

Session 3 – The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven | Matthew 13:31-35

Matthew 13:31-32 | The Parable of the Mustard Seed

- This is one of three parables which Matthew labels **another parable** (v. 24, 31, 33).
 - As with the others, any application outside **the kingdom of heaven** is incidental and not driven from the Scripture.
 - Many want to make the comparison to be God's rule rather than God's Kingdom. This inevitably creates contradictions and challenges.
 - God's rule is sovereign and spiritual, His Kingdom is set in time and space. When we begin this phrase with something like "God's rule and reign in our hearts and churches is like..." then we build a post-millennial, kingdom-advancement kind of eschatology in which God's kingdom *slowly* advances itself on society, especially by the work of the church.
- In this case, **a man took** [a mustard seed] **and sowed in his field**.
 - In all the chapter, we have not had a negative view of sowing.
 - This **least of all seeds**.
 - We should note that Gideon calls himself **the least in my family** (Judges 6:15, where the Septuagint uses this same word, see also 1 Sam. 9:21 in which Saul says his family is **the least of all the families**.)
 - In these verses the emphasis is not on size but stature, showing that we need not prove the mustard seed to be the *tiniest* of all seeds.
 - This seed **becometh a tree**.
 - Some have argued that mustard does not become a tree, and thus this speaks of a *morphed* and *disfigured* kingdom that will be rejected. However, there are varieties of mustard which can grow to 35 feet tall.
 - It has also been argued that **the birds of the air** are always negative in prophecy, thus further solidifying the parable as showing the *negative nature* of the growth of the Kingdom.
 - However, the same words are used (in Greek) in Matthew 6:26 with no negative connotation.
 - The phrase is also used in Acts 10:12, where Peter is shown the formerly unclean foods, with no negative connotation of birds.
 - In Psalm 104:12 the **fowls of the heaven** are also seen in a non-negative light.
 - In order to build a negative view, one must limit insight into a minority of Biblical passages (such as Matt. 13:32 and Daniel 4:10-14).
 - In the end, it seems best to say that Jesus was teaching the multitude that "what you see is not what you get, and what you get will be sufficient for all." The crowd expected the kingdom to be *now*, Jesus was revealing that it would be *later*.

Matthew 13:33 | The Parable of the Leaven

- This is the third of three **another** parables (v. 24, 31, 33).
- **Leaven** is almost universally seen as representing corruption, but we must question this assumption.
 - In this verse, the leaven is *amoral* and could be interpreted negatively or positively.

- There is corrupting leaven in the New Testament, but it is always noted as such. See Mt. 16:6 and 11, and note in 16:12 there is a clarification that **leaven of bread** is not the issue, but rather the **doctrine of the Pharisees**. Mark 8:15 speaks of the **leaven of Herod**.
- The point of the parable is that **a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump** (1 Cor 5:6). And Jesus is teaching the Jews of that day that even though there are only a few who are faithful and prepared for the Kingdom, they can have a great influence. In Luke 13:23, the context is clear that **there are few that be saved**.
- The **Kingdom of Heaven** is not the church, but the coming theocratic Davidic Kingdom of God on earth.
- Note that Luke 13:20-21 uses the same illustration and calls it the **kingdom of God**, so making a distinction between the two kingdoms is unmerited. The concept of church as Kingdom is a replacement theology position created by the Catholic church and retained by the reformers (and one that should be rejected by those who interpret the Bible literally).

Matthew 13:34-35 | Concluding Remarks to the Matthew 13 Parables to the Multitudes

- Matthew makes a commentary of the parables, giving us two insights:
 1. That the speaking of parables was prophetic, the prophecy being found in Psalm 78:2. Psalm 78 is about the rebellion of the Jewish people but the eventual establishment of **his sanctuary** (v. 69) and the Davidic throne (v. 70) in order **to feed Jacob his people, And Israel his inheritance** (v. 71). We learn from this that the history of Israel is often prophetic (as in Ruth and Job). Bullinger notes that, "Divine history contains more than appears on the surface." (*The Companion Bible* note on Ps. 78:2).
 2. That the parables display **things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world**. If we make the parables to be "information about things which have always been known," we will miss their true meaning.
- Note that the exact point of the quote is difficult to discern, thus a version which intentionally avoids quotation marks is of best use to the student.

Examples of the dearth of teaching on these parables

- This example dismisses the sudden arrival of the Kingdom: "The idea of growth is the central teaching of this story. We must remember that in Christ's day modern ideas of development had not taken hold of the popular mind; and that most of their ideas of the coming of God's Kingdom involved something sudden, spectacular and overwhelming. Here the thought is mainly of the outward manifestations of its growth; in the twin-parable of the Leaven attention is directed to the inwardness of the *method* of growth." - G. R. H. Shafto, *The Stories of the Kingdom: A Study of the Parables of Jesus* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1922), 46.
- This example equates the Kingdom to be the church: "The professing church of God became a power to be reckoned with among the nations, but its branches sheltered all kinds of false professors and evil teachers. The birds of the air represent the hosts of evil, and these lodge in the branches of the mustard tree. It is a most graphic picture of what Christendom became throughout the course of centuries when the false church seemed to dominate the world." - H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948), 167.