

## The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of Leaven

These two parables will be discussed together because they both have essentially the same message to convey, that is, the growth of evil within the visible kingdom of heaven. Before we begin to probe the depths of spiritual meaning Jesus is conveying to us through them, let's first try to better understand why He is speaking in this seemingly convoluted manner. Also it is important to better understand just what the kingdom of heaven is, where it is, and in what time frame it exists, or will exist.

First, it might be useful to end the possible confusion between the kingdom of heaven as spoken of by Matthew and the kingdom of God spoken of by Mark and Luke. They are both the same. Bible scholars have concluded that Matthew, whose primary emphasis was on Jesus as the Messiah and was thereby appealing primarily to the Hebrews, would have offended them by using the word God. Throughout the Hebrew history, the name of God was so sacred that it dare not be uttered or even referred to, except indirectly. Because it was never spoken, the pronunciation of His name has been lost. The closest we come is through the word Yahweh. Thus Matthew called it the kingdom of heaven. Mark and Luke, however, had no such restraints, because they considered their readers to be mostly Romans and Greeks. Their calling it the kingdom of God is probably more literal in terms of what Jesus actually said.

After speaking such profound and eternal truths with such great clarity that everyone could understand, throughout the earlier part of His ministry, Jesus suddenly ends this aspect of His ministry to the people. After the point in time represented by Matthew, chapter 12, Jesus speaks publicly only in parables. Why? Chapter 12 tells us why. In verse 22, we learn that He healed a man who was blind and dumb and possessed by a devil. This was truly a miracle healing, the likes of which had never before been seen. Others had apparently removed evil spirits, but never from anyone who couldn't speak, because such exorcism required the spirit to first identify itself through the spoken word of its victim. This, of course, was impossible when the person was incapable of speaking. That is why some claimed that Jesus must be the "Son of David," the Messiah (verse 23). However, the official verdict as decreed by the Pharisees was that this had to

be the work of Beelzebub, which is another name for Satan, and which also means, “dung god” in Greek. Having been thus officially proclaimed by the spiritual leaders, this constituted the national rejection of their Messiah. They had been given ample light by means of which they could have known the truth, but they rejected it. Henceforth, there would be no more light given to them; He would speak only in parables, which the people would not understand. Only the Apostles and genuine disciples would be given the privilege of knowing more truth. Matthew 13, verses 11-17, tells us this in Jesus’ own words. From these verses, we find three reasons why Jesus would continue to speak, but to speak only in parables. First, in verse 11, these truths would be given only to His followers, His true believers, that they would know the mysteries of the kingdom. Second, it was not to be given for those who had rejected Him to know, and third, it was to fulfill prophecy, which predicted His parabolic method of teaching. He refers here to Isaiah, which would be chapter 6, verses 9 and 10. This prophecy can also be found in Psalm 78:2.

So the purpose of these parables is to explain the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven / God. Now then, what is the kingdom? In what we call the Lord’s Prayer, we say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” That is not the kingdom of heaven Jesus referred to in Matthew 13. It is the kingdom, which will come in the millennium, when Jesus rules on the throne of David here on earth, and in that kingdom His will will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 13 is here and now, and encompasses the period from His first to His second coming. We might best call this the period of Christendom. It is the specific sphere over which God rules today. Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum offers a very clear and informative explanation of God’s overall kingdom program as expressed in Scripture. A compression of his analysis is as follows:

There are five facets of God’s overall kingdom program.

1. The external timeless kingdom of universal scope. Here God is always in control, either by His decrees or by His permissive will. There is nothing anywhere or at any time that is not by His decreed or permissive will.
2. There is a spiritual kingdom, which includes every born-again person from all people of all times.
3. There was the theocratic kingdom where God ruled over Israel through the establishment of the Mosaic laws. This was in two phases.
  - a. The mediatorial kingdom where God ruled through mediators such as Moses, Joshua, and the judges.
  - b. The monarchial kingdom that extended from Saul through Zedekiah to the Babylon captivity where He ruled through the kings.
4. The messianic kingdom. This is the kingdom that the prophets began to expound. It is the kingdom which Jesus offered and which Israel rejected. The fact is that it is the millennium kingdom that will begin just 75 days after the great tribulation (Daniel 12:12). With Israel's rejection of their Messiah, the offer was taken away for a while, that is, postponed some 2000 plus years until the closing days of the Tribulation at which time it will be offered again and accepted, as the Israelis see "whom they have pierced" (Zachariah 12:10).
5. The mystery kingdom. This is best called Christendom, the period between the first and second coming of Jesus. It expresses the condition of the earth now, while He is away. The mystery kingdom is not the same as the eternal kingdom. It is not a theocratic kingdom because it is not limited to one nation, but involves both Jews and Gentiles. It is also not the same as the messianic kingdom, although it is included in it. The mystery kingdom includes both believers and unbelievers. Therefore, it is not the same as the church, but the church, that is, the saved believers, is included in it.

Thus Scripture makes clear that the kingdom of God, as spoken of by Jesus through parables, is, in fact, what now exists and which we must deal with every day. Is it not, therefore, essential, if we have chosen to be His disciples, to learn as much as possible about this period of time in which He has placed us? It was not, as He

stated, for the non-believers to know this mystery. And through this parabolic method of teaching, none could accurately decipher His meaning. It is only through the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit that His truth can be known. It is through our prayers and the prayers of saints who came before us that the Holy Spirit was, and is willing to reveal what He wants us to know. There seems to be a basic message theme flowing throughout all of these parables, and each presents a particular facet of that theme. At this point, in my quest to understand, I believe that the kingdom of God message, as Jesus is providing it in the parables, has to do with Christian behavior, values and choices, and what the world conditions would be like during these ever increasingly corrupt, deceptive and faith challenging times. Finally let us examine the two subject parables by first reading each of them:

### ***The Parable of the Mustard Seed***

- 31 ¶ *Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:*  
32 *which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.*

### ***The Parable of the Leaven***

- 33 ¶ *Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*

I pray forgiveness from those who read this and want only the “bottom line” meaning, and feel that they have suffered through too many words here before reaching that point. In order to best understand our Lord’s message, it seems important to me that we understand as much as we can about the figures used in the parables and what they represent, in order to be most capable of extracting from them what is hidden. Remember Jesus meant these parables to contain hidden truths, not to be readily understood, except by those who have been given the light.

In the parable of the mustard seed, it refers to the “least of all seeds.” If you have seen a mustard seed, you know that there are many smaller vegetable seeds. However, it then speaks of it as “the greatest among herbs.” Therefore, we may

consider it to be the smallest in an herb garden. The mustard plant most common to the region only grows to about 3 to 4 feet in height, surely something that would not be very attractive or even possible for birds to “lodge in.” This has led some commentators to conclude that this is a mutation, a perversion that grew to large and grotesque proportions. This is not necessarily true, however, because according to the Oxford English dictionary there is a black mustard plant called the *brossica nigra* which grows to the height of 8 to 12 feet and can be found in Israel. This would qualify to be the greatest among herbs; however, at this height it still does not seem in my opinion, to express the large stature of the tree suggested by the parable. Therefore, whether Jesus is using as an example the small yellow mustard plant or the larger black mustard seed “tree,” the parable is surely referring to a plant that sprung to life from a tiny seed and grew into an exceptionally large tree for that type of plant. Scripture frequently uses a large tree with spreading branches to describe worldly kingdoms as with Babylon in Daniel 4 and the Assyrian dynasty in Ezekiel 31:3. Here Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is like this huge tree. It sprang to life from a single tiny seed, which is to say the Gospel, and grew into the worldwide power, which is Christendom. However, it is not all righteous and fruit bearing as it could be, because it becomes infested with birds, which come to occupy its branches. Birds, of course, symbolize, as they do elsewhere in Scripture, Satan’s agents, the false professors, evil teachers and other kindred spirits who seek to undermine, prevent and discredit Christ’s way by any and all possible means. This “tree,” the kingdom, grew rapidly and perversely from the time of Constantine, when it married the world, on through the middle ages, when it reigned supreme over all the power of Europe, and then on into the present age of “branches,” that is, the denominations. Surely the “birds” can be seen to having been continuously active to this day, even in the branches, and now more than ever.

In summary, Jesus is describing the kingdom of God, that is the church age, as a tree which grows from a very tiny seed, the Gospel Word, into a great tree, that is, into a large and perverted kingdom. Although ordained by God to contain His own, it does, nevertheless, through His permissive will, become contaminated through the agents

of Satan. This serves as another warning to those who live in it to be ever alert as to the dangers these agents represent. The mystery as revealed by this and the other parables is that, while this is the church age, the age of redeemed Christians, not all who profess to be a part of it are saved. Satan's agents who are in all of its branches are there to deceive and to thus prevent as many as possible from accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The deceit and resulting departure from our Lord's way will continue to increase "as in the days that were before the flood" (Matthew 24:38). Then He will "in the twinkling of an eye," (1Corinthians 15:52) remove His faithful and end the church portion of the kingdom of God.

With the preceding background, little need be said directly regarding the Parable of the Leaven. Leaven throughout Scripture expresses evil, just as the birds do in the preceding parable. The three measures of meal takes us back to Genesis 18, where Abraham asked Sarah to make ready three measures of meal for the guests who had arrived at his tent on their way to Sodom. These guests, of course, were our Lord and two angels, all in human-like bodies. These three measures of meal have become a traditional fellowship offering in both Jewish and Arabic cultures. A measure in Greek is Satan and is derived from the Hebrew word seah, which is a unit of measure said to be one third of an ephah, or 7 quarts. Meal in both Greek and Hebrew means flour. It would be finely ground grain such as wheat or barely. Here it was most likely wheat, because barley was viewed as an inferior grain. If indeed a measure was 7 quarts, that batch of dough that Sarah made was huge, enough for many meals. Perhaps it was intended to supply the visitors during their several days journey to and from Sodom. In the parable the woman hid leaven in the meal, contaminating all of it. The woman might be viewed as a Jezebel of Revelation 2:20, through whose agency the earthly church was contaminated. She called herself a prophetess and taught unholy principals which were subversive to the faith. This mystery of iniquity began in the times of the apostles and has continued for 2,000 years, growing increasingly powerful and evident in these final days. Notice the whole was leavened. That is most expressive of these final days, immediately prior to the rapture, when there is hardly any great doctrine of Scripture, which has not been

perverted by false teachers. Once the whole of Christendom has become perverted it will signify that moment spoken of when Jesus says in Luke 21:24 “the times of the Gentiles be filled.” That, I believe, is also the moment Jesus will come for those who are His own.

Dr. Fruchtenbaum has an interesting perspective on the three measures. He likens this to the three world religions, which make up Christendom, that is, the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, which are all contaminated with the leaven. Our Lord’s words are always very deep and packed full of profound meaning. Surely no violence is done to His word if this be a part of the understanding of the parable.

In summary, we again have the message, that during this age of the kingdom of heaven, there is this widespread apostasy. Except for the saved remnant within this age, it is nothing like what God’s millennium kingdom will be, nor is it like the subsequent new heaven and earth. The kingdom of heaven is a sin-infected interlude within which a remnant of saints will be found who becomes so because they have believed in Jesus, in who He was, and in what He did. They will be those whose faith is demonstrated by their works. Their works will include total repentance, a contrite heart and a sincere striving for obedience to His Word, in spite of the awesome and powerful worldly temptations. The parable of the leaven might be called a description of the kingdom at its very end. With the meal representing the kingdom, the whole of it is here depicted as sinfully contaminated. Of what use is it to God any longer, when it is incapable of bearing any more fruit, i.e. saved souls? Nothing. So, of course, He will cut it down as with any fruitless tree. The Book of Revelation describes this cutting down in very graphic detail.

Knowing all of this, and seeing the evidence that there is very little time left for this kingdom in which we find ourselves, is it not urgent that we put our spiritual affairs in order right now? If we are to be part of that blessed rapture, our house must be continuously in order and ready. We must be among those of the “good ground” (Matthew 13:8). We must be the wheat among the tares (Matthew 13:24). We must

be among the good fish found in the net (Matthew 13:48). We must be like the man who found treasure hidden in the field (Matthew 13:44). We must be like the virgins who had the oil, etc... We must be spiritually ready now, because He said He could come at any moment. Given what we can clearly see in this world, that moment will not be long in coming. May God bless you with this sense of urgency and a need for sincere devotion to His Lordship and all that that implies.