appears in the story, attempting to do him harm. *Weeds* translates a Greek word that refers to a kind that looks very much like wheat until it matures. These are not just weeds that threaten the growth of the crop. These are weeds easily confused with the crop itself.

Removing such weeds (also called *tares* in older translations) will be very difficult. But early in the story, the farmer and his workers do not recognize what has happened. The enemy conceals his act by doing it while everyone sleeps.

B. Damage Discovered (vv. 26-28)

²⁶ **“When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.**

As the plants begin to grow, the difference between the wheat and the weeds begins to become apparent. At first the two kinds of plants seem identical, but their differences become more apparent with time. Eventually the workers discern that their field is infested with weeds.



Visual for Lesson 2. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “Who can explain how a Venn diagram works?”

27. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

As Jesus tells the story, *the owner’s servants* do not inform the master about the weeds in so many words. Rather, they ask how the situation has arisen. They know that their master is a good farmer who saw to it that *good seed* has been sown. The servants are at a loss to explain the weeds. But they assume that their master understands, so they ask him.

28. “An enemy did this,” he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

The master’s response is clear and decisive. He knows that only someone with malicious intent could have sown the weeds among the wheat.

The servants’ response is in line with conventional wisdom: weeds must be dealt with immediately. Every hour they live they draw water, sunlight, and nutrients away from the good plants. Surely the master will agree that the weeds must be dealt with immediately!

C. Temporary Coexistence (vv. 29, 30a)

^{29, 30a.} **“No,” he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.**

The master’s reply is very different from what the servants expect. He will not have the weeds removed immediately. He wants to protect the good plants from being uprooted in the weeding process. Because *the weeds* and *the wheat* are growing so close together, weeding is bound to cause collateral damage.

What Do You Think?

How does our proximity to worldly weeds of sin affect the safeguards we adopt against them?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Individual vs. communal safeguards against unholy lifestyles

Individual vs. communal safeguards against ungodly definitions of success

Other

In the larger context, this is the second parable of Jesus that tells a story of seed and harvest (see [Matthew 13:3-9](#)). Jesus subsequently explains both parables to his disciples ([13:18-23](#), [36-43](#)). These explanations make clear that Jesus is not offering advice about agriculture but challenging his hearers to begin thinking differently about God’s kingdom.

Many in Jesus’ audience expect that when God’s king brings God’s kingdom into the world, both evil and evildoers will be judged and eliminated immediately. But Jesus tells a very different story. The inbreaking of God’s kingdom and the final judgment on evil are separated by an interval of time. During that interval, the people of the kingdom live alongside evildoers. A separation will indeed come, but only at *the harvest*.

WEEDS TO WHOM?

Joe and Bonnie missed their former neighbors. The Heinrichs had sold their house and moved into a long-term care facility. They had been the best of neighbors! Joe and Bonnie were sad to lose their compassionate Christian friends.

The new neighbors were quite different. Joe and Bonnie didn’t know their names, but they did know that they were rowdy beer drinkers. The peace and quiet of the neighborhood was now shattered by loud music, loud voices, and cars without mufflers, squealing in and out at all hours of the night.

Because they were offended, Joe and Bonnie made no effort to get to know their new neighbors. They prayed that God would intervene and help them get rid of their “headache.” But one Sunday morning as the two were walking to their car, Bibles in hand, something incredible happened: the lady next door said, “Hello.” A brief conversation took place, cut short since Joe and Bonnie were headed for church. “Maybe you’d like to come with us sometime,” Bonnie said offhandedly as she slid into the car seat.

The next week the new neighbors were at Sunday worship. They were guests of Joe and Bonnie, who learned to trust God’s ability to transform lives. Those we see as “weeds” to be removed immediately may be viewed differently by God.

—C. T.

What Do You Think?

How do you avoid taking “weeding justice” into your own hands?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When loved ones are hurt

When God’s name is maligned

When your rights are violated

Other

D. Eternal Separation (v. 30b)

^{30b.} **“At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”**

The harvesters will follow the distinctive instructions we see here. The instructions are stated not only in terms of the final dispositions of *the weeds* and *the wheat*, but also of a certain sequence.

When requested by his disciples to do so, Jesus later identifies the elements of the parable this way ([Matthew 13:37-39](#)):

the sower of good seed	→	the Son of Man
the field	→	the world
good seed	→	the people of the kingdom
the weeds (tares)	→	the people of the evil one
the enemy	→	the devil
the harvest	→	the end of the age
the harvesters	→	angels

Jesus closes his explanation, as he did the earlier parable of the sower, by saying that the one who has ears must hear what he says ([Matthew 13:9](#), [43](#)). These are solemn warnings to listeners to think carefully about Jesus’ teaching and to act on it wisely. The warnings echo words from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus quoted in the earlier context regarding those who hear God’s Word but do not understand, and those who see but do not perceive ([13:14](#)). This spiritual deafness and blindness is traced to problems of the heart ([13:15](#)). Destruction awaits them ([13:41](#), [42](#)).

By contrast, those who follow Jesus and listen with willing hearts will discern the truth of God's kingdom. They are the ones who receive the fullness of God's blessing as they heed the message ([Matthew 13:16, 17, 43](#)).

Even so, Jesus' followers must expect to work in a field where weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest. We can expect to be surrounded continually by evil. We can expect frustration and discouragement because of that evil. We can even expect scorn and opposition from those who do not listen to the kingdom's call. Thus we must be prepared to endure with patience as we serve in expectation of the Lord's bringing his kingdom to its fullness. When that happens, the Lord's promise is that his people will be with him in his kingdom, where all the disappointments and heartaches of a sinful world will have no place.

II. Parable of the Mustard Seed

([MATTHEW 13:31, 32](#))

A. From Tiny Seed ([vv. 31, 32a](#))

31, 32a. He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds,

Matthew records 10 parables of Jesus using some form of the phrase *the kingdom of heaven is like*. The parable of the sower in [Matthew 13:3-23](#) does not use that phrase, but that parable can be added to the tally of 10 nonetheless since its phrase "the message about the kingdom" ([13:19](#)) indicates the same intent. Therefore we have come to the third of such parables in this Gospel (see also [Luke 13:18, 19](#)).

The imagery now shifts from sowing grain to planting *a mustard seed*. The phrase *though it is the smallest of all seeds* is not intended to be a comparison with the seeds of all plants known today. Rather, it reflects the experience of Jesus' first-century audience. Such a seed measures only one to two millimeters in diameter.

Mustard is a common garden plant in the biblical world. It is grown for its seeds, which can be ground into a powder to add savory flavor to cooked dishes.

What Do You Think?

How has experiencing the fact that God's work often has humble beginnings affected you? How should it?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In positive situations of church growth, answered prayer, etc.

In negative situations of church conflict, unanswered prayer, etc.

B. To Large Tree ([v. 32b, c](#))

32b. "yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree,

This partial verse reflects the fact that mature mustard plants are large shrubs that can grow as high as 10 or 12 feet. The mustard seed is tiny; the mustard plant is impressively tall. But over time the small, hard-to-see, seemingly insignificant seed grows to become an exceptionally tall plant. And that is the point about God's inbreaking kingdom that Jesus desires his listeners to understand. Many expect God's kingdom to enter the world suddenly and dramatically (see the Lesson Background), and they must change their thinking.

32c. "so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

The final phrase of the parable underlines the extent of the mustard plant's growth by noting one result. This detail may prompt us to wonder what *the birds* might represent.

In reading Jesus' parables, we generally should first ask not what the details represent but how each detail contributes to the main point(s) of the parable. Clearly, the birds' ability to *perch in its branches* stresses the great size of the plant.

Another theory, however, is that Jesus is drawing a parallel with [Ezekiel 17:22-24](#). The imagery of birds there suggests people of other nations who come to know God. It's possible that Jesus is making the same point: the kingdom of God that he brings, though humble in its beginnings, will fulfill Ezekiel's promise and make people of all nations part of God's people.

III. Parable of the Leaven

([MATTHEW 13:33](#))

33. He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The third parable of today's lesson makes a point similar to the second. Jesus often delivers units of teaching in pairs in this Gospel (see [Matthew 5:13-16; 13:44-46; 24:27, 28](#)). Here the focus is on *yeast* ([Luke 13:20, 21](#) is parallel). This substance is added to flour to make bread dough rise. Another word for yeast is leaven (compare [1 Corinthians 5:6](#)).

As with the mustard seed, the details of the story contrast the smallness of something with its outsized impact or result. The phrasing *mixed into . . . all through the dough* underlines the difficulty (if not impossibility) of being able to see the yeast in such a context. And *sixty pounds of flour* is quite a large amount; when baked into bread, it may feed as many as 100 people.

Yeast is often used in the Bible as a symbol for evil that infiltrates God's people ([Matthew 16:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9](#)). But it can also be associated with positive actions ([Leviticus 7:13; 23:17](#)). As always in interpreting Scripture, we must give due weight to the immediate context. The context at hand suggests a parallel between the growth of a mustard seed and the impact of a small amount of yeast.

It is often noted that this parable depicts the action of a woman, following the action of a man in the story of the mustard seed. Certainly, Jesus is offering every member of his audience the opportunity to connect to his message about God's surprising kingdom. Everyone needs to hear the challenge that God's kingdom will operate almost unnoticed at first, but the end result will be astonishing.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to resist un-Christian temptations of implementing change?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to changing ethics
 With regard to changing morals
 With regard to changing definitions (of truth, etc.)
 Other

THE BIG IMPACT OF A LITTLE LEAVEN

Molly was a beagle of average intelligence who did a very dumb thing. One morning Jane, her master, mixed up a batch of bread dough and left it on the kitchen table to rise. Then Jane went to the back of the house to do laundry. In Jane's absence, Molly somehow nudged a chair over to the table, hopped up, and gobbled down the entire batch of dough.

When Jane returned to the kitchen, her bread dough was gone! But Molly hadn't gone far. Lying on her back with legs sticking straight up in the air, Molly looked like a bratwurst that had been left on the grill too long! The poor little dog was groaning in agony from the swelling taking place in her tummy.

The small amount of yeast in the dough had created a big crisis within Molly. So an emergency trip to the veterinarian followed. Four hours and \$800 later, Molly was on her way to becoming her old happy self.

Jesus' parable of the yeast describes what just a small portion of the message of his kingdom will do. When that message is received in faith and obedience, an incredible spiritual growth begins to take place. It's not the harmful kind of growth Molly experienced, but the kind that leads to fullness in Christ.

The good news is that Jesus' promise of spiritual fullness is still valid.

—C. T.

Conclusion

A. Wait with Patience

None of us likes having to be patient—we just don't like to wait! We all prefer to get what we need immediately. When we are victimized by injustice and evil, we want relief and vindication without delay.

The promise of God's kingdom is that God will certainly bring that relief and vindication. Our holy and just God cannot abide evil and injustice forever. His kingdom promises to defeat the devil and his works, creating "a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

But the kingdom of God that Christ establishes does not bring about the defeat of evil all at once. The separation happens not at the beginning but at the end. For now the kingdom operates quietly, almost invisibly, like a tiny seed that grows or like yeast that makes dough rise. As that happens, the Lord calls on people to have ears that hear, to heed his call to turn to him in repentance and receive the blessing of his mercy before it is too late.

If the full reign of God takes longer to occur than his people want, it is only to allow more people the opportunity to become subjects of the kingdom (2 Peter 3:9). Meanwhile, God supplies the strength for his people to wait faithfully, to serve faithfully, and to see the true impact of his seemingly invisible kingdom.

What part of God's future reign do you wish you could experience now? How do you see his kingdom at work as you wait? How has God enabled you to wait with patience? As we reflect on questions like these, we understand what it means to live with ears that hear Jesus' message of God's reign.

B. Prayer

Father, we long for your rule over every part of your world! Empower us to wait with patience and discernment, knowing that your kingdom is present among us and will one day be complete. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Wait patiently and work prayerfully.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask students, "Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding with your GPS? What happened?" Allow people to share their stories. Then say, "At least, no one did what some tourists in Australia managed to do. Being unfamiliar with the country and relying too heavily on the GPS, which said it was leading them to a road, they managed to drive their car into the ocean."

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "What Do You Know?" activity from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. After students finish, give the answers with explanations.

After either activity say, "Most of the misunderstandings we have are not that significant. But the vast majority of Jewish people in Jesus' day misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God. So Jesus used parables to help correct this problem."

Into the Word

Using the Lesson Background, explain what parables are, how and why Jesus used them, and principles to observe when interpreting them; the "why" explanation should focus on Jewish expectations regarding God's promised kingdom.

Give each student a handout (you prepare) featuring one of the three assignments below. Leave appropriate space for students to write answers. Title every handout "Jesus Teaches About the Kingdom of Heaven." Form students into small groups based on the assignment received.

Assignment 1: The Jewish people of Jesus' day expected that when God's kingdom burst onto the scene, God's king would defeat Israel's enemies immediately and purge the land of evil and unbelief. Summarize the parable of the weeds ([Matthew 13:24-30](#)) and why it overturned this expectation.

Assignment 2: The Jewish people of Jesus' day expected that when God's king came, he would enter the world suddenly and sweep swiftly into power. Summarize the parable of the mustard seed ([Matthew 13:31, 32](#)) and why it contradicted this expectation.

Assignment 3: The Jewish people expected that when God's king came, his kingdom would be located in Israel. Summarize the parable of the yeast ([Matthew 13:33](#)) and explain how it contradicted the Jewish expectation.

Allow each group to report on its findings. Expected responses are as follows: *Assignment 1:* God's people can expect to be surrounded by evil and opposition. We are to endure patiently and wait expectantly for the triumphant future harvest. *Assignment 2:* Just like the mustard seed, God's kingdom starts small and unnoticed, but grows to a greatness that cannot be missed. *Assignment 3:* As yeast spreads through the bread and causes it to grow, God's kingdom will spread throughout the world and have great influence.

Into Life

Distribute handouts (you prepare) with the following simple matching test. Have the following three statements down the left side of each handout: A. The world treats the church as insignificant. B. Christians should spread God's kingdom. C. We live in a world surrounded by evil. Down the right side, have the following parable subjects listed to be matched to the statements above: 1-mustard seed; 2-weeds; 3-yeast.

Distribute handouts and call for 15 seconds of silence as you challenge students to match each statement with one of the three parables. (*Answers: A1; B3; C2.*) Ask for volunteers to verbalize which of the three statements challenges them most and why.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "What Would You Say?" activity from the reproducible page. Have students discuss how they might use Jesus' parables from today's text to respond to each person.