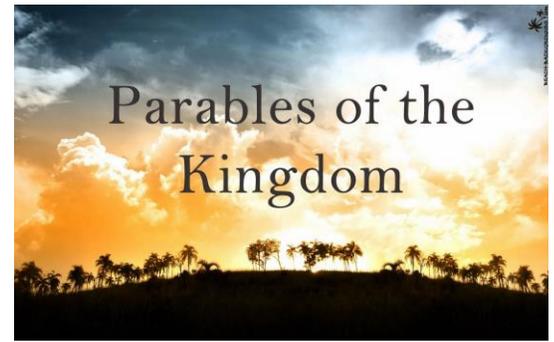


1 Kings 3:5-12
 Psalm 119:129-136
 Romans 8:26-39
 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52



SO IT WILL BE AT THE CLOSE OF THE AGE

In our last two studies we discussed two parables: *The Sower* and *The Wheat and the Weeds*. Jesus explained privately to his disciples how these two parables describe the kingdom of heaven. This week we have the remaining five parables in Matthew 13, the explanations of which are left to us.

Before we begin, review Matt 13:10-17. The parables of Jesus were always about simple things from his surroundings, like seeds and plants and animals and fish and coins and leaven and nets – things each hearer could understand. Why then, according to this passage, did the parables have the effect of *dividing* people? We discussed how a parable brings to mind things that are not in the parable itself. How and when does this happen? Discuss the following remarks by Dr. J. V. McGee in his *Thru the Bible Commentary*:

“If a man wants to know the Word of God, he can know it. He who wants to know the truth can know it. But you can shut your ears to it. There are multitudes of so-called broad-minded people who shut their ears to the Word of God. If you don't want to hear it, you won't hear it, my friend. Not only would you fail to hear it, but you wouldn't understand it if you did hear it. You must have the kind of ear that wants to hear the Word of God.”

And Jesus said, “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (Matt 13:9, 43).

Matt 13:31-33. *Another parable he put before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” ³³He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”¹*

• “*The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed*” ... “*The kingdom of heaven is like leaven*” (v.31, 33). These two parables depict the kingdom of heaven as something that begins small and grows large. There are several ways for us to apply it:

(1) We may apply it to church history. The church began in Jerusalem with a small group of radicals who insisted Jesus was the Son of God and claimed they had seen him risen from the dead. At that time there was a Pharisee, “*a member of the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in honor by all the people,*” who cautioned his colleagues with these words: “*If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!*” (Acts 5:33-39). From that time the church, like a mustard seed, has grown in spite of all opposition.

(2) We may apply it in the setting in which it was given. Huge crowds came to see Jesus, but mostly for the wrong reasons. He was not there primarily to cause a revolution, or to relieve suffering, or to feed the hungry, even though he did all these things. He really came to die on the cross and redeem the world from sin. And among the vast crowds there were some who believed and responded to his call, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.*” (Mark 1:15). They would become the *kingdom of God* – the vast network of believers who embrace the truth of the gospel.

(3) Finally, we may apply it to our faith. If your faith in Jesus has grown, you can look back to when it was small – like a seed. And once the seed – the new life in Jesus – is planted in your heart, the Holy Spirit of God will nourish it and make it grow. As the prophet said, “*He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, till he brings justice to victory*” (Isa 42:3, Matt 12:20).

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

- “... *the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches*” (v.32). This saying may describe an evil aspect of church growth. In *The Sower*, the birds stand for “the evil one” who snatches away “the word of the kingdom” from those who do not understand it. Ezekiel 31 describes Egypt as a large tree in which “*All the birds of the air made their nests in its boughs,*” but was to be cast out “*because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height.*” There is a similar description in Daniel 4.

Thus, the *birds* apparently represent evil forces – worldly components that find their “nests” in the church. We see these today, especially in large church organizations. Politics, committees, etc., make their nests in the living, growing church and get in the way of its work of meeting needs and saving souls.

- “*The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened*” (v.33). C. S. Lewis likened the world to a country temporarily overcome by an internal rebellion and ruled by an evil imposter: “Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”²

Like a bit of leaven, the Holy Spirit does his work secretly in the hearts of men, yet the effect cannot be contained or overcome. “*For this is the will of my Father,*” Jesus said, “*That everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*” (John 6:40). The evil ruler – the prince of this world – battles against the church, but he cannot destroy it.

Matt 13:44-49a. “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.* ⁴⁵“*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls,* ⁴⁶*who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.* ⁴⁷“*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind;* ⁴⁸*when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad.* ⁴⁹*So it will be at the close of the age.*”

- “... *like treasure hidden in a field ...*” (v.44). There were no banks in those days – people used to bury their money to protect it, and sometimes a forgotten treasure would be discovered accidentally. Likewise, many have seen their conversion to faith in Jesus in just this way – as the discovery of a great treasure. This priceless gift from God, which is new life in Jesus Christ, is worth more than the entire world to the one who receives it. It is imperishable. He or she will gladly “sell all he has” to keep it forever.

- “...*like a merchant in search of fine pearls ...*” (v.46). This parable is similar, except the merchant was *in search of fine pearls* when he found this one pearl of great value, worth all he had and more. Jesus is *the Pearl of Great Price*. If you are searching for God, and you find Jesus, you have found God as well. There are those to whom God reveals himself in Christ because they are searching, as this merchant was doing, and there are those to whom God chooses to reveal himself regardless of what they are doing, in the way the hidden treasure was discovered by the man out in the field.

- “... *like a net which was thrown into the sea*” (v.47). This last parable is like the second (the wheat and weeds) in the way the two end: the good are kept and the bad are thrown away (or burned). Both parables speak of “*the close of the age*” (v.49). This is the age in which we live. What conclusions about it do you draw from these two parables? What has been God’s purpose for it, and how will it end?

- “*So it will be at the close of the age*” (v.49). The *close of the age* is a time when men will rise from the grave and stand before the throne of God. You may have to deny yourself in this life in order to become good soil for the Word to grow in; you may wonder why God doesn’t do something about all those bad weeds so the wheat will have more room to grow, or why he waits while there is so much suffering in the world; and why it may cost all you have to keep the treasure of Christ in your heart while all this is going on and the sea is full of so many queer fish. Jesus said, “*In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33). Remember: the parables of Jesus do not teach mainly about *the world*; they teach mainly about *the kingdom of heaven*. The evil in the world is not your problem; it is God’s. Your mission is to prepare yourself to dwell in the kingdom of heaven forever.