

Parables of Kingdom Growth

Matthew 13:31-35

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 13 Jesus speaks several parables to the crowds that followed Him. The two major parables are the parable of the sower, and the parable of the weeds in the wheat field.

The parable of the sower explains why so many hear the Word of God and are nevertheless unsaved. The problem is not with the Word, or with the preacher, but with the heart of the person. Some are hard; some are shallow; some are worldly. But when the Word finds a ready heart, softened by the Spirit of God, it grows and produces abundant, eternal life.

The parable of the weeds in the wheat field explains why there are two kinds of people, those who are children of God, and those who are children of wrath. It's not that God deliberately created some simply to feed the flames of hell, but that mankind, created by God in God's image, willingly chose to follow Satan's leadership. By God's decree, many are left to their own sin nature and guilt, and face eternal judgment. By His mercy, the Creator has chosen to save many, not one of whom deserves anything but eternal judgment.

This is explosive information, isn't it? I mean, the arrival of the Kingdom

of God, ushered in by the King Himself, should have caught the attention of the entire world! The establishment of that Kingdom should have come with the power of the greatest earthquake ever known to man! The growth of that Kingdom should be like a wildfire, blazing through the world of man!

We know, of course, that it didn't happen that way. But at the time Jesus was speaking these parables, people had no idea what to expect. And so He tells them what they can expect, which is not what they probably would have expected.

Let's listen to the Lord Jesus:

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is the smallest of all seeds, but when it is fully grown, it is the largest of the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of flour until it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:31-33, LSB)

Why Is There No Explanation?

Jesus explained both the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds in the wheat field; why doesn't He explain these parables, or those that follow? I think for several reasons. First, they are much simpler, and the parables themselves do guide our minds toward their meaning.

Second, in explaining the two primary parables, Jesus sets the pattern for our understanding.

THE MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 13:31-32

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Mustard seeds are not the smallest seeds in existence, but they were the smallest seeds commonly used in Israel at that time. They are very small, and yet fully grown mustard plants reach 20 to 30 feet in height and width. They are so substantial in some places mustard trees or bushes still serve as wind breaks. They are plenty large enough for birds to nest in their branches.

What is Jesus telling us about the Kingdom of Heaven? He is telling us that it did not spring into its earthly existence fully formed. The church started small, so small as to be unnoticeable and imperceptible. It was certainly unimpressive and seemed unimportant. Jesus chose twelve disciples to be with Him. By the end of His earthly ministry there were eleven apostles, and a few hundred disciples (First Corinthians 15:6). On the day of Pentecost just 120 were gathered in the upper room, praying and waiting for the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15). It's true that 3,000 believed that first day (Acts 2:41), and that the Spirit added daily to their numbers (Acts 2:47). It's true that in a few months there were about 5,000

believers (Acts 4:4). It's true that even many priests believed (Acts 6:7). But those numbers are just fractions of the population of Jerusalem – around 150,000 – and Israel – around two million.

Bigger Is Better

Human nature insists that bigger is better. It's always been that way. Tragically, it's even true in the Christian world. One mega church pastor (with about 30,000 members) said a few years ago that people in little churches are selfish, and should be ashamed. Why? Bigger is better. People are attracted to big churches. Success breeds success. And if the only measure of success is numbers, then he wins by a long shot. But if truth and doctrine matters more – and I believe the Bible teaches that truth and doctrine matter most – then the majority of big churches are actually failures. The majority of them didn't get big by being faithful to the Word of God, but by providing entertainment with a religious flair. We just met with some friends from Missouri who briefly attended a church with about 5,000 members, but which only has a small handful of small groups that meet.

About ten years ago Linda and I visited some missionaries in the south, who attended a mega church. They proudly told us about the church's new audio-visual-lighting system, which cost one million dollars. One. Million. Dollars. This was back in 2012 or so, when a million dollars was a lot of money. Bigger is better, after all.

Bigger Isn't Better

But God doesn't say that bigger is better. His focus in the Old Testament is on a remnant, a small number compared to the whole. The same holds true for the New Testament. The focus is on a relatively small number, chosen by God, redeemed by the Son, regenerated by the Spirit. There is never a sense in the Gospels or the New Testament epistles that the church is large, massive, important, forceful, carrying enormous momentum. To the contrary, for decades the church was considered a Jewish sect, just a small branch. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote a massive 20-volume history of the Jewish people, but he barely gave a passing mention to Jesus or the church. The Romans treated the church as a weed to be uprooted. There was persecution against Christians, yes, but it was often part of a larger political context.

The growth of the Kingdom of God has always been slow and incremental. God promised to build His Kingdom (Ezekiel 17:22-24). Jesus promised to build His church (Matthew 16:18). The Holy Spirit takes individual sinners, converts them, and joins them to Jesus' body (First Corinthians 12:13). It took time for the world to even notice that it was there. The Kingdom of God is still growing, and will continue to grow until it reaches the gates of eternity. This is not because of any government help or cooperation, or political maneuvering, but because God's purposes cannot be defeated or hindered. Frankly, it's comical when unbelievers predict that the church is dying, or that in 100 years no one will remember

Christianity. They've been saying that for a long, long time, and the mustard seed is still growing.

THE LEAVEN

Matthew 13:33

He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three sata of flour until it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:33)

Leaven is yeast, which is mixed into flour to make dough, and left to rise. Just in case you're interested, the measure that Jesus uses is about 28 pounds of flour. Leaven is most often used to describe the effect of sin; a little leaven leavens the whole lump, Paul writes in First Corinthians 5, telling the Corinthians that they must take unrepentant church members seriously. But Jesus uses it here in a positive sense.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven. It was introduced into the world by the Lord Jesus, and since then it has been affecting the world. That effect is usually quiet, unobtrusive, invisible. Just as the wind blows where it will, and no one can tell where it came from or where it's going next, the Spirit of God comes upon this one, and then that one, according to His own will. We can't see the wind; we can't see yeast at work; neither can we see the Holy Spirit at work. We know the wind is blowing because of its effect on trees and grasses. We know that yeast is at work because the dough rises. And we know that the Spirit of God is at work because a sinner,

though means invisible to us, suddenly confesses Christ, repents of sin, and is personally transformed.

Did you know that the Chinese government has been able to completely control communication in and out of the country? If you send an email to someone in China, the government knows what you write. If you talk to someone in China on the phone, the government is listening. There is no such thing as a private conversation in China. If there aren't electronic listening devices, there are people who infiltrate every sort of social gathering. We can probably assume that every college class in China is attended by at least one government agent.

The technology and power and paranoia of the Chinese government don't stop the Gospel.

North Korea – which some consider to be the more dangerous country in which a Christian can live – has an estimated 50,000 Christians, and there are probably more. Forced labor camps don't stop the Gospel.

In Afghanistan a Muslim who converts to Christ could be killed on the spot. One Afghani Christian said, "How we survive daily, only God knows." Threats of death don't stop the Gospel.

So, there are Christians in that land. 99% of Somalians are Muslim, and Christians face violent persecution. "We were all dead, but Jesus came to

save us and give us new life,” a Somalian Christian says, “I leave my life in His hands. The violent hatred of Islam can’t stop the Gospel.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast mixed in dough. As hard as the world has tried to remove it, it has failed.

Both of these parables describe the growth of the Kingdom of God as something remarkable, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and an utter blessing. The growth of the Kingdom is not anything like what the world would expect, or what we would choose if we were in charge.

BRINGING IT HOME

PERSONALIZATION

Let’s personalize this.

Throughout church history, evangelism has rarely been large-scale, as on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 believed. It is far more common for evangelism to be one-on-one, person to person, as when Philip spoke to the Ethiopian official. The yeast of the Gospel spreads slowly, through common means. The devil wants you to think that because you aren’t Peter or Paul or Billy Graham, you are not a legitimate evangelist. If you know Jesus Christ, and you tell someone else about Christ, you are an evangelist.

Another lie of the devil is that effective, gifted evangelists can have a single conversation with someone on a plane, and lead them to Christ. That's not true either. Oh, that happens at times. But most often, evangelism is a series of small steps, often involving multiple people. That's what Paul means when he says "I planted the seed, and Apollos watered it." When you encounter someone and share Christ with them, it is almost certainly not the first time that person has heard the Gospel, although it might be the first time someone was direct with them. If you have the privilege of being present when the Holy Spirit regenerates someone, then give God praise and glory!

Ultimately evangelism is a Christian telling a non-Christian about the hope of the Gospel. It's not astounding, or powerful, or amazing; it's quiet, inconspicuous, and unpretentious. I spent a lot of my Christian life being afraid of evangelism because of the way it is so often taught and discussed. I've learned the joy of planting some seeds and watering others, according to my ability and the need of the moment.

APPROPRIATION

What practical things can we consider?

First, pray. Even Paul asked for prayer for the right words to say, the boldness to say it, for open doors for the Gospel, and that the Word would

spread rapidly and be glorified. (Second Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3; Second Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 13:8; First Thessalonians 5:25). Converting sinners is a God-sized task; the very nature of a person is being changed. You can't do that for them, and they can't do it for themselves (nor do they want it, until they are made aware of their need). Consider the depth of a sinner's need on the one hand, and your powerlessness on the other, and you will be driven to pray.

Second, prepare. Be prepared in the Gospel itself. Know what you believe and why you believe it. Be able to outline the Gospel in a minute or two. Be prepared for questions that you can't answer, and don't be embarrassed to say, "I don't know the answer to that." Be prepared for rejection in the form of casual dismissal, mockery, or anger. Be prepared to see someone's eyes light up when the Spirit of God regenerates them.

Third, present. Speak with boldness and clarity. Speak the truth in love. Don't be afraid of disagreement; keep Jesus centered in your heart as your Lord, and tell others why your hope is in Him alone. Be gentle with them, and be reverent for the Lord and His Gospel. They don't have ears to hear until the Spirit enables them to hear. You won't know if they have ears to hear if you remain silent.

Here's where the alliteration gives out: **trust the Lord with the results.** Don't trust your ability; you can't save them. Don't trust them to hear and respond; as long as they are dead in their sins, they can't respond. Trust in

God who gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead.