

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Four Short Parables

Scripture Matthew 13:31-35, 44-46

There are several parables in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew. The first parable concerned the Sower, the Seed, and the Soils. The soils represented different types of people and their responses to the message of the kingdom. Only the seed which fell on good soil, that is, was received by listeners who accepted the gospel message, was capable of producing a harvest. The seed which fell on the other three types of soil, representing people unresponsive to the gospel message, was unfruitful.

The second parable was about Wheat and Weeds. This parable described the co-existence in this age of the people of the kingdom and the people of the evil one. Jesus gave thorough explanations of these parables to His disciples, identifying each important part of the story, and making the meanings clear.

Together, these parables describe conditions of the present age. The good news of the gospel is being sown all over the world. People are responding to the gospel with varying degrees of receptivity. Jesus is raising up His people throughout the world, but kingdom advances are being opposed by Satanic forces just as Jesus predicted. Good and evil will continue to co-exist in the world until the end of the age, at which time all the people associated with evil will be cast into the fires of hell and the righteous members of the kingdom of heaven will be revealed in all their heavenly glory.

The parables of the Sower and Seed and Wheat and Weeds are unique for a very important reason: the explanations given for these first two parables are the basis for understanding many of the parables which follow. In the parables we will think about today, you will notice that there are no explanations given, nor will there be for many of the other parables taught by Jesus. However, we will be able to understand what Jesus was teaching because the essential information was provided in the first two parables.

Today we are going to look at four more of the parables of Matthew chapter 13.

Read Matthew 13:31-35

In His teachings, Jesus endeavored to communicate an accurate picture of the kingdom of heaven to His followers. They needed to have a correct understanding of the kingdom if they were to be ready to eventually continue His ministry in the world. However, listeners who were not true disciples were unable to benefit from Jesus' teaching. They recognized that the parables were true to life, but they never grasped the deeper meanings.

The common understanding among the Jews was that the Messiah would usher in a kingdom which would be massively powerful and glorious, capable of overwhelming all opposition. The parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast disabuse that common understanding of the kingdom, and set the disciples straight about what will really happen in the present age.

These two parables illustrate the growth of the kingdom of heaven. The key point in each parable is the small beginning of the kingdom compared to its eventual end. In telling the parables, it was not Jesus' purpose to stress the greatness of the kingdom. All Jews were aware of what the kingdom would eventually become. Instead, Jesus used the two metaphors to emphasize that the kingdom would have a small beginning.

In the First Century, most households had their own garden plots, and in most gardens there would be a mustard plant. This plant produced seeds which would be ground up and used in food preparations. The seeds were also assumed to have some medicinal value, but these characteristics had nothing to do with the point Jesus was making. He used the mustard seed as His illustration because it was the smallest of all the seeds used in a Jewish garden.

Among the Jews, the mustard seed was a standard by which the idea of "smallness" and "insignificance" could be conveyed. The Rabbis made frequent references to the seed in their teachings. Jesus Himself, on one occasion, told His disciples, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed," you can command mountains to move (*Matthew 17:20*).

The contrast in the parable between small and great was important to the point that Jesus was making. The “smallest of all the seeds” would become “the largest of the garden plants” — large and sturdy enough for “the birds of the air to come and perch in its branches.” The mustard plant in the Middle East grew eight to twelve feet high, and attracted many birds. Finches, for example, went wild over the seeds after they ripened.

Looking back over the centuries, we can recognize the growth of the kingdom. Beginning with the handful of disciples on the day of Pentecost, the kingdom has expanded so that at the present time the Church has been planted among two-thirds of the world’s population. This accomplishment represents faithful ministry by untold numbers of evangelists and cross-cultural missionaries.

However, the fact that one third of the world’s population has not yet had an opportunity to learn about Jesus also means that the growth of the kingdom on earth is not yet complete. Missions outreach continues to be an essential responsibility of believers. The plant that Jesus described metaphorically is still growing. Believers must continue to evangelize and missionize in areas where the gospel is not yet known so that the plant will reach full growth — so that the kingdom will be complete.

Jesus, in a later chapter of Matthew, explained to His disciples the reason for missionary activities. He said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (*Matthew 24:14*).

The next parable, in verse 33, describes what happens when a small bit of yeast is mixed into a large amount of flour. The general thrust of this parable is the same as that of the mustard seed, but there may be a subtle distinction. The mustard seed parable suggests visible growth; the yeast parable concerns inner change and transformation. Taken together, the parables indicate that the kingdom of heaven expands in a slow, steady, systematic way, quietly, from small beginnings.

Bread was the staple food of Israelites, consumed at every meal. We all understand what yeast does in bread dough. Modern translations use the word “yeast.” However, ancient bakers did not have modern day dry, packaged yeast. They used “leaven,” which was a small bit of fermented dough retained from a previous session of bread-making. When this little bit was added to the new batch of dough, it would, after a period of time, ferment the entire batch and the bread would be ready for baking.

Jesus stated that the woman mixed the leaven into a large amount of flour. That was an understatement. The Greek language mentions “three satas” of flour. That was equal to about 50 pounds of flour! Jesus used exaggeration to make His point: just a little pinch of leaven had the ability to ferment an enormous quantity of dough. The leaven was hidden from sight inside the dough, and did its work in an invisible way, although the rising of the dough could be recognized. Jesus said that the kingdom was like leaven. The emphasis of the parable was on the internal power of the kingdom to bring about change wherever it was embedded among people.

Verses 34-35 are commentary by the writer Matthew. The quotation is from the Greek language version of Psalm 78, verse 2. The implication is that Jesus was revealing truths which had been determined “since the creation of the world.” Jesus was not teaching things which were new to Him since He was one of the planners of creation. As the Messiah, He was providing instruction about matters which were not recognized or understood by the listeners of His day.

In Matthew’s mind, the purpose behind the teachings of Jesus was similar to the purpose of the writer of Psalm 78. Jesus was revealing the future actions of God in regard to the kingdom age, just as the writer of Psalm 78 revealed the patterns of God’s actions in regard to Israel in an earlier period of time.

[Note: Psalm 78 is a historical record of the acts of God in taking care of His rebellious people Israel. The Jews in the Old Testament had failed to comprehend the “cause and effects” behind God’s actions and therefore they did not recognize the patterns of events nor the direction to which the patterns pointed. They had, so to speak, not connected the dots. Jesus did not want His disciples, the ones who would give direction to the kingdom movement after His return to heaven, to make the same kinds of mistakes as the Old Testament Israelites.]

There are two more very short parables in chapter 13. Because they teach the same truth, they form a pair just like the two previous parables we have been thinking about form a pair. These combinations of illustrations with the same themes were a way for Jesus to reinforce the points He was making.

Read Matthew 13:44-46

These two parables call attention to the superlative value of the kingdom of heaven. The man who found the treasure in the field apparently did so by chance. *[He wasn't like the people who walk up and down the beaches with their Geiger counters.]* According to rabbinic law, anything of value that was moved or lifted out of its place in a field belonged to the owner of the field, not the finder. In the parable, the man did not move the treasure, he left it hidden and undisturbed in its place. After he had purchased the field, then the treasure became legally his.

The lesson of the parable was clear: The kingdom of heaven, which the treasure represented, was worth infinitely more than the cost of the field. The man joyfully gave up everything he had in order to purchase the field and obtain the treasure. This parable is in keeping with the teaching that Jesus gave on another occasion, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (*Matthew 16:26*) The decision to enter the kingdom of heaven is the most important action step a person can make in this lifetime.

The cost of obtaining the kingdom of heaven is not something that impoverishes a person. It is, rather, a benefit that immeasurably enriches the person in good ways. The Apostle Paul understood this after his surprise encounter with Jesus. He wrote, "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (*Philippians 3:7-9*). To put this lesson in the context of discipleship, the kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than all the difficulties and abuses and pains of being a believer in the midst of an evil world.

As I thought about the implications of this parable, I became intrigued about the circumstances in which a person might chance upon, or be guided to, or caused to recognize the value of the kingdom of heaven. How does a person discover the importance of a relationship with God? What causes a person to seek God's kingdom? And to be willing to surrender all his earthly possessions, ambitions, and personal rights in order to gain access to the kingdom?

Not surprisingly, there is a clear answer to this question in Scripture. The answer is related to the sovereignty and grace of God. When the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke to the people in parables, Jesus said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (*Matthew 13:11*). The knowledge of the kingdom must be given.

Back in chapter 11, Jesus prayed concerning His disciples, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." He also said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (*Matthew 11:25-27*). From these and numerous other passages we learn that the eyes, minds, and hearts of true disciples are opened only on the initiative of God the Father working through His Son, Jesus. Humans cannot take credit for their discoveries of spiritual truth any more than the man could claim credit for his strenuous efforts in discovering of the treasure in the field. It is God's grace which guides some people to truth while the truth remains hidden to others.

In the next parable, Jesus described a merchant who was seeking pearls. In Jesus' time, pearls had become an important status symbol of wealthy people in Israel, so there was a market for them. In the course of his business activities, this merchant, one day, chanced upon a special pearl of great value. This particular pearl so far exceeded any other pearl he had ever seen that he was willing, even eager, to exchange everything else he owned in order to obtain it.

The merchant may have had fantasy dreams of becoming wealthy, but he had not planned in advance for the unanticipated opportunity which came his way. He had not written into his Daytimer: "Today, discover fantastic pearl." Like the man in the first parable, he had come upon his treasure unexpectedly. The pearl, like the treasure of the field, represents the kingdom of heaven, and it was the kingdom which Jesus was describing.

Once again, I want to call your attention to the grace of God and how God sovereignly works to draw people into His kingdom. Scripture declares that there is “no one who seeks God” of their own volition; no one who is able to gain spiritual understanding on their own (*Romans 3:11*). Believers may assume that it was their decisions to accept Jesus as Savior, but behind their decisions is God’s sovereign activity in exposing them to Biblical truth and stirring up their spiritual interests.

The testimonies of believers through history are similar. They confess: “unless God had graciously intervened in my life, and cause me to be concerned about spiritual matters, I would never have discovered the kingdom of heaven.” As believers we have to acknowledge that our discovery of and understanding of the truth of the gospel message is not our own doing.

Jesus articulated this truth during one of His extended discussions with the Jews. He said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” A few sentences later He said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him,” and, “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me” (*John 6:37, 44-45*).

What can we conclude from this study of these parables? People must be chosen and called by God the Father before they will recognize Jesus Christ as Redeemer and Savior and King, and before they become willing to give up everything they have on earth in order to secure their place in the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus pointed out to His disciples, the privilege that God offers to be a member of the kingdom of heaven is greater than all the treasures of earth.

Have we recognized the value of the gift to which God is calling us? Do we treasure this salvation above all else? Have we surrendered ourselves to the King of the Kingdom?

Appendix

The Parable of the Leaven (v. 33-35): Some interpreters think the leaven here, as in other places in the New Testament, represents an ever-present, spreading evil in the world. They argue that the effects of sin spread in the world much as leaven permeates a lump of dough. This view, however, seems to contradict the text. Jesus said “the Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven...” It is true that yeast often serves as a symbol of evil in the Scriptures; nevertheless, in this context, the ever-spreading influence seems to relate to the power of the gospel in the world.