



The Parables of Jesus
The Parables of the Present Kingdom, Part 1
The Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)
The Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)
The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)
The Leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21)

In Luke 7:19, John the Baptist sends messengers to the Lord Jesus asking him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” It shouldn’t be that much of a surprise that he should ask such a thing, for after all, he has to send messengers to Jesus because he was in prison. Certainly, this was not the way it was supposed to be! The coming of the kingdom, the coming of the Messiah wasn’t expected to bring with it imprisonment and persecution but glory. If this was the kingdom then it surely left a lot to be desired if compared to the common expectation of the kingdom of God. The nature of the kingdom was very different than what was anticipated. As it was, it seemed ineffective, unimpressive, and woefully short of the glory that many thought would come with it. Could this Jesus really be the one who has come to bring the kingdom of God?

And yet, Jesus’ response to the messengers sent by John the Baptist was certainly instructive. Jesus doesn’t simply answer them with a “yes” or a “no.” Some incorrectly argue that the vagueness of Jesus’ response speaks to the postponement of the kingdom. That, in fact, He came bringing the kingdom but because His own people rejected him, He postponed the kingdom to some future time. However, this doesn’t speak to the “postponement” of the kingdom but to the radically different nature of the kingdom. Jesus’ response to the messengers was, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

Jesus gives evidence of the fact that He has come in fulfillment of Old Testament promise. These miracles that He cites as an answer to John the Baptist were those very miracles that Isaiah had prophesied would come about in the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom. Isaiah 29:18 says, “In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.” Isaiah 35:5-6 say, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” And then, of course, Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”

It’s not surprising then, however, that John the Baptist asked the question. Isaiah had proclaimed “liberty to the captives” and yet, here he was imprisoned on account of the very one who came proclaiming liberty! Ironic. This was a very real concern and troubling thing for the followers of Christ.

These four parables all serve to give comfort and encouragement in the context of a kingdom that doesn’t look like had been expected. These four parables, along with the two that will be covered next study, The Parable of the Treasure and The Parable of the Pearl, emphasize the present or inaugurated kingdom. But these four specifically address doubts concerning

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Jesus' announcement and proclamation that the kingdom has come. These four parables DO NOT teach that the kingdom has come in its fullness. The term "present kingdom" or the acknowledgement that the kingdom has come in Jesus Christ does not imply that there is nothing yet to come. It does not deny the reality of the fullness of the kingdom that still awaits those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. These parables do not speak to an already consummated kingdom. In fact, this is part of the contrast. This is part of the issue. Why does the kingdom look the way that it looks? Two reasons: 1) There was a misconception of the nature of the kingdom; and 2) The kingdom, while it has come, has been inaugurated and not yet consummated. This distinction is part of the confusion that Jesus addresses in these very parables. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has already come. It has been inaugurated. And yet, it is not as it will be. It has not fully come in its consummated state. There is yet more to come.

As one would find in their reading of the parables, The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds, The Parable of the Mustard Seed, and the Parable of the Leaven are all found in the Gospel of Matthew. The Wheat and the Weeds, however, is only found in Matthew while The Mustard Seed is found in Mark, as well as in Luke along with The Parable of the Leaven. The Parable of The Growing Seed is the only one not found in Matthew and is only found in Mark's gospel. The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds is a double-indirect narrative parable with a developed plot while the remaining three are extended similes. While the contexts of the gospels may be different, the intent of these parables remain consistent. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we will look mainly at the Matthean context for The Wheat and Weeds, The Mustard Seed, and The Leaven and of course, in Mark, for The Growing Seed.

A good and proper understanding of the four parables in this study can be

enhanced by taking them together and thinking in terms of the reality of the present kingdom, the growth of that kingdom as pictured in the parables, and the judgment that still awaits.

THIS PRESENT KINGDOM

Just before Matthew 13 where we find the bulk of the parables under observation in this lesson, Jesus says, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). People had asked concerning Jesus, "Can this be the Son of David" (Matthew 12:23)? They had asked that because Jesus had just healed the demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute. But the Pharisees responded, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (Matthew 12:24). So the choice before the people was (is) clear. Either Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit of God or by Beelzebul. If He did so by the Spirit of God, then the "kingdom has come upon you." The question of the kingdom was not whether it was coming or not but if, in fact, it had come in Jesus Christ. For the most part, the Jews of the day wouldn't have denied the reality of the coming kingdom of God; they anticipated that reality. But the question was: Was Jesus the anticipated Messiah and did He bring the kingdom? The New Testament, unequivocally, affirms that He was and He did. Yet, again, it's more complex than simply saying, "It is here." Understanding of the kingdom of God would have to be expanded. People would have to learn and understand that what was (is) in their midst as the kingdom was not yet fully realized. There would be both wheat and weeds in their midst. The kingdom might look insignificant and small. This would require some significant changes in understanding. But as Jesus says

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beginning Matthew 13:24, “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.” The point Jesus is making is that the time for final judgment, the separation of the “wheat” and “weeds,” has not yet come. It is not at present for “lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them” (Matt. 13:29). So for now, existing, coinciding, and living in the midst of one another will be both the “wheat” and the “weeds.”

By far, the most common interpretation of this parable is that this, the kingdom of heaven, is analogous to the church. That is to say, that Jesus is preparing His people for the reality that within the church there will be both “wheat” and “weeds.” There will be those who act as sheep but are really wolves in sheep’s clothing. This is the distinction between what has been called the “visible” and “invisible” church. This, of course, would correspond to Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:6, “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” Jesus is encouraging those who are asking the question, “what do we do with these people who are weeds?” Jesus is simply saying that this is the way it is going to be at this time. Don’t let that be a discouragement. That doesn’t mean that the kingdom hasn’t come. “Let both grow together” (Matt. 13:30) and then at harvest time Jesus will take care of it.

However, others argue for a broader interpretation of the “kingdom of heaven” based on what Jesus says in verse 38, “The field is the world.” This has led some to argue that the church is not in view here but the world as a whole. They are not arguing that it is not a reality that there are sheep and wolves within the life of the church; they would affirm that, yet simply, that this is not what the parable is aiming at. Instead, Jesus would be here preparing his people (this effect is the same) for what the

WORLD looks like during this stage of the present kingdom (the presence of the kingdom is not affected in this interpretation either). *In the world, even though the kingdom has come, there will still be good and evil.* Jesus is here addressing the very common objection of today that many have to God Himself, “if God is good, if God is all-powerful, then why is there still evil in the world?”

In the end, the result and application of these two interpretations are very similar. Snodgrass says on page 212 of *Stories with Intent*, “Its primary teaching is that the kingdom is present despite the presence of evil and that evil will be dealt with at the judgment.” Both interpretations could agree to this statement. The discussion or debate would come in answer to “where does this exist?” It seems that the discussion revolves around the question of contrasts or where that contrast exists. It could be summed up like this: Does the good seed and bad seed correspond to sheep and wolves within the midst of the church or do they correspond to good and evil in the world? While both contrasts are present in the Scripture, it seems that the broader view fits the context of this parable more naturally. But again, at the end of the day, when it comes to application and the point of the parable, this seems to be a nuance rather than a determinative issue. Moreover, the same applications can be drawn with the more specific interpretation from the broader.

The people of God of today, just like those in Jesus’ time, can take great comfort and encouragement knowing that things are going just like God planned. The kingdom, at this stage, looks just like it is supposed to look! Jesus does reign.

THE GROWTH OF THE KINGDOM

In all these parables the theme of growth is apparent. Even in The Wheat and the Weeds, even though both the wheat and

the weeds are growing, nonetheless, growth is occurring. Clearly in The Growing Seed, the Mustard Seed, and The Leaven, growth is a major theme. The Mustard Seed and The Leaven are, as Snodgrass calls them, twin parables, but not identical. They are more like fraternal twins. They both have the same point and purpose but Jesus used different analogies to get his point across.

Whether it is like a mustard seed that starts off so very small and yet grows into a tree into which even birds take refuge or like leaven, when introduced, infects and affects the whole mix, so is the kingdom of heaven. Again, it may look as if it has begun in humble beginnings, it may look as if there is not much to it, it may look like only a small group of people have received it, but it will grow! Many have been reluctant to see the idea of growth in the kingdom of God. But this would depend on how one defines the kingdom of God. If it is defined simply as God, in the person of Jesus Christ, coming as king in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy then certainly there is no growth to that reality. However, if one has a much broader and holistic view of the kingdom of God, then the idea of growth shouldn't be unusual but rather expected. If one defines the kingdom of God as God's people, in God's place, under God's rule, then growth certainly should take place as the gospel goes forth. This is what God's people are praying for when they say, "may Your kingdom advance."

The kingdom was present in Jesus' ministry but it was, at that time, in its infancy. It began as a mustard seed. But even as that seed grows into a tree, so too, will the kingdom of God. And the humble beginnings will spread like leaven throughout the world even as Acts 1:8 proclaims, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The kingdom of God will work like leaven in a lump of flour. As Jesus said in Matthew 13:33, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in

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three measures of flour, till it was *all* leavened." The gospel will go throughout the world to the very ends of the earth. As the new song of Revelation 5:9-10 proclaims, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

While the growth of the kingdom is made clear in all these parables, The Parable of the Growing Seed recorded in Mark gives a proper understanding of that growth. The growth of the kingdom is not by the effort of man nor is it dependent upon him. In fact, this parable nowhere teaches what man is even "to do." It is describing the reality of the kingdom. There is growth in the kingdom and believers ought to affirm that reality. But as Snodgrass says, "Humans do not bring in the kingdom; they are servants of the kingdom." The man in the parable sleeps and rises and while he does what he does, the "seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (Mark 4:27-28). God's kingdom will grow and mature and do exactly as God has planned it to do. Even while there is evil in the midst of the world, even while it appears that things may not be moving in the proper direction, the kingdom will come to its full realization at the consummation of all things when the Lord returns.

JUDGMENT AND THE KINGDOM

The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds and The Parable of the Growing Seed both have judgment as an important and emphasized theme. And while there is certainly a sense in which Christ came

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dispensing both grace and judgment in His first coming, the judgment to which these parables point is that which awaits all people at the end of the age.

Both of these two parables use the language and image of harvest to speak of judgment. In The Growing Seed, Jesus says, "But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come" (Mark 4:29). Jesus here alludes to Joel 3:13, "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great." This allusion is here so that the hearer will relate the theme of judgment not to what is taking place in their midst but that which will take at "the harvest" which is "the close of the age" (Matthew 13:39). Revelation 14 also uses the imagery of harvest, "Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe'" (vss.14-15).

In The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds, not only is the imagery clear, but Jesus explains the parable in very plain language. "Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close 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" (Matt. 13:40-43).

The judgment of the wicked is meant not only as a warning, but also here as an encouragement to those who were asking the question, "what do we do with the presence of evil even though Jesus and His kingdom have already come?" This is a call for patience. It is a call to trust in the justice of God. As per the earlier discussion regarding Jesus' use of the "kingdom of heaven" and whether this parable spoke of the wheat and

weeds as being within the church or within the world, it seems that Jesus here is, Himself, relating the kingdom of heaven with the world in general for He says, "gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers" (Matthew 13:41). Again, the encouragement is this: the Lord will deal with this reality. This is not outside of His plan or control. While at this time there may be a mixture of good and evil in this world, this is not the way that it will always be!

The wicked will be judged and contrary to many of the so-called theologians of our day promoting a gospel similar to that which Richard Niebuhr described, "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross," God will judge sin and He will cast those apart from Him into the "fiery furnace" (Matt. 13:42). But there is a wonderful, final contrast meant, again, to give great encouragement, hope, and comfort to the people of God, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

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