

The Parables to the Crowds
Matthew 13:24-35
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Matthew 13 contains a series of eight parables, each involving truth regarding the kingdom of heaven. The first parable of Matthew 13 is the Parable of the Sower, which is foundational, for if we do not understand this parable, we cannot expect to understand any of the parables of Jesus (Mark 4:13). This parable instructs the reader about the nature of responsiveness to Jesus. The message of the kingdom will be heard by many, but not all will understand it in order to become fruitful in their service to our Lord.

The reason that Jesus taught in parables was to grant understanding about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to some, while hiding this from those who were against Him (Matthew 13:11-13). The followers of Jesus are blessed because they have been granted this revelation, which many prophets and righteous men from earlier times longed to know (Matthew 13:16-17).

The first four parables of Matthew 13 (the parable of the sower, the parable of the tares, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven) are all spoken by Jesus to the crowds. In Matthew 13:36, Jesus, "*left the crowds and went into the house.*" The remaining four parables are then addressed to the disciples, including the explanation of the parable of the tares.

The parable of the tares (13:24-30)

The parable of the tares is similar to the parable of the sower in that it uses the imagery of agriculture with sowing seeds. These first two parables are the only ones that provide a separate explanation as to its meaning (cf. 13:18-23, 36-43). This parable adds more complexity to the story, specifically with more people involved beyond the sower, such as a landowner and his slaves, reapers and the landowner's enemy. Also, this parable of the tares is unlike the parable of the sower in that it, like the following parables, describe the kingdom itself, not the individuals making up the kingdom of heaven.

This parable, and all the remaining parables in this chapter, compare the kingdom of heaven to something else in order to communicate about some aspect of the kingdom. The other parables use the phrase, "*the kingdom of heaven is like,*" while the parable of the tares uses the aorist, passive tense (HOMOIOTHE) to say "*the kingdom of heaven may be compared to*" or more literally, "*the kingdom of heaven has become like.*"

This is significant because it describes the change to the kingdom of heaven. It has now become like this parable because of the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews. Because of their rejection of Jesus, the kingdom is now like the parable of the tares. This will help us to understand the explanation of the parable of the tares in Matthew 13:36-43 in describing the state of the world at the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

The man sowing in the field with good seed is identified as "*the Son of Man*" in Matthew 13:37, and the seed was evidently protected by his men who fall asleep. Since the men are the only ones not identified in the explanation of the parable, this sleeping is not a criticism of the men but a reference to the diabolical nature of the enemy (the devil in verse 39), who takes the opportunity to come and sow tares among the wheat. The function of men who question the owner seems to be to answer a common question about why these tares have been sown and what to do about them.

In the parable, the tares are likely a weed-type plant known as bearded darnel, which grows in wheat production zones. It is sometimes called "false wheat" since it looks similar to wheat until it matures. These tares are representative of "*the sons of the evil one*" (13:38). Therefore, the parable of the tares describes true believers who are the sons of God existing alongside the sons of the devil.

The wheat and the tares are sown in the field, which according to Matthew 13:38 is the world. This is important because many apply this parable to the church, with true believers and those merely professing faith existing together. Clearly, this refers to the coexistence of believers and unbelievers in the world. While unbelievers may enter into the church buildings and associate themselves with true believers, this is not the point of this parable.

The point of the parable of the tares involves the proper response to the situation of the tares growing up with the wheat. In the world, believers live alongside unbelievers. This implies the change of God's plan for His people as no longer will the sons of God be geographically distinct and separated from the sons of the devil. Also, the plan of God is to allow this coexistence and therefore, those who seek to eradicate the unbelievers are opposing the will of God, for they may unintentionally eliminate some of the true believers as well.

Therefore, Jesus warns of the impossibility of successfully identifying the sons of the devil. This identification awaits the time of the harvest, which according to Matthew 13:39 occurs at the end of the age by the angels. Since this final judgment awaits God's timing in the future, we ought to refrain from such judgment in the present (cf. John 3:17).

The parable of the mustard seed (13:31-32)

The parable of the mustard seed begins the series of parables that begin with *“the kingdom of heaven is like.”* These parables are significantly shorter than either the parable of the sower or the parable of the tares, and do not contain a follow-up explanation. By applying the nature of the method of explanation of the first two parables, it is assumed that the reader can understand the meaning of these parables.

The mustard seed symbolized a very small thing to the Jews. People have argued that there are seeds smaller than the mustard seed. However, of all the seeds in the world which a first century Jewish farmer would sow in his field, the mustard seed was the smallest. This is clear from the phrase “which a man took and sowed in his field.” In context, Jesus was speaking of the mustard seed as the smallest of all the seeds that would be sown in Palestine.

Also, some claim that mustard trees cannot grow big enough to house birds. However, some do grow as tall as ten feet, providing enough branch space for birds to build a nest or, in the words of Mark 4:32, for birds to nest under its shade. Such imagery of a kingdom represented by a large tree with birds on its branches is based in the Old Testament (cf. Judges 9:15; Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:3-14; Daniel 4:7-23).

This parable is not merely about the great size of the kingdom to come, as represented by a mustard seed. Rather, it is more about the metaphor of the very small mustard seed producing such a garden plant that it grows to a tree upon which birds can nest. The Jews believed in the greatness of the kingdom of God, but they did not understand the nature of the growth of the kingdom. Jesus could have chosen a much larger tree to emphasize the great size of the kingdom, but He chose the mustard tree because of the small size of its seed the produces the growth.

Therefore, the parable of the mustard seed emphasizes the growth of the kingdom from small and insignificant to being larger than any other kingdom. The kingdom began with very few, only to expand to a great multitude. This is true from the original promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) and is also true of the roughly 120 who had gathered in the upper room prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 1:12-26). Today, there are a great number of true followers of Christ, and this will continue to grow beyond our awareness. While we have no full knowledge of this growth, we can be assured that the Lord’s plan for His kingdom will continue to produce such fruit, regardless of opposition.

The parable of the leaven (13:33)

The parable of the leaven corresponds to the parable of the mustard seed in the sense that both parables describe the growth of the kingdom of heaven. Just as the kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed that grows into a large tree, so too the kingdom of heaven is like the little leaven that grows through the whole dough. The difference between these parables is that the mustard seed grows externally in quantity, while the leaven grows internally in quality.

Leaven is a substance, typically yeast, that is used in dough to make it rise. This takes place when the substance produces gas bubbles, usually carbon dioxide, that lightens and softens the dough. The process is expedited by the supplemental process of kneading, where the dough is manipulated to increase the incorporation of air in the dough. This chemical process occurs in a manner that transforms the dough for bread making. Like the leaven gradually transforms the dough as it is mixed with a large amount of flour, so there is a transformation process taking place with the kingdom of heaven.

The parable describes a woman hiding the leaven in three pecks (SATA in Greek) of flour, which is a large amount of flour (cf. NIV) but not an unreasonable amount for a woman to bake. Three pecks of flour would be close to a bushel, or roughly enough to feed around 150 people. Thus a small amount of leaven affects a large amount of flour.

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven does not grow bigger, it gradually permeates the dough in a transformative manner. What this transformation is has been debated. There are two views regarding the meaning of this parable:

1. The leaven represents the growth of evil in the world

There are several good reasons that support this perspective.

- a. The imagery of leaven is almost always associated with the spread of evil in the Bible (Exodus 12; Leviticus 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matthew 16:12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). However, Leviticus 7:13 and Leviticus 23:15-18 are two exceptions to this.
- b. The verb "hid" is more naturally used for the plotting of evil, similar to the enemy sowing the tares in Matthew 13:28.
- c. This view is supported by the revelation of the growing evil character of the world at the end of the church age and in the tribulation period (1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; Jude; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 6-19), growing like the leaven.

2. The leaven represents growth of gospel of the kingdom

The most compelling reason to accept this perspective of the parable of the leaven is because the leaven is what *“the kingdom of heaven is like.”* It is hard to understand the kingdom of heaven as being like something evil. This is why most have understood this parable as referring to good, not evil.

Some have seen this growth permeating the world as support for the postmillennial view that the world will get increasingly better as the present, spiritual kingdom of heaven grows until Christ comes. This is inconsistent with the biblical teaching of the nature of the kingdom, with the revelation of increasing evil, and with the empirical evidence of the state of the fallen world. Better to view this as the growth of the gospel message, which is taught in Matthew 24:14, *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”*

With this understanding, we can see how these parables relate to each other. Both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven depict the growth of the kingdom of heaven, either numerically, by its inhabitants, or influentially, through its message. This message of the gospel of the kingdom is like leaven in that it is happening organically, without notice. Unlike the expectation of the sudden arrival of the kingdom, we are taught about the more hidden growth of its participants. This will continue according to God’s sovereign will until the Lord returns to establish the kingdom upon the earth (Acts 1:6-11).

From the small beginning of the few disciples of Jesus, we have seen exponential growth of the followers of Jesus throughout history, regardless of oppression from worldly governments or from persecution by the institutional church. This growth of the influence of the message of the word of God occurs apart from forceful rebellion or political revolution. As Jesus would proclaim justice to the people, He did not argue or cry out, nor did He raise His voice in the streets (Matthew 12:18-19). *Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place”* (John 18:36).

These parables should instill great hope for the servants of Christ. Regardless of affliction or persecution, the message of the kingdom will bear fruit (Matthew 13:23). Our ministry may be small, but like a mustard seed, it is part of what God is establishing. The impact may be difficult to measure, but like leaven, it is part of what God is using to accomplish His will in the kingdom of heaven.

The reason for parables (13:34-35)

Matthew 13:34-35 are transition verses between Jesus concluding His parables spoken to the crowd from the boat (Matthew 13:2) and Jesus moving to speak in parables to the disciples in the house (Matthew 13:36). These two verses show the centrality of parables in the public teaching ministry of Jesus. Supporting this approach by Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy.

Matthew 13:34 uses a chiasm in the Greek text, with the emphasis on “parables” in the middle. As a result of Christ’s rejection in Matthew 12, He began speaking in parables, beginning in Matthew 13:3. He explained why He used parables in Matthew 13:10-17, “*to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.*” He purposely hid revelation from those who opposed Him.

Moving forward, the hostile crowds would hear parables from Him and whenever He would speak to them, He would do so with parables. This should not be understood to mean that He would no longer tell the crowds nothing but parables, but rather that nothing would be said to them without also employing parables. Parables would be an essential part of His ongoing public ministry.

Matthew 13:35 reveals an additional reason why Jesus spoke in parables. He did so in order to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 78:2, where Asaph reveals the history of Israel through the use of parabolic stories to compare various aspects of Israel’s rebelliousness with God’s justice and mercy.

Like Asaph, Jesus taught the crowds profound lessons from that which they knew something about. His revelation was to enlighten those with ears to hear regarding truth they had not previously understood. Those who were not granted this depth of understanding would only think they understood but truly were blinded by their lack of faith. These lessons followed the prophecy of Asaph in that Jesus brought the pieces of what had already been revealed about the kingdom to join with new revelation about the kingdom, much the same way that Asaph did with the history of Israel. Both Asaph and Jesus used these stories to emphasize the grace of God to rebellious people.

Indeed, Jesus fulfilled Psalm 78:2 as He would “*utter things hidden since the foundation of the world*” by teaching these parables of the kingdom of heaven. The rejection of the Messiah was prophesied (cf. Psalm 118:22), and the resultant delay of the kingdom with the advent of the church age was now being revealed in these parables.

The parable of the sower and the parable of the tares revealed the nature of man's responsiveness. The Son of Man sows the good seed in the good soil and the evil one snatches this seed away and sows the tares in the world. This reflects the nature of the reception of the gospel, where there is genuine faith on the part of those who hear the word, understand the word, and are fruitful. Alongside those with true faith are those who are temporarily responsive (the seed on the rocky places and the seed among the thorns) and appear to be those with true faith but are destined for judgment, as portrayed by the tares.

Also, foreshadowing the church age is the parable of the mustard seed, which shows the growth of the believers and the parable of the leaven, which shows the spread of the message of the gospel. These things will be seen in the church age, where the gospel goes to the Gentiles, who are in the remotest parts of the world (Acts 1:7-8). These parables depict the mystery of the church, with Jews and Gentiles joined together as God's people, "*which for ages past was kept hidden in God*" (cf. Ephesians 3:1-13).

Conclusion

Jesus taught the crowds three parables that reveal aspects of the nature, growth and influence of the kingdom of heaven. These parables fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 78:2 and serve to instruct those with faith about the kingdom of heaven, while obscuring this truth from those in opposition to Christ. We who have ears to hear are blessed by the knowledge of this revelation from Christ.

Since we know the enemy has sown tares among the wheat, we can expect many to be religiously "*holding to a form of godliness, but denying its power*" (2 Timothy 3:5). While 2 Timothy instructs us to "*avoid such men as these,*" we should not seek to eradicate them from our community, since we are unable to discern their ultimate eternal destiny. We hold out hope that "*they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will*" (2 Timothy 2:26).

Since we know the kingdom of heaven will grow through the preaching of the gospel, we should have confidence that the Lord is gradually building His kingdom with the good soil who are responsive to His word. Therefore, we should participate in His sovereign work of spreading His word to many as He builds the number of those whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world until the time when He will deliver us into His kingdom at a time fixed by His own authority (cf. Acts 1:6-7).