
THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN EXPLAINED THROUGH THE PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13

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INTRODUCTION

Matthew 3:2 ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The Kingdom of Heaven is neither a kingdom nor is it heaven. Heaven can quite easily be defined in such a way as to make it nearly equivalent to the term kingdom of heaven. Heaven, however, in the way we normally think of it, i.e. that place we go after death, is not what Christ is talking about here. Rather the two terms combined form a concept which is perfectly expressed by Christ Himself in His words to Pilate. "You say rightly I am a king . . ." BUT "My kingdom is not of this world . . .".

With the first term "Kingdom" Christ affirms His right and inheritance to rule (see Psalm 2). With the second term "Heaven," He makes it clear that this rule will have nothing in common with the political powers of this earth, nor will it consist of earthly boundaries, but will instead be accomplished in the spiritual realm.

The Jews of Jesus day as many of you well know believed that when the Messiah came he would create "the Kingdom." They believed it would be physical, political, glorious, and mighty. Jesus takes the word which was the core of their belief, "kingdom" and uses it to describe everything that was the opposite of their dreams but the truth of what He came to do and how He would accomplish it.

If we come as the Pharisees looking to be exalted in the kingdom of God before the kingdoms of this world, we will find Christ's version of the kingdom very confusing. But if we come with broken hearts, confessing our sins, we will find God's kingdom enfolding us in the Love of Christ, proclaiming the forgiveness of our sins and peace with God.

Let us take also our dreams and see how they compare to Jesus description of "His Kingdom" throughout the 13th chapter of Matthew.

MATTHEW 13:31-32

³¹ 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. ³² 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."

In this parable Jesus wishes us to learn that despite appearance His Kingdom will grow and become great.

There is no need to get sidetracked over the question of the meaning of the birds. When we stick to the meaning above the birds show us just how strong and large the mustard seed grows, namely so that its branches will support even the birds of the air. If Christ meant the birds to be anything more than a simple demonstration of the size of the mustard plant there is no hint of it anywhere in the text or the context. Thus

such ideas are merely speculation, which at their best distract from Christ's main point and at their worst are an addition to Christ's word.

Many make another mistake with this parable pointing to the largeness of "Christianity" on this earth as the fulfillment of this parable. Such thinking is contrary to the very point Christ wishes us to learn. There is no generation of true Christians who have not sighed within themselves, thinking the forces arrayed against them are too great. Thinking, the newest generation is too worldly, thinking that no one wants to listen to the word anymore.

The kingdom of our Lord always appears small, in power, in numbers, in ability, in strength, in all things by which men measure. It is insignificant in the thinking of men. And yet it becomes greater than all the things of men, not ever through earthly sight, but God knows the truth.

Do we dream of a church, a synod, a pastor who/which is large and glorious? Do we become discouraged by the apparent smallness of our work? Let us rather dream and search for the "mustard seed" no matter its appearance. And rejoice in the largeness of Christ's forgiveness.

MATTHEW 13:33

³³ 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."

Perhaps it would be better to translate that last phrase "until all the dough was raised." I personally in the past always thought only of the spreading of the yeast, but the words here talk not just about how the yeast spreads, but the fact that it causes the bread to rise as well.

Like the parable of the mustard seed, Christ pictures for us something that seems too small to be of significance and yet accomplish great things. There is however one key difference between this parable and the mustard seed. Whereas the mustard seed emphasis how the kingdom will become great of itself, the yeast parable illustrates that it will also affect the world around it. Wherever the true kingdom of Christ is present it will affect change.

There may be some argument over the meaning of the dough and the three measures. Christ Himself never gives even the slightest indication as to the exact meaning of the dough or the "three measures". Thus we ought to apply the parable in general, and simply say that wherever the Kingdom is present it will affect change. If it is present in my heart it will change me, if it is present in my nation it will change my nation, if it is present in the world it will change the world.

Never mind that we cannot see, and often cannot measure this change. If you were to sit and stare at a loaf of bread, the activity of the yeast will not be evident to your eyes. Yet very slowly over a much longer period of time the dough will change.

So too we need not worry. We need not carefully watch and precisely measure every little sin of ourselves or others in an attempt to see the rising yeast, in an attempt to make sure the Gospel is active. It is enough simply to preach God's word to ourselves and others and know that there in the preaching of His word is the work of God's kingdom. And there God WILL change us through His forgiveness.

MATTHEW 13:44-46

⁴⁴ "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.

There are some who go looking and some who stumble upon it, but in either case there are some who understand the value of God's kingdom and consider it well worth the sacrifice to give up all else for this one treasure.

Jesus is no doubt building here on His previous parables. Whereas the kingdom looks small and unassuming it is full of power. Whereas it may seem as insignificant as a mustard seed, its true worth is beyond anything else on this earth.

It is an easy thing in our minds to condemn those who put riches, and fortunes above God's kingdom. It is a much harder thing to practice it in our lives. But even when we might do this, we have still not come to understand the worth of Christ's kingdom as He portrays it here. To forsake the material for the sake of Christ, is not just putting money and fame second to God's kingdom, but also even family, friends, love and marriage, for even these things as precious as they may be do not exceed to the same heights as the treasure of God's kingdom.

Yet when we know that within ourselves we do not treasure the kingdom in this manner, when we know that we fail to rejoice in His riches, we do not, as is the manner of some, need to attempt all manners of "godly" works or self punishment or inner exercise to create such joy in our hearts. Rather we acknowledge that we are so sinful that we do not even understand what a treasure God's word is and we simply are glad to hear that treasure remind us, "Christ died even for this sin."

MATTHEW 13:47-49

⁴⁷ " Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, ⁴⁸ "which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just,

This parable is very similar to that of the tares in which Jesus reminds us it is not our duty to judge our brothers in the faith but only to look at our own heart.

It is significant that Jesus never indicates the fish are all a part of the kingdom, but merely that they are brought together by the kingdom. We can see even in our life how the preaching of the Word brings together many different people. People of different color to be sure, but also people of different character, people of different interest, people of different station, people of different views, and whatever else a man may use to classify and differentiate people is included in Jesus many different "kinds". There are some types of nets that are made to catch only certain types of fish, but the net Jesus speaks of here gathers together everything in its path no matter any distinction that may exist.

So it is that Jesus would have us do also in our kingdom work. To be sure the work of the kingdom and the preaching of the word will bring in many different kinds, even many hypocrites with the believers. But what is that to us? The Lord leaves the job of sorting the fish to the angels at the end of the day, our job is to simply catch whomever we can.

And what a wonderful thing it is that it is God who judges and not we. For if it were left to us, who among us would not be forced to condemn ourselves as well? Yet as John so beautifully puts it, "For if our heart

condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." (1 John 3:20) and what does God say, "and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

MATTHEW 13:52

⁵² Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure *things* new and old."

To what shall I compare the kingdom of heaven?

In this last parable of Matthew 13 after having taught us the true nature of the kingdom, Christ encourages those who understand not to get bogged down in a mere repetition of the old things but to find new ways of expressing the same truths. This can certainly be the case of a pastor. Some men may graduate from seminary and considered that they have well learned God's word. Then they might spend the rest of their lives merely repeating the same phrases and metaphors which they had learned so long ago. The same may be true of members who learn one phrase and keep repeating it like a parrot without reference to context or situation, and without understanding.

The Lord instead counsels three things:

1 – "every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven" first comes good scriptural grounding. The things of God and these truths concerning the kingdom are not the things that are "new" but only how they are expressed.

2 – "brings things new" - thus we should not get caught up in the old, and stuck on the same phrases, but learn to express God's eternal truth in new ways, and according to new circumstances, and with new pictures and metaphors and even stories that help our members understand the same truths.

3 – "and old" – thus even as we learn new ways of speaking God's truth, we never despise the old and consider it left over debris from a dead era. But instead we treasure it as we do the new and learn from both.

First we learn what sinners we are. Second we are astounded to find that God has declared us His children anyway. Third we grow in our ability to share this with all men, even making use of some of our own parables to describe the wonderful love of God.