
The Growth of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:24-58

Watching something grow...

Watching something develop that still has flaws...

There is a problem approaching the next set of parables. If you have been a taught Christian for any length of time, you have probably heard some teaching on these parables. I certainly have. A very important way to hear preaching is not to sit and hear it compared or contrasted to a body of doctrine or interpretation you already have. This will almost certainly lead to confusion or misunderstanding. Please, in all your listening to the preaching of the Word from this pulpit, listen to it looking at your Bibles. Have them open. Read along. As I preach along, follow. Is the preaching saying what the text says, not just what you have been taught to believe about the text. This will be of great importance as we work through these parables and the rest of Matthew as well.

Remember,

big **F** little t?

Shouldn't it be

big **TEXT** and little
framework?



The parables lend themselves to trying to carry the freight of gigantic frameworks. These are not freight trains. They are deceptively simple and complex BMW's. Don't load them up with bricks and lumber and plywood. Take them for a lovely spin along the road they are intended to carry you on. Now you can put some luggage in the trunk – that's fine. There's ample space for a couple of theological suitcases – but no more.

The Character of the Kingdom

(v.24-33)

Continuing in his discussion where we left off last week, Jesus continues to teaching parables. Verse 34 tells us that the giving of these parables is in public while the interpretation is in private. There is public teaching whose intent is to give those who believe an opportunity to understand. It also intends to keep those who do not believe, from that very same understanding.

Its Mixed Expansion

(v.24-30)

Through this parable Jesus highlights the mixed expansion of the kingdom.

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 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.' "

The story itself is clear. An enemy attempts to undermine the careful work of a farmer. He does so by intentionally sowing darnel, wheat-like weeds, in the field. The farm hands discover the problem but are instructed not to go among the fields while they are growing and when the wheat and tares are indistinguishable. Rather, wait until the harvest when the weeds are easy to pick out because they have no heads/fruit on them. At that point, the harvesters are instructed to remove the weeds first and burn them. Then, harvest the wheat and gather it into the barns.

What would the ordinary listener pick up from this story as punch line? Since the rest of the story is simply common, good farming practice, they would have seen the treachery of the enemy. What a vile thing to do – to attempt to destroy ones livelihood by diluting the value of his harvest. From Jesus' own interpretation a bit later, the main point is that the kingdom of heaven will expand but with both genuine wheat and false weeds mixed in together.

Its Slow Expansion

(v.31-33)

Then, he puts forward two parables demonstrating a different aspect of the kingdom's expansion.

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."

Both of these parables, on their face, are talking about growth and expansion. From a tiny spec to a 9ft tall tree, the mustard seed grows and spreads its branches. It becomes a place for the birds to gather. The leaven is familiar to

bread makers. A small bit of leaven in a lump of dough causes the dough to rise and expand, otherwise you get crackers.

Neither Jesus nor Matthew interprets these two parables for us. However, notice that the kingdom of heaven is like a planted seed that grows. It is like a bit of leaven that expands. So, a small bit has an enormous impact for growth and expansion over a period of time.

So this is what Jesus said in public. The sense here is that Matthew now has gone back to what Jesus was saying at the seashore. He has arranged these with the intervening discussions and interpretations on purpose. Rather than giving us a long sequence of parables, he has grouped to serve his teaching purpose.

The Change in the Kingdom (v.34-35)

Once again he highlights from the Old Testament the great change in the kingdom that is beginning to unfold.

³⁴ All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Verses 34-35 are a quote from Psalm 78. Once again, we must go back to Psalm 78 and see why Matthew is quoting this text. Is it just because there is reference to parables there? Does he see an important connection between Jesus' teaching using parables and what the whole Psalm is doing. I think so. In the time we have, let me walk you through the Psalm – read it on your own later.

- ❖ v.1-4 – Opens with a call for the people to listen to what is being taught for what is spoken in parables will reveal God's glorious deeds, His might and His wonders.
- ❖ v.5-8 – This will be done in teaching the children so that they will not rebel.
- ❖ v.9-55 – Then follows several stanzas rehearsing the history of the sin and rebellion of Israel in the face of God's good to them.
- ❖ v.56-66 – Therefore, God has utterly rejected Israel (as a nation). He has withdrawn His presence from her but will eventually rise to rout His enemies.
- ❖ v.67-72 - God has chosen David to be King and Mount Zion to be His dwelling place. He has preserved His inheritance. He will shepherd His people through One who is upright in heart and skillful in hand.

Conclusion: the kingdom (over which David's Son rules) is now a different kind of kingdom. It is not longer defined by genealogy or geography but rather by the gospel. Jesus has come as the Son of David to redeem and to rule His people. The one who comes and speaks in parables is the One who fulfills what this Psalm prophecies. This is the Lord Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven.

The Clarification of the Kingdom**(v.36-43)**

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷ He answered, "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 close of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Change in Setting**(v.36)**

Once again, Matthew changes the setting to be sure that we understand that the interpretative keys to unlock the parables were given, not to the crowds, but rather to the disciples.

The disciples ask for an interpretation of the parable of the weeds. Now, why do they ask for the interpretation of this one?

Possibly they ask for an explanation because it is the longest and most complex in this set. They might be making a connection to the parable of the sower which Jesus interpreted for them. They might be thinking that understanding this one will unlock the others. Or, they might have understood the others but not this one. Matthew does not tell us.

But since Matthew does tell us Jesus' interpretation of this one, he seems to focus on it as the key to understanding the others.

Exposition of the Parable**(v.37-43a)**

Each element in his parable is given something that it points to. The field is the world. The sower is Jesus and the good seed are the true sons of the kingdom. The enemy is the devil and the bad seed are unbelievers. The harvest is the end of the age when the angels will gather the unbelievers and cast them into everlasting fire. In an interesting switch in metaphors, believers are not harvested but rather are spoken of as shining like the sun in the kingdom.

So, the kingdom will be in the whole world. It will grow with both the true sons of God and the false sons of the devil. God's kingdom will have a mixture of false and true. But, at the end of the age, the false are removed from it and sent into eternal punishment. The true will then enjoy the fullness of what the pure and completed kingdom will be.

This establishes that the kingdom of heaven will be growing through this age. It will have within it those who are not true believers who are placed there by the enemy of God. At the end of the age, God will remove all that remains of the false out of the kingdom, leaving it comprised only of the true in the ages to come.

Charge to the Reader

(v.43b)

Once again, He closes with this charge to the disciples and to us. Remember that even among the disciples was a weed, a false one. So, through Jesus' interpretation, may we have ears to hear and hearts to understand what the kingdom is truly like.

Now, let's pause and consider the two parables of growth. We know from both the parable of the sower and the weeds that there will be mixed results in the kingdom. We will expect growth, some of which is a result of new sons of God being born into the kingdom. Some of which is a result of the devil placing his own evil sons in the kingdom. So there is a growth that is spiritually good and a growth that is spiritually evil.

It seems to me that each of parables of growth capture one aspect of this. The parable of the mustard seed speaks of the wonderful growth of the kingdom from such small and inauspicious beginnings. The birds roosting in it may have an evil connotation and are parallel to the weeds. The parable of the leaven speaks of the growth of the kingdom that has within it a leaven of sin or evil. Leaven is consistently viewed in the Bible as being bad. Every Jew and Old Testament informed Gentile would immediately hear that way. We should be careful not to push the parables too far; but we also should understand all we are intended to from them.

The Cost of the Kingdom

(v.44-50)

The next two parables are represented as being told to the disciples alone. There is no reason to think otherwise. Neither of them are interpreted by Jesus but their sense is easily understood.

Its Great Value

(v.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.

Both of these parables speak of the great value of what is in the kingdom. In the first, the kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. Someone finds it and hides it. He is so happy that he sells everything he has to obtain the field and thus the treasure. In the second, a merchant, in the midst of seeking fine pearls, finds one of enormous worth. He then sells everything he has in order to obtain it.

So, what do we have here?

Some have said that the treasure and the pearl is Jesus. The man who buys the field and the merchant who buys the pearl are the believer. In the kingdom, a person must be willing to give up everything in order to be able to obtain Christ. It seems to me that the problem with this is that it isn't what Jesus said – the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure and a sought pearl.

Some have said that the treasure and the pearl are the true believers in the world. God is the one who has given up everything and paid the full price in

order to purchase those on whom He has set His heart and therefore He values.

Both of these seem to fit the details well, but it seems to me that the second of these is more in line with the flow of the parables. The parables tend to focus on what God is doing. The field in all of the parables is the world. What is sown or found in the field tends to be those who hear and heed the message of the kingdom of heaven. This duet of parables sings the immeasurable love of God who gave all He had to purchase what He prized, His people.

Its Mixed Variety

(v.47-50)

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 close 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.

This final parable points to the mixed variety within the kingdom until it is sorted out at the end. In a very familiar analogy, Jesus points to the haul that the fishermen make with their nets. There are both good and bad fish brought in. The good are separated out and the rest thrown away. At the end of the age, there will be a time when God will separate the evil from the righteous. The evil will be thrown into the fiery furnace of hell where there will be unimaginable suffering.

This parable is to serve as a warning to many who have attached themselves to the church or identified themselves with Christendom. There will come a day when they will be identified as lost and will be cast into hell. So, for all of us, are we carefully considering our relationship with Christ. Have we truly repented of our sins and trusted in Christ to save, believing His Word and bowing to His rule.

The Challenge of the Kingdom

(v.51-56)

Matthew closes this section by pointing to the challenges of the kingdom. The kingdom challenges people to understand and to believe.

Its Responsibility

(v.51-52)

⁵¹ "Have you understood all these things?" They said to him, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

What do you think? Yes, they understood everything Jesus is saying? Jesus seems to affirm that they have understood what they could at the moment. But he also encourages them to become those who are trained for service the kingdom. Matthew is doing in his gospel writing what Jesus set before him here. As a scribe, a student who writes, he and all the disciples are to go to the treasure of Christ and His kingdom and to unpack both the new and the old.

Notice how he puts the new first. This is an awkward way to talk, even in English. It is much more natural to say, "the old, then the new." So, it is said and written to get our attention. The well taught student in the kingdom knows how to unpack the treasures of kingdom from the front (new) towards the back (old). The treasures of the old will be seen to be larger and of more value as they seen

in the light of the new. How much greater is our appreciation of David, Solomon, Israel's kingdom, Jerusalem, the temple when seen in the light of Jesus, the new covenant, the heavenly Mt. Zion and God's people as the dwelling place of God? See, the old emerges out of the shadows and is more fully lit and more gloriously seen in the full brightness of the light of Christ.

Its Response

(v.53-56)

⁵³ And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, ⁵⁴ and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." ⁵⁸ And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

Matthew now brings us full circle. Jesus' family does not understand his words and work (Matthew 12:46-49). Now His words and works are denied because he is identified with His family. How could He be so wise and knowledgeable of God's word and ways when He is nothing but a carpenter's son? Aren't his family members right over there? How does He make these extravagant claims?

So they are offended at Him. This being offended is a symptom of unbelief. So God's Spirit-filled messenger and heaven-sent prophet who may receive some honor where He is unknown is rejected where He is known best.

A final condemnation then – because of their unbelief, Jesus did not do many miracles in his own hometown.

Reflect and Respond

What do we make of the fact that Jesus does some teaching in such a way that unbelievers not only will not understand but is also intentionally designed to hide the truth from them? What does this mean for our preaching and teaching today?

The character and nature of God's kingdom is to be understood by believers. There is a place for "inside" conversations, language and vocabulary.

There are some truths that are not to be clearly taught to unbelievers.

This is not a justification, as the emergent atheologians do, to be intentionally paradoxical, illusive, unclear and non-specific in their teaching.

We will expect that in the kingdom, expressed in the church today, that there will be those who are not true believers. This does not mean that we are not to give attention to who comes into the church nor are we to be slack in our discipline of sin, but it does mean that in this age a truly "pure" church is probably not attainable. While we are to do our best as the New Testament commands, we will have to wait till the end of the age for it all to be sorted out.

In the light of these parables on the kingdom of heaven, is your own unbelief exposed? Have you believed the message? Are you offended at Jesus' claim to be the one and only way to God in heaven? Do you scorn Him as a mere man with an extravagant ego? Will you repent and believe and bow to Him?

Do you work hard as a student in the kingdom to understand, not only the parables, but as much of the new and old as you can? Does your own study open for ever greater insight with more and more, "Oh, I see" moments?

The kingdom of heaven, the growing extension of Jesus' rule is expanding over all the earth through the ages. To this day, it is mixed with weeds, leaven, birds and bad fish. But that is OK for now. God is still growing His true wheat, His good fish, His mighty tree. There will come a day, when the kingdom of heaven will be purified of all that is evil and in that day, we will shine as stars in the heaven.

May God hasten that glorious day...

Notes