

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like
The Kingdom Parables
Matthew 13

In the early days of railroads many objected to this fearful new technology. Some objected because it threatened their business such as those who worked on the canals. Others opposed them for safety reasons. It was believed that the human body could not withstand such high speeds. In fact, there is a letter reported to have been from Martin Van Buren, future president and then governor of New York, expressing his fear that break neck speeds of 35 mph hour would threaten human life. Although that letter has been unable to be confirmed, many doctors did believe these speeds would cause severe brain damage. It seems kind of humorous to us today when we can travel around the world faster than the speed of sound. But at the time these were strongly held expectations.

The Jews in Jesus day also had strong but wrong expectations about the kingdom of heaven. For centuries the Jews had been eagerly awaiting the coming of the kingdom. Over the years many beliefs and teachings arose about the kingdom. When Jesus arrived on the scene with John the Baptist announcing "*The kingdom of Heaven is at hand,*" the hopes of many Jews were excited. However, the kingdom they were wanting, and the kingdom Jesus was bringing were two entirely different things. His was not a kingdom of political power or military might, but it was God's rule in the hearts of men and woman as their lives were transformed by his saving grace.

In Mt. 13, right on the heels of the parable of the soils we looked at last week, Jesus tells five short parables about the nature of kingdom. His teachings here counter many of the popular misconceptions of his day, but by couching his teaching in parables, Jesus presented the truth so that only those truly seeking the kingdom would understand it. Although all of them are about the kingdom, some of the parables seem quite different, but there are also share some common themes.

Though we look back on these parables more than 2,000 years after Jesus first spoke them, and though we don't share the same expectations as did the Jews in Jesus' day, they still have much to teach us about the kingdom, for we are the kingdom, we are living the things Jesus talks about here, and we may have some wrong expectations of our own.

The five parables we look at here teach us four great truths about the kingdom of heaven. We will consider the first two this morning, and the last two next week.

I. The Kingdom will Grow.

Probably the most basic truth underlying all the kingdom parables is that the kingdom will grow. It is its very nature to grow. Even with very humble beginnings, it grows dramatically, because of this. Little is much when God is in it. This theme is emphasized in two of the simplest parables Jesus told.

These are stories about things with very small beginnings but with big endings. The parable of the mustard seed and the parable of leaven. You were given a little ziplock bag this morning. In that bag is a black mustard seed, probably the same kind of mustard seed Jesus was speaking of, and a yeast. That is if you can find it. We want this to be a living illustration of what Jesus is talking about here.

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."*

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."*

Some want to take issue with Jesus here, since we know of seeds smaller than the mustard seed, but we must remember that Jesus was talking to a crowd of 1st Century Jewish peasants, not a conference of 21st Century botanists. The black mustard seed was indeed the smallest of garden seeds the Jews might sow in their fields. It is barely visible to the naked eye. Yet it grew to be the largest of all of their garden plants, even to the size of a small tree of 12 feet in height.

Any of you who have baked homemade bread or friendship bread knows the power of yeast. Leaven was a little piece of bread kept from previous baking. Today we call it a starter. What gives leaven its power is the yeast which is a one-celled plant classified as a fungus. It feeds on starch found in the dough. It reproduces by growing a bud which breaks off into a new yeast cell, and the process continues. Yeast produces enzymes which convert starch to sugar for food. As the yeast feeds the sugar turns into alcohol, the process we call fermentation. This in turn creates gas which causes the bread to rise. As the bread is baked the heat burns off the alcohol creating even more gas and the dough rises even more. It is possible for one yeast to transform an entire batch of dough.

The only point of these two short stories is that the kingdom will grow. And grow it has. A kingdom that started with a baby born in a barn to a couple of Jewish peasants. A king who in his earthly life gathered only 12 disciples. A church begun with only 120 members in all the world. In its early days, people were added to the church thousands at a time. Then persecution came, but instead of slowing the church, it only served to spread it far and wide. The kingdom spread like a fire out of control. Paul writes in Romans 10, *"Their sound went out into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world."* Within 30 years this kingdom stretched around the Mediterranean from Egypt to Rome. Within a century it had spread throughout the entire Roman Empire.

I know we often hear statistics regarding the desperate need for missions and evangelism today, and we do need to spread the word just like they did in the early church. However, let's not

underestimate the explosive growth of the kingdom. Today the gospel has reached more than 10000 distinct people groups, though there are many more to go. The Bible has been translated into 554 languages and some portion of it have been translated into 2,932 languages.

Even today it is still the nature of the kingdom to grow, to grow in size, to grow in maturity. Brothers and sisters, the church is to grow. Son-Rise is to grow. It is not an option. It is not a choice. It is a mandate. We are to grow, spreading the kingdom by transforming the world around us.

There is no need for us to fear growth. Whether its growth its growth in size or growth in faith, we are merely doing what God has called us to do. There is no growth God cannot manage. We should not think of this growth only in terms of additions and baptisms. Just as the leaven actually transforms the loaf, it is in by individual cells transforming individual cells around them so it is in the church. The church will grow in the world around us when the truth and love of Jesus grows within us.

Friends, we are the leaven, we are the yeast. You are the mustard seed. We are to be making an impact. We are to be making a change. We are to be transforming the world around us. As with the mustard seed, growth doesn't come with big things, but with little things. Never underestimate the big impact the small thing in your life can have. Are you a leavening influence with your family? Are you the leaven with your friends at school? Are you the change agent at your work?

We should not look at this growth only in terms of size and numbers, but also in terms of maturity and individual transformation. We know from Scripture that the kingdom is God's reign in our hearts. The kingdom grows as God's rule increases in your own life. The church is to grow in size, and Christians are to grow in maturity.

Spiritual growth can seem extremely difficult at times, I know. But our Lord's point here is that if a barely visible seed can become a 12ft. tree, there's nothing God can't do in your life. This is a great message of hope. We may think we could never overcome a certain sin. We may think that we could never have enough faith to pray that much, or memorize Scripture like this person, or give sacrificially like that family does. We may think we could never do that kind of ministry. But God can take the littlest thing in your life. The least amount of faith, the smallest potential, minimal promise and do great things with it. Little is much when God is in it. Do you feel like giving up? Little is much when God is in it. Getting close to the end of your rope? Little is much when God is in it. Been burning the candle at both ends and they've both melted to where your holding it? Little is much when God is in it! That's the power of the kingdom. And if you are a Christian that kingdom is in your heart, and it's growing, and it has transforming power. There is a tiny seed in your life. Let it grow!

II. Citizens of the Kingdom Must Coexist with Enemies of the Kingdom Until Our King Returns,

The kingdom is to grow, but we should not misunderstand the nature of this growth. It does not grow by forcing itself on others. It grows by transforming others from the inside out just as the leaven transforms the dough one cell at a time. There have been some in the history of the church who have seen the promise of growth as a license to go out and forcefully impose the kingdom.

During the middle ages, the institutional church of the day sponsored several military crusades, where they invaded nations of unconverted people in an effort to make them “Christian nations.” Though a flag with a cross on it may have been flying over their captured territories, it didn't mean that Jesus was in their hearts. That was not about the kingdom of God. That was about the kingdom of men.

A couple of the parables here in Mt. 13 indicate that although the kingdom will grow, it must coexist with its enemies in this world until the very end. Not only that, but there will be enemies among our own number too. (Please read with me Mt. 13:24-30; 47-51)

24 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, 25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds[c] among the wheat and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 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?’ 28 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?’ 29 But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 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.””

47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. 48 When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The first of these parables probably does not hit us with the same impact it had on Jesus' listeners. But the disciples would have understood its significance. Newer translations use the word weeds. In my mind that creates picture of an assortment of weeds that would be obvious as soon as they sprouted. I used to wonder why the servants never noticed the weeds until later.

Older translations use the word tares. *Tare* comes from the middle ages and it means *wheat*. This is because there is a variety of weed that looks and grows just like wheat. It is a poisonous, noxious weed, but it does not become apparent that it is a weed until the real wheat matures and forms heads of wheat, and the weed does not.

This was a particular pest to ancient farmers. We have historical accounts where if someone was upset with another, they would plant this weed in their wheat as an act of revenge. The farmer can't pull

these weeds, because there is no way to distinguish the weed from the wheat . If the farmer waits until the heads start forming on the wheat to pull, the wheat is at a very tender, delicate stage and the process of weeding the field, could damage or even destroy the wheat. The best approach was to wait until harvest, and cut it all down together, and then separate the two.

Jesus gives an interpretation for this parable. The parable was spoken to the crowds, but Jesus saves the explanation for when he is alone with his disciples. The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man who is Jesus. *Son of man* is a title of Jesus which refers to his humanity, as opposed to the title Son of God, which refers to his divinity. The field is the world, and sons of the kingdom are the good seed. It is important to know these allegories because they can change from parable to parable. In the parable of the soils the field represented our hearts and the seed was the message about the kingdom. But in this parable we are the seed and the field is the world in which we live.

Sons of the kingdom is a reference to believers, Christians who have God's kingdom in their hearts. *Sons of the evil one* is a reference to non-Christians. Now in your witnessing I don't recommend that you refer to someone you are talking too as "son of the evil one." They probably won't listen to you. But Jesus is speaking of a spiritual reality. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In our sin we are separated from God and enslaved to sin. Every time we sin, we are believing Satan, the great deceiver and the father of lies. So, in a spiritual sense we are his children. But when we become Christians we are forgiven our sin, we receive the Holy Spirit, and we are adopted as children of God.

Now look back at Jesus explanation here. Where do the wheat and tares, the Christians and non-Christians live in relation to each other? They are intermingled. All mixed together. Until when, for how long? Until the harvest. When is the harvest? The end of the age. Friends, we are Christians in an unchristian world until our Lord returns. We are to coexist with ungodly people until the very end.

The unsaved of the world are not the enemy. They are not to be defeated or conquered. Who is the enemy? Jesus explains this in verses 37-43.

"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

The enemy is Satan. He is the one who has sown the seeds of lust and addiction and greed and laziness and anger and jealousy and pride in their lives. They are not the enemy, they are victims of the enemy. They are to be objects of our compassion, not our hate. Objects of our love, not our animosity. Objects of our mercy, not our condemnation. That is not our place.

I believe this parable has much to teach the church today on how we relate to, engage, and interact with the world around us. As our nation quickly turns pagan around us, how are we as Christians and as a church to respond?

Listen to words of our Lord again, *"Let them both grow together."* I don't believe it is our place to antagonize the world in any way. We have to find a balance here. On the one hand the church is to grow, it is to expand, and like the yeast in the dough, eventually work its influence throughout the entire world.

The yeast doesn't change the dough by attacking it, but by transforming it, piece by individual piece. We change the world, not by attacking it, but by transforming it, heart by individual heart. We must be careful about protests and boycotts and the like. There is a time a place for such things. When we make a stand let's make sure it is for Jesus and His truth. And we must make sure we do it in love. So much of what I see being done now is driven by anger. While there is such a thing as a righteous anger, we must remember that Jesus did not leave his church here as an instrument of his wrath, but as an instrument of his grace.

Jesus lived under a very wicked and evil system of government. Yet never once did he lead the disciples in protest. The only leaders he ever denounced were religious leaders. Paul never wrote a letter encouraging the church to boycott. Yes, Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen. As U.S. citizens we have certain rights still respected by our society, and we are called to be good stewards of everything that we have been given. And I do believe that includes the political and social opportunities we have as Americans. Jesus is the Lord of our lives, even in the voting booth.

But we must listen to Jesus' point here and be careful not to get too caught up in the culture wars, and focus more on living transformational lives. We should remember Jesus called us to be salt and light. Salt was used in Jesus day to flavor, heal, and preserve. Not to attack, condemn, or judge. Light illuminates and warms.

Listen to what the New Testament has to say to the church of the 1st Century who lived under a very wicked, corrupt, pagan system of government. Paul told the Christians on the island of Crete, *"Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men."*

Likewise, Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3,

¹³*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil,*

but living as servants of God. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

In the very next chapter, Peter adds this, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”*

It is not our place to bring about the harvest, or go about pulling up the weeds now. The result is disastrous, *“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.’”* When we treat the non-Christians as the enemy we only hurt the cause of Christ. We only harm the church, and those we love in it.

We must reach the community around us. We must grow. We must make an impact. Let the world see our hands not with fingers pointed in accusation, but hands outstretched to serve, help, love and heal. But its times like these I must remember my Savior. He died for me. He died for them. He wept over Jerusalem, can we not weep over