

PARABLES OF JESUS PART 4

Wheat and the Tares (Weeds) – Mustard Seed – Leaven

Two weeks ago, when we last met together, I spent about 20 minutes introducing “the kingdom of heaven.” It is the subject of eight parables found in Matthew Chapter 13, which is where we will be today. So, it is a good idea that we understand what it is, what the “kingdom of heaven” is.

Reviewing the Kingdom of Heaven

I made a number of key points that are worth repeating. First, the terms “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” mean the same thing. You will hear both terms floated around and I think a lot of people try to distinguish differences between them. For all intents and purposes, they are the same thing. Let me show you a passage where I got that from. It comes from Matthew Chapter 19. Jesus is making a point and He says, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23). And then driving that same point home further He says, “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). Jesus is talking about the same thing. That is what I wanted you to see.

The second point I made is that Matthew is the only New Testament writer that uses the term “kingdom of heaven.” If you look through your Bibles, you will see it in Matthew but not in the other writings. By the way, Matthew uses that term 32 times in his gospel. He uses it a lot. The other Gospel writers will say either “kingdom of God” or “His kingdom” or “Your kingdom” or just plain “kingdom.”

The third point I made is that the kingdom of heaven is ruled by a king -- THE KING, God Himself.

And the fourth point I made and this is a big one; Q1, the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom that has been established not only in heaven, but also where? On earth. And then I gave you Matthew 6:9-10 as a hint, a very

familiar passage of scripture, the first part of the Lord's Prayer, which you all know. Jesus prays, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10 KJV). So, when Jesus speaks of the "kingdom of heaven," He is referring to the kingdom here on earth.

The fifth point, this is Q2. True or false? When Jesus came the first time, He did NOT set up His kingdom and rule on the earth. True. That was something that His disciples thought He was going to do. But He did not do that. Instead, after His mission of redemption was complete with His death and His resurrection, He returned to heaven rather than set up the kingdom on earth.

That leads to the sixth point that I made. That is Q3. True or false? When Jesus returns, He will set up His kingdom and rule on earth. True. That happens in Revelation Chapter 20. He is going to rule and reign on the earth.

So, the kingdom of heaven came to earth when Jesus arrived on the scene. And then during His ministry He showed us many things about God – His holy character, His love, His compassion, His heart, His hatred of sin, and so forth. Many things Jesus showed us about God. He showed us God. John states in his gospel that "[Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we [saw] His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And we know from reading Revelation that in the future (future for us) that sometime out there somewhere, the kingdom of heaven will be established on earth when Jesus returns and reigns for 1000 years (Revelation 20:4).

The Kingdom of Heaven In the Church Age

But the question is, what about this "in-between" period that we are living in right now? This is Q4. Take a look at your biblical timeline [a class handout]. I asked the question, the period of time between Jesus's first coming (covered in the Gospels) and His second coming (covered in the

book of Revelation) is known as WHAT? The "Church Age." This is one of the points I made before.

So, the kingdom of heaven on earth... it exists right now, doesn't it? We are going to talk more about that this morning as we go through three more of the "kingdom of heaven" parables.

This [slide] depicts something about Old Testament prophecy. It shows an Old Testament prophet. He is standing out there in eastern Colorado and he is looking toward the mountains. The mountain range, all the mountains look like they are about the same location, the same distance away. But in reality, some mountains are a little closer than others. Some mountains are a lot further away than others. But [standing in eastern Colorado] you cannot really tell that from your vantage point out there. So, the period of time we call the Church Age was not foreseen by the Old Testament prophets. They foresaw the first coming of the Messiah (who we know to be Jesus). You will see prophecies in the Old Testament about His birth in Bethlehem and about Him being born of a virgin; about many of the things that the Messiah would do – His preaching, His miracles, healing, signs and wonders. Isaiah even talks about His rejection and suffering, and death. And then they foresaw His second coming and about how He will reign on the earth and defeat all of Israel's enemies and so forth and so on. They even foresaw final judgment, which comes later after that. If you read the Old Testament, they will refer to the judgment as the "day of the LORD." Many of the prophets talk about that. However, they did NOT foresee the period we are living in now, which is in between these two events, which we call the Church Age. So, they saw the first and second coming of the Messiah as being one event (in time) sort of running together. That is how they saw it from their vantage point (in the Old Testament). But now that we are living here in the year 2025, we know that these are two different events separated by some gap of time.

The "kingdom of heaven" is here on earth right now. This is what I want you to see. It exists through believers in Jesus Christ who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Our mission as the Church, as the living body of

believers, as we await the return of our Lord, is to carry out the Great Commission. That is our mission, isn't it? To bring people into the kingdom, to make disciples of all nations.

The eight "kingdom of heaven" parables we are going to see in Matthew 13, reveal mysteries about the Church Age, about God's kingdom here on earth that the people living in Jesus's day would not have been aware of. Why not? Because the Old Testament prophets did not talk about it.

A Review of the Parable of the Soils

The first parable we looked at last time was the Parable of the Soils (sometimes called the Parable of the Sower). In that parable Jesus revealed that during this period that we are living in, the Church Age, that the Gospel message is being preached faithfully. We see that, don't we? But the results will vary depending on people's hearts and their willingness to receive the Good News that Jesus offers. Some people are receptive while many are not. That is what that whole parable was talking about. It was talking about the different kinds of soils which represents people's hearts.

So, that brings us to Q5. *[I listed several statements and asked to check which statement(s) were true].* Not everyone who hears the gospel will believe, will they? That is kind of obvious. So, it is not that one. You don't check that one. In the kingdom of heaven there are many people who respond eagerly to the Gospel, but that does not necessarily equate to true belief. We saw that in the Parable of the Soils. So, it is not that one. Some grow to maturity and are productive for the kingdom while others (that are true believers) do not grow, they do not mature, or if they do, it is very gradual. There are a lot of people that fall into that category. So, not all who believe will be productive. That was another thing that came out in the parable. So, those three [statements] do not apply. Frankly, it is often quite difficult to tell whether a person is indeed saved, redeemed, sanctified, a citizen of the kingdom of heaven or not. So then, the correct

answer to Q5 is the last statement – it is often difficult to tell who is part of the kingdom. We are not the final judges, are we?

The Wheat and the Tares (Weeds)

That is a great segue into the next parable we are going to talk about, which is, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. If you have the King James Version it says, "tares." We would say "weeds" today.

[At this point I passed out the contents of my Christian Box – 64 Crayola crayons, each marked with the name of different "Christian" organizations, denominations or prominent church figures.]

I have done this exercise before and I really think it fits with the next parable we are going to be looking at. It drives home this point I am trying to make about the difficulty in distinguishing a true believer apart from an unbeliever. In the Christian Box, you have all these people; every one of them are individuals or groups that claim to be "Christian." They claim to be part of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Some of them you could say, "Well, yes, they appear to be Christian." Some of them you might scratch your head and say, "I never heard of them before. I don't know." Others you will say, "Definitely not. They are not Christians. They are just pretenders." Some of them you really cannot tell. So, when I did this exercise originally the whole point of it was, how DO you tell whether someone is indeed a Christian or not? And the answer is, what do they say about Jesus? Is He the Son of God? Is He the Savior? Do they talk about the Gospel or do they talk about other things (like health and wealth and politics and social issues)? So that is how you tell whether they really are truly Christian or not – what do they say about Jesus?

Let's get into the parable here, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Weeds).

He [Jesus] put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So, when the plants came up

and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So, the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn"' (Matthew 13:24-30).

Jesus Explains the Parable

Now here is where I pulled the rug out from under you all. I have to admit this was kind of devious on my part because the questions I am going to ask you, Questions 6 thru 9, actually come from a passage that I did not give you. The first parable that Jesus told, the Parable of the Soils, the disciples later came to Jesus and said, "Hey, we don't understand. Can you explain that parable to us?" So, He did. There was a long explanation about it. Well, the same thing happens with this parable. This parable seems pretty straightforward, but the disciples are confused. So, later that day, they get with Jesus in the house and they say, "Hey, Jesus, can you explain this parable to us?" And those are the verses I am going to read to you now, which I did not give you. But they give you the answers to Questions 6 thru 9. I did not want to give it all away and make it too easy for you. I wanted you to struggle with the questions and then I would give you the answers from this passage. Beginning in v 36, Jesus explains the parable...

Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom [true believers]. The weeds are the sons of the evil one [unbelievers]" (Matthew 13:36-38).

That seems pretty straightforward, right?

“...and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:39-43).

OK, so now you have heard Jesus’s explanation. It should be easy to answer Questions 6 thru 9 (now that you have struggled with them). Q6 asks, according to Jesus in this parable, who is it that sows the seeds that produce weeds? Satan. Now, there may be human agents (like false teachers) who will teach untruth. They are certainly tools of the devil, but it is Satan himself who sneaks in at night and sows the weeds among the wheat. He is the one responsible for sowing the bad seed.

Wheat and Weeds Look a Lot Alike (Temporarily)

So, now you have the wheat and the tares, the weeds, growing together in the same field (in the world). Q7 asks, True or false? In this parable, the wheat and the weeds look a lot alike. This is a tricky question. So, true. Early on it is hard to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds because they look a lot alike. But then later as they grow to full maturity, the wheat distinguishes itself from the weeds, doesn’t it?

Let me read for you John MacArthur’s explanation. He is talking about [weeds] specifically in Israel. He says that “[the weeds] here are probably damel [which rhymes with camel]. This is a type of weed that can hardly be distinguished from wheat until the head [of the wheat] matures. In agricultural settings, sowing damel in someone else’s wheat field was a way for enemies to destroy someone’s livelihood.” So, this actually happened. People were actually sabotaging people’s crops. So, that was a particular kind of a weed. And especially early on it looks just like the

wheat. It looked the same. But then the wheat gets the head on it that distinguishes itself and the weeds do not. Then you can tell them apart. So, the answer is true and false depending on when...

I will admit it was a very tricky question.

This parable illustrates the importance of spiritual growth. In the sermon today he talked about the danger of being misled by false teachings. We do not want that to happen. We want to grow spiritually so that we are not misled. It is vital that we be able to identify truth from false teachings. Our world is being inundated with every kind of cult and new age religion. Many of them copy elements from Christianity. Their problem is that they fail to teach Jesus as God's ONLY Son and that He is the ONLY way to heaven. They teach everything else around the prosperity gospel or whatever. So then, these false religions and false teachers need to be avoided. That really shows you how important it is to grow in your faith so you are not misled.

The Harvest and Final Judgment

Q8, in this parable, when do the wheat and the weeds get systematically separated out? At the harvest. That is what Jesus just talked about. The picture of the harvest reminds us that there is coming a final day of judgment when true believers and false deceivers (religious imposters) are going to get separated out. There WILL be a day of reckoning. The Lord Himself will take out His sickle and separate the weeds from the wheat. True believers will be harvested for an eternity with the LORD while those who reject the truth of the Gospel (who are not true believers but pretenders) will be harvested for destruction.

Notice that the agents of God's judgment, the ones who will determine all that, that task is assigned to the angels. Now Jesus is the ultimate authority, but the angels are doing His bidding in this process – not the church and not people.

Q9 asks, True or false? ALL those who claim to be part of the kingdom of heaven (who call themselves "Christians") are truly saved. False.

Last time we met I quoted from Matthew Chapter 7 – what I called “the scariest passage in the Bible.” This is what Jesus is teaching in that passage and it drives home the point I am trying to make here. He says,

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day [Judgment Day] many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Wow! That is a scary passage! But there is coming that day of judgment when this will happen. And there are a lot of people who claim to be part of the kingdom of heaven who will not make it because they are not really followers of Jesus. It is not ours to judge. God is the Judge of that.

There is a lot of deception and false teaching going on in our world today. For every legitimate Christian ministry on television and the internet, there is at least one imposter. You must be discerning as you read and hear and watch. And by the way, the same principle of discernment must be applied even in the local church, even inside our church buildings. After all (I am going to say something that may sound radical) -- not all church members and Sunday School workers are Christians, though they claim to be. Jesus clearly teaches that in the last days (I believe we are in the last days) there will be deceivers among us!

[Our class had a lengthy discussion about some of the other belief systems they had been exposed to]

The Mustard Seed

The next parable is a short one, the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The people in Jesus’ day would have really understood this a lot better than we do, being the agricultural society that they were. The Common Black Mustard Seed is a seed about 1/20th of an inch in diameter, the size of a

pin. It produces a plant that can grow 10 to 12 feet high with a stem the size of a man's arm. The Mustard plant is so large that it is commonly referred to as the Mustard tree (it is actually a plant). Let's read these two verses...

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).

Q10 asks, in this parable a tiny seed grows eventually into a large plant. As it relates to the kingdom of heaven, this represents the growth of WHAT? [*Several class members responded "individual faith," which was one of the four choices*].

Normally when we think about growth, we think about spiritual growth (as individuals), right? But in terms of the kingdom of heaven on earth, through us Christians, the Church corporately, I believe the answer is – and I am going to defend this answer – it is the growth of Christianity, Church growth corporately.

[The reason I say this is] because it started small, didn't it? Christianity started small. It started with Jesus and His disciples, right? Just a handful of people. And then it grew. By the time Jesus left the earth there were 500 brothers that met together. There were probably many more believers than that, maybe a thousand or so. Jesus went back to the Father and then came Pentecost. And after Pentecost thousands more were added to the kingdom. First Century, Paul's ministry, many more were added.

This is from Nelson's Commentary which I thought was good. He says: "It took from Pentecost to 1900 for Christians to number 2.5 percent of the world's population. From 1900 to 1970 that number doubled to 5 percent. In the next 20 years [so by 1990] it doubled to 10 percent. There is a demographic explosion of Christendom taking place today, especially in Third World countries."

Do you see what is happening? The Church (the Christian movement) is growing exponentially in numbers. The primary growth of Christianity today is in the African countries and in South America and Central America; and then in some parts of Asia you can also see Christianity growing by leaps and bounds.

The growth of Christianity that we see in the world does not mean that the answer to Q10 could not also refer to growing in your faith. But I think the main application when Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven here on earth is the growth of the church in number of believers. I think this is the point Jesus is emphasizing in this parable. So that is where I am coming from.

[One class member said that we start out as brand-new Christians with just a small amount of faith (tiny seed). We then grow (mature spiritually). This in turn helps others around us to grow. In that way our small amount of faith at the beginning over time can produce significant spiritual growth in us and in the people around us. I thought this was a good observation and acknowledged that it is another way of looking at this parable.]

Is Bigger Necessarily Better?

I thought that Q11 was an interesting question. It says: "The mustard plant becomes so large that birds settle in its branches. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?" So, is that a good thing or a bad thing? *[Several class members commented that this was a good thing].*

Well does Jesus actually say that this is a good thing? He just makes an observation that the plant grows so big that the birds can settle in its branches. Now, this can be a good thing. If you look at it as one's own spiritual growth, obviously that is a good thing. We are growing spiritually. If you look at it as church growth, that also is a good thing. More and more people are coming to Christ. Now you have churches all over the world. You have the Bible is being translated into all these languages and people coming to faith. That is a good thing. Twenty percent plus of the world's population is Christian (or claims to be). That is a good thing.

On the other hand, it could be bad in this sense – with great growth come large organizations, big churches, large programs; these are often sustained by human effort (rather than by the power of the Holy Spirit). A lot of people come to these churches that are not saved and they feel right at home – just like those birds in the branches of the mustard plant. No problem. There is no pressure on them. So, that could be bad in a sense because even the people who are not saved really do not get convicted. They do not get confronted about their salvation. They may end up going to hell because nobody ever takes the time to ask them what they believe about Jesus. So, bigger is not necessarily better! Jesus does not really give a commentary whether it is good or bad. Just that it is bigger. I just thought it was something to think about.

The Leaven

Let's go to the last parable. It is just a one verse parable. It is the parable of the leaven. Have any of you ever used leaven (yeast) in your baking?

Not only does Jesus say that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. He also compares it to leaven, or yeast. The women in that day would have certainly related to Jesus' illustration of the yeast.

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matthew 13:33).

There we go. There is the parable.

Q12, in other passages in the Bible leaven represents SIN. However, in this parable leaven represents something that is good. What is leaven as it relates to the kingdom of heaven? We have talked about growth. What is it that causes the church to grow? It is the Holy Spirit, the power of God. That is what caused the church to grow from Pentecost on, isn't it? Now, evangelism is a part of that. The Great Commission is our mission. But ultimately the power within is the power of God. That causes the growth, right? It is the power of God that changes lives – the Holy Spirit. He causes

the Church to grow in both numbers (liked we talked about before) but also spiritually (individually).

Q13 asks, True or false? A small amount of yeast in dough can make a big impact on it. True. A small amount of yeast makes the dough rise naturally. In these last two parables we saw both the mustard seed and the leaven. Both start out small, just a little bit. Both are placed by human hands and then the work is done hidden away. In the case of the mustard seed the work was done in the ground. In the case of the yeast the work happens inside the dough. You cannot see it working but you see the end result. The growth is gradual and the end results are God's design.

Jesus Speaking in Parables

These next two verses are verses that people often just read right on past because they are in a hurry to get to the next parable. I wanted us to hear what these verses say.

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, He said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:34-35).

Q14 asks, these verses tell us that Jesus spoke in parables to fulfill prophecy, but also WHAT? "I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." There is your hint. Jesus reveals truths not previously revealed. They have been hidden since the foundation of the world. Jesus is revealing truths that His audience would not have been aware of. Jesus is now going to reveal things about the "kingdom of heaven" that were not previously known. The parables emphasize a spiritual truth. His kingdom of heaven parables – this is what I need you to hear – are unlocking the mystery of the Church Age which the Old Testament did not speak about. So, although we are living all of this out in our day, it would have been something new for the people of Jesus's day.

So, that is what I wanted you to see as we go through the kingdom of heaven parables.

Application

The Wheat and the Tares: Believers and unbelievers co-exist side by side in the world (and often side by side in the church). They often look a lot alike and it can be difficult to distinguish between them.

Not all who claim to be Christians are truly saved.

It is not our responsibility as believers in Jesus to judge people in the world. That is our duty. Our responsibility is to present the Gospel message to all who will listen and then to be a godly influence to those we are around.

The Mustard Seed: Jesus's Church started out small and continues to grow exponentially today into all corners of the world.

The Leaven: The dynamic growth of the Church and the influence of the Gospel in the world are directly attributed to the power of God (certainly through evangelism), the working of the Holy Spirit here on earth.