

God's Kingdom In The Parables (Part Two)

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch,"

Part One explained that the phrase “kingdom of heaven” has a variety of usages. While most understand it to refer to the coming Kingdom of God, a lesser-known usage applies to the physical Kingdom of Israel, founded by God in heaven and ruled over by the same.

The previous article also stressed the necessity of recognizing to whom Jesus was speaking while giving the parables in Matthew 13. The audience, made up of the remnant of Judah, helps us comprehend the scope of His instructions. Even though the people of Judah and Galilee did not have “ears to hear” in a spiritual sense, they still received *some* true instruction from their unacknowledged King, just as the leadership perceived that Jesus was speaking about them in the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:23-44).

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

The second parable of Matthew 13 concerns wheat and tares sown together in the same field by different actors:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’” (Matthew 13:24-30)

As with the Parable of the Sower, Jesus later defines His symbols to His disciples (Matthew 13:38). The field, He says, is “the world.” While there can still be an application of this parable to the church, Jesus’ immediate audience was “great multitudes” (Matthew 13:2, 34, 36), and the scope was “the world,” rather than the limited assembly of called-out ones.

The good seeds are “the sons of the kingdom.” This phrase appears just one other time, in an earlier teaching in which the “sons of the kingdom” are cast into outer darkness (Matthew 8:11-12). Jesus used this phrase after encountering more faith in a Gentile centurion than in Israel (Matthew 8:10). In that instance, the “sons of the kingdom” are Israelites without faith. In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, though, the Son of Man plants the “sons of the kingdom,” and they are revealed as righteous and glorified at the end of the age. Then, all who “offend, and those who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 13:41) will be gathered out of His Kingdom—at that time, the whole world (see Revelation 11:15).

Jesus defines the tares as “the sons of the wicked one.” While it is common to interpret this parable and its players strictly in terms of the church, consider that both God and Satan have had “sons” from

the very beginning, long before the founding of the church in Acts 2. Abel lived by faith, but Cain, the first murderer, bore the spiritual image of his father, Satan (see John 8:44). Seth likewise was of the “good seed,” as were Enoch, Noah, and others. God planted in the world all these righteous men, who had to contend with the sons of the Adversary.

Recall that these parables come after a verbal altercation with the Pharisees in which Jesus calls them a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 12:34), indicating they were offspring of the serpent—sons of Satan—because they bore his spiritual image. John the Baptist also dubs the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers,” implying they will be burned like the tares (Matthew 3:7-12). In John 8:44, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they were of their father the Devil, just another way of saying “sons of the wicked one.” He uses parallel imagery in Matthew 15:13, again regarding the Pharisees: “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.”

Jesus says that “while men slept,” the “enemy came and sowed tares” (Matthew 13:25). The Bible often uses sleep as a symbol of obliviousness, non-awareness, or inattention. As such, it is frequently a negative symbol, often coinciding with lethargy, apathy, and letting down in one’s duties (see Proverbs 6:4-10; 24:30-34).

Within Israel, God appointed watchmen who were not merely to keep an eye out for approaching armies but were also to monitor the nation’s moral condition. In Isaiah 56:10, though, God vents His displeasure with these servants: “His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; *sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber*” (emphasis ours throughout). Instead of staying focused for the sake of the nation, “they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory” (verse 11).

Those who should have sounded the alarm about the problems creeping into the nation *before* the captivity were—as we would say—asleep at the switch! Focused on their own concerns, they allowed ungodly elements to take root, leading to the nation’s spiritual downfall. We will see more of this later.

Jesus ends the parable’s explanation with, “Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:43). Similarly, Daniel 12:3 says the “wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” This glorification is also linked with the “harvest” in John 5:28-30. This end-time harvest is not limited to righteous individuals who lived from AD 31 onward—that is, the church—but includes all who have lived and died by faith, beginning with righteous Abel. As Hebrews 11:40 explains, all the true sons of the Kingdom, planted throughout history, will be made perfect at the same time.

Certainly, this parable can apply within the assembly of believers, for the New Testament is replete with warnings about false teachers and false brethren. Yet the principle is not limited to the church. The Pharisees were “sons of the wicked one”—and thus tares—even before Christ founded His church. The parable warns that not everyone who *appears* to be under the dominion of God is actually *of* God. The Pharisees and other leaders defied God’s sovereign authority, but He commands His servants to leave Satan’s offspring in place until the conclusion of His purpose.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Because of their symbols, the third and fourth parables spoken to the great multitude are among the most difficult to comprehend, but they become especially understandable when we consider Jesus' audience and what was then happening in the kingdom—the physical nation.

The third parable appears in Matthew 13:31-32:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Aside from this parable, His only other mention of a mustard seed relates to faith (Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6). This usage does not mean that the mustard seed *is* faith, but faith is nevertheless a component of the growth or increase to which Jesus refers in the symbol of the seed. In addition, He describes the mustard seed as “the least of all the seeds,” linking it with God's description of Israel as “the least of all peoples” (Deuteronomy 7:7). Its first human king, Saul, even protested that he was from the smallest tribe, and his family was “the least of all the families” (I Samuel 9:21).

The real beginning of the nation/kingdom, though, was Abraham. Through Abraham's faith, the nation (which became a kingdom) began, both in following God out of Ur and in believing God's promises about his descendants. By his faith in God's promise of an heir, the nation grew. God promised Abraham that “kings shall come from you” (Genesis 17:6) and that “kings of peoples shall be from” his wife Sarah (verse 16). Thus, the “least of all peoples” had a faithful seed (beginning), and this seed likewise grew because of faith.

The commentaries are divided over the nature of the mustard plant in this parable. *The Bible Exposition Commentary* and *The Companion Bible* notes suggest that something contrary to nature takes place for the mustard plant to be considered a tree large enough to support birds. Yet *Barnes' Notes* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* assert that the mustard plant can reach fifteen feet in height and provide anecdotes from travelers that suggest Jesus describes nothing unusual in His parable. Even today, mustard plants in the areas of modern Israel and Jordan are found with branches an inch in diameter. Relative to other local herbs such as hyssop, as well as the minuscule seed involved, a one-inch branch is massive!

Jesus, however, may describe a form of gigantism, like what we see in Great Danes, whose breeding has resulted in overly large (though friendly) dogs with relatively small hearts and short lifespans. Humanity's practices often result in something out of balance.

Along these lines, historians often herald Solomon's kingdom as a—if not *the*—Golden Age of Israel, yet it was also oppressive and unsustainable. Solomon multiplied armaments of war, precious metals, and wives, all in contradiction to God's instructions for kings (see Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Ultimately, his wives turned his heart from God, and the worship of foreign gods (demons) received official sanction within the “thriving” kingdom. God blessed Solomon's kingdom, yet through his unwise excesses, it ultimately veered in a disastrous direction. As we will see in the Parable of the Pearl, bigger is not always better.

Because Jesus does not explain the mustard tree's size either way, it proves helpful to consider the elements of the parable that remain. First, Jesus draws attention to the fantastically humble beginning, which applies to Israel. Second, He points out its tremendous growth relative to its

minuscule beginning. However, even with this surprising growth, the nation of Israel did not overshadow other “trees”—other kingdoms. Instead, it “grows up and becomes greater than all *herbs*” (Mark 4:32). Scripture also presents the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon as trees—huge, majestic trees (Ezekiel 31:3-9; Daniel 4:10-12), against which a mustard plant is insignificant.

Birds Among the Branches

A third element is that the final state of the mustard tree is as a host to birds. This third point is central because Jesus uses birds as a symbol for Satan and his demons in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:19; Mark 4:15; Luke 8:12). The humble mustard plant, with its faithful beginning and dramatic growth, in time became a place where the demons felt at home.

The Old Testament contains few mentions of demons, though enough to record that the Israelites had sacrificed to demons in Egypt (Leviticus 17:7) and that the practice picked up again as Israel rejected God (II Chronicles 11:15; Psalm 106:37). The law also contains prohibitions against having anything to do with familiar spirits (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27).

In stark contrast, the gospels highlight demon possession as a major problem in Judea and Galilee during Christ’s short ministry, and casting out demons was a significant part of His and the disciples’ work (Matthew 4:24; 8:16, 28-34; 9:32-33; 10:1, 8; 12:22-28; 15:22; 17:18; Mark 1:23-27, 32-34, 39; 3:11, 15; 5:1-17; 6:7, 13; 7:25-30; 9:17-29, 38; 16:9, 17; Luke 4:33-36, 41; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2, 27-38; 9:1, 37-42; 10:17, 20; 11:14-23; 13:32; Acts 10:38). Because of Israel’s unfaithfulness, God had removed His protection, and demons were “nesting” everywhere in the kingdom.

As we saw in Part One, this parable formed part of Christ’s preaching to the multitudes after He performed an exorcism, for which the Pharisees criticized Him (Matthew 12:22-30). Rather than give God glory for the man’s deliverance from the power of Satan, they mistook the power of God for the work of the wicked one! The parable thus immediately describes the nation’s then-current satanic state rather than, as many commentators hold, the growth of the then-future church.

Moses foretold what would happen when Israel—sometimes called “Jeshurun”—became large and prosperous:

But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you grew fat, you grew thick, you are obese! Then he forsook God who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; with abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to demons, not to God, to gods they did not know, to new gods, new arrivals that your fathers did not fear. (Deuteronomy 32:15-17)

God inspired Moses to write that when Israel grew large through His increase, she would also fall into idolatry, which involves demonism, an exact parallel to what Jesus describes in the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Moses knew that Israel would “become utterly corrupt,” warning them that “evil will befall you in the latter days, because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands” (Deuteronomy 31:29). Israel’s corruption is a consistent Old Testament theme (Psalm 14:3; 53:3; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 7:11; 10:21; Ezekiel 16:47; 23:11). Without the new heart and Spirit available under the New Covenant, she followed the world’s course into spiritual uncleanness and demonic activity.

The Parable of the Leaven

The Parable of the Leaven follows a similar theme: “Another parable He spoke to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened’” (Matthew 13:33).

The “three measures of meal” first show up in Genesis 18:6: “So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, ‘Quickly, make ready *three measures of fine meal*; knead it and make cakes.’” The occasion was God’s meeting with Abraham and Sarah to promise them a son, the next step—a miraculous one—in the growth of the family/kingdom. The meal symbolizes the fellowship between God and the family of Abraham.

The Jews in Jesus’ audience were quick to claim Abraham as their father (John 8:39), and the “three measures of meal” refers to something easily recognizable in their history. But then Jesus introduces a subversive element into the story. Over time, something happened to the fellowship between God and the expanding house of Abraham—the kingdom became “all leavened.” Many commenters hold that this parable teaches that the gospel will spread over all the earth in the same way that leaven spreads, but this interpretation overlooks both the context and the fact that God’s Word never uses leaven positively. Instead, leaven is universally a symbol of corruption, especially of apostate doctrine and practice (Matthew 16:11-12; Luke 12:1; I Corinthians 5:8; Galatians 5:7-9).

The parable indicates, then, that the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham’s family had completely degenerated. Israel “took” of pagan belief systems from the nations around her and introduced those corrupting ways into her relationship with God. The Judaism that Jesus encountered was a noxious blend of some Scripture with beliefs and practices picked up during the Babylonian captivity and flavored with Hellenism and the hardened traditions of previous generations. When Jesus delivered the parables, the major problem within the kingdom was not the idolatry of graven images as before the captivity, but one of false beliefs. He did not have to contend with pagan temples and high places, but with hearts hardened by anti-God doctrines and practices.

The beliefs and practices that Jesus encountered suggested a thoroughly leavened covenantal relationship, such that “He came to His own”—the descendants of Abraham, in particular—“and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). Therefore, as He later informed the religious leaders, God would take the kingdom from its current caretakers and give it to a spiritual nation—the spiritual seed of Abraham, those who are Israelites because of their faith in Him rather than their physical lineage.

The Context of Luke’s Versions

Luke also records the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven (Luke 13:18-21), and the setting in his gospel underscores Christ’s object in giving them: as a testimony against the kingdom’s condition and particularly its leadership. The context begins in Luke 13:10, with Jesus healing a woman with “a spirit of infirmity” on the Sabbath. Later, He describes the woman as being bound by Satan (verse 16), which again stresses the nation’s problem with “birds” (demons). The healed woman glorified God, but the ruler of the synagogue was incensed:

But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, “There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day” (Luke 13:14).

The Jews’ beliefs and practices had become so perverse that, even though they believed they were keeping the fourth commandment (the breaking of which was a major cause of their captivity; see

Ezekiel 20:10-24), they completely misunderstood the liberating intent of God's law. Their worldview was so warped that they could feel only indignation at divine deliverance from spiritual bondage, showing how far their hearts had turned from their Creator and how aligned they were with their spiritual captor.

As in Matthew 13, Jesus spoke the two parables to "the multitude" (Luke 13:17) in response to their skewed practices rather than to foretell the future growth and influence of the yet-to-be-established church. In reading through the whole passage, the concept of future church growth is wholly incongruous. In Luke 12:32, our Good Shepherd refers to His followers as a "little flock," and He says God calls many but chooses only a few (Matthew 20:16). Likewise, James 1:18 calls us "a kind of firstfruits," implying that the church is limited in number, a remnant (Romans 9:27; 11:5), while the more abundant main harvest will come later.

Using a different metaphor, Paul writes in I Corinthians 12:18, "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased." God alone adds individuals to the spiritual Body, so numeric growth is entirely in His hands—it will never expand beyond the limits He places on it. Paul also writes to Christians at Corinth that, because of Christ's sacrifice, "You truly are unleavened." His statement does not mean they were without sin but that God imputed righteousness to them based on Christ's work. These scriptures contradict the interpretations that the true church will become either exceptionally large or "all leavened."

Christ delivers the last four parables of Matthew 13 to the disciples—those to whom God would give an understanding of the mysteries of His Kingdom—and thus, the "kingdom" in those parables has a different emphasis. They do not primarily concern the physical nation, but the spiritual one. Jesus has a different audience, and thus, a different purpose and perspective. Interestingly, though, the two parables in the first group that Jesus explains to the disciples are ones in which we can glimpse the church: in the good soil (Parable of the Sower) and in the "sons of the kingdom" (Parable of the Wheat and Tares), who have faith.

Next time, we will begin examining the last four parables and their applications. We will see that Matthew arranges the eight parables in a balanced structure that reinforces the intended meaning of each.