

Parables from Matthew 13

by David Guzik

Matthew 13:31-32

The parable of the mustard seed

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."

a. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ... when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree: Some - or even most - regard this as a description of the growth and eventual dominance of the church, the kingdom community. Yet in light of both the parable itself and the context of the parables both before and after, this should be regarded as another description of corruption in the kingdom community, just as the previous parable of the wheat and the tares described (Matthew 13:24-30).

i. Adam Clarke is a good example of the majority opinion on the meaning of this parable and the one following: "Both these parables are prophetic, and were intended to show, principally, how, from very small beginnings, the Gospel of Christ should pervade all the nations of the world, and fill them with righteousness and true holiness."

b. 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: Again, many or even most regard this as a beautiful picture of the church growing so large that it provides refuge for all of the world. But this mustard seed plant has grown

unnaturally large, and it harbors birds - which, the in previous parables, were emissaries of Satan (Matthew 13:4, 13:19).

i. Becomes a tree: The mustard plant customarily never grows beyond what one would call a bush, and at its normal size be an unlikely place for bird's nests. The tree-like growth from this mustard seed describes something unnatural.

ii. "The language suggests that Jesus was thinking of the Old Testament use of the tree as an image for a great empire (see especially Ezekiel 17:23;31:3-9; Daniel 4:10-12)." (France)

iii. This was a tree, "Not in nature but in size; an excusable exaggeration in a popular discourse. . . . it serves admirably to express the thought of a growth beyond expectation. Who would expect so tiny a seed to produce such a large herb, a monster in the garden?" (Bruce)

iv. This parable accurately describes what the kingdom community became in the decades and centuries after the Christianization of the Roman Empire. In those centuries the church grew abnormally large in influence and dominion, and was a nest for much corruption. "Birds lodging in the branches most probably refers to elements of corruption which take refuge in the very shadow of Christianity." (Morgan)

v. "Close study of birds as symbols in the Old Testament and especially in the literature of later Judaism shows that birds regularly symbolize evil and even demons or Satan (cf. b. Sanhedrin, 107a; cf. Revelation 18:2)." (Carson)

Matthew 13:33

The parable of the leaven in the meal -

Another illustration of corruption in the kingdom community:

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."

- a. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven: Jesus used a surprising picture here. Many, if not most, regard this as a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God working its way through the whole world. Yet leaven is consistently used as a picture of sin and corruption (especially in the Passover narrative of Exodus 12:8, 12:15-20). Again, both the content and the context point towards this being a description of corruption in the kingdom community.
 - i. "There would be a certain shock in hearing the Kingdom of God compared to leaven." (Barclay)
 - b. Leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened: This was an unusually large amount of meal. It was much more than any normal woman would prepare, and again suggest the idea of massive or unnatural size.
 - i. "Three measures of meal would be about 40 litres, which would make enough bread for a meal for 100 people, a remarkable baking for an ordinary woman." (France)
 - c. Hid in it: The idea of hiding leaven in three measures of meal would have offended any observant Jew. This certainly isn't a picture of the church gradually influencing the whole world for good. Rather, in the context of increasing opposition to His work, Jesus announced that His kingdom community would also be threatened by corruption and impurity.
 - i. G. Campbell Morgan wrote that the leaven represents "paganizing influences" brought into the church.

Matthew 13:34-35 Jesus' teaching in parables as a fulfillment of prophecy

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world."

- a. Without a parable He did not speak to them: This does not mean that Jesus never, in His entire teaching and preaching ministry, spoke in anything other than a parable. It describes this particular season of Jesus' ministry, again in the context of increasing opposition from the Jewish leaders.
 - i. "Implying that this was Jesus' constant custom ... In short parables were an essential part of his spoken ministry." (Carson)
 - b. I will open My mouth in parables: Another reason Jesus taught about the kingdom community in parables is because the church itself was part of the things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world, and would not be revealed in fullness until later.
 - c. Kept secret from the foundation of the world: Later, Paul expresses this same idea about the church in Ephesians 3:4-11.

Matthew 13:44 The parable of the hidden treasure

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

- a. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field: The field is the world, but the man does not represent the believer, because we have nothing to buy

this treasure with. Instead, Jesus is the man who gave all that He had to buy the field.

i. "Under rabbinic law if a workman came on a treasure in a field and lifted it out, it would belong to his master, the field's owner; but here the man is careful not to life the treasure out till he has bought the field." (Carson)

ii. This parable and the one following are different in character than the previous three. The previous three parables (the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, and the leaven) each spoke of corruption in the kingdom community. These two parables speak of how highly the King values the people of His kingdom.

b. And for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field: The treasure so wonderful that Jesus would give all to purchase is the individual believer. This powerfully shows how Jesus gave everything to redeem the whole world to preserve a treasure in it, and the treasure is His people.

i. "Finding the treasure appears to be by chance. In a land as frequently ravaged as Palestine, many people doubtless buried their treasures; but ... to actually find a treasure would happen once in a thousand lifetimes. Thus the extravagance of the parable dramatizes the supreme importance of the kingdom." (Carson)

ii. "So did Jesus himself, at the utmost cost, buy the world to gain his church, which was the treasure which he desired." (Spurgeon)

iii. The believer who gives all to follow Jesus is also not a loser, but a gainer. "Some years ago a person rather eccentrically advertised for persons who had been losers by obedience to the divine command-that if any one who had lost anything through love to Christ would apply to him he would make it up. The

odd advertisement appeared for some months in one of our religious periodicals. But the oddest thing is that nobody ever answered it. I should have thought that somebody would have tried and made out a case; but nobody did. They cannot make out such a case: they are no losers by Christ." (Spurgeon)

Matthew 13:45-46

The parable of the costly pearl

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

a. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls: Again, Jesus is the buyer and the individual believer is the pearl that He sees as so valuable that He would happily give all to have it forever.

i. "To the ancient peoples, as we have just seen, a pearl was the loveliest of all possessions; that means that the Kingdom of Heaven is the loveliest thing in the world." (Barclay)

b. One pearl of great price: It seems crazy for a merchant to sell all that he had for one pearl, but for this merchant it was well worth it. That shows how much he valued this pearl of great price, and how much Jesus values His people.

Matthew 13:47-50

The parable of the dragnet

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

furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

a. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet: Jesus shows that the world will remain divided right up until the end, and the Church will not reform the world, ushering in the kingdom.

b. So it will be at the end of the age: There will be both the wicked and the just until the end of the age (as also demonstrated in the previous parable of the wheat and the tares). At that time the angels will come forth and assist the King in the work of judgment, sending some into the furnace of fire for final judgment.

i. "The reference, as in the weeds, is not primarily to a mixed church, but to the division among mankind in general which the last judgment will bring to light." (France)

Matthew 13:51-52
The disciples claim to understand Jesus' parables

Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." 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."

a. They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." We wonder if the disciples really did understand Jesus here. However, Jesus did not deny their claim to understand.

i. Assuming that the disciples did understand, they had an advantage over many among the multitudes. "The multitude went away (as most people do from sermons) never the wiser, understanding nothing of what they heard, nor caring to understand it." (Poole)

b. Every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom: Jesus said that every one who

really knows God's word both will know the old and learn the new of the kingdom. "He is not weary of the old; he is not afraid of the new." (Spurgeon)

i. Every scribe: Jesus used the term here simply to describe a teacher. "The scribes amongst the Jews were not only clerks, that were employed in writing, but teachers of the law; such a one was Ezra (Ezra 7:6)." (Poole)

ii. The main idea is that the disciples - who had just claimed to understand what Jesus taught - are now responsible to bring forth their understanding to others, as if they were distributing from the storehouse of their wisdom and understanding. This storehouse contains things new and old.

iii. "After you have been instructed by me, you have the knowledge, not only of the things you used to know, but of things you never knew before, and even the knowledge which you had before is illuminated by what I have told to you." (Barclay)

iv. "A small degree of knowledge is not sufficient for a preacher of the Gospel. The sacred writings should be his treasure, and he should properly understand them. . . . his knowledge consists in being well instructed in the things concerning the kingdom of heaven, and the art of conducting men thither." (Clarke)

v. "Ministers of the gospel should not be novices, 1 Timothy 3:6, raw and ignorant men; but men mighty in the Scriptures, well acquainted with the writings of the Old and New Testament, and the sense of them; men that have a stock of spiritual knowledge, able readily to speak a word to the weary, and to speak to men and women's particular cases and questions." (Poole)