

MT. 13 PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM -- FINAL PART



With this study, we will finish our in-depth look at the vital parables of Jesus in Matthew 13.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed Explained

After the parable of the sower and of the wheat and tares, Jesus now gives the third parable – about 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” (Mt. 13:31-32).

The formal name of the mustard plant in the Middle East is *sinapis negra*, which produces a black mustard seed from an aromatic yellow flower. When the seed is ground up, it emits mustard oil, where we get the base for our traditional mustard. It is a rich source of oil and protein, being composed of up to 48 percent of oil and 43.6 percent of protein. It is certainly one of the smallest of seeds and yet after several months, it can grow into one of the largest herb bushes, up to 12 ft. tall, where birds can easily perch.

Christ used this analogy to describe how God often carries out His work among men. At first it seems so small, modest and insignificant, yet it will become the most important work on earth. He does this in two ways—personally and collectively. Personally He has done so by implanting His spirit in us, which is a tiny amount at first and yet it can eventually grow and transform us into immortal spirit beings in His Family. Collectively He has done it through His people in the Old, the New Testament and up to today. Notice how many times this principle of God starting things from a humble beginning is found in the Bible:

1. Abel the just, who left no physical descendant, yet has many spiritual descendants. From his faith, we have all become a family of faith called the way of Abel.
2. Noah -- from one man who eventually became the only just person on earth, we are also his physical and spiritual descendants.
3. Abraham seemed childless, yet had Isaac, the son of promise, whose physical and spiritual

descendants, including us, would end up being as many as the stars in the heavens.

4. Israel -- from a tiny group of 75 people entering Egypt to millions when they left. God told them: “The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the *least* of all people” (Deut. 7:7).

5. Jesus Christ, who, being God in the flesh, became a modest craftsman in Galilee yet will be King of kings.

6. The Church is a “little flock” (Luke 12:32). Revelation describes her as a persecuted, commandment-keeping woman, small enough to hide among the nations (Rev. 12:6, 14).

7. The kingdom of God itself -- so small considering the few that are converted and persevere to the end, but will one day fill the entire creation (Is. 9:7; Dan. 2:44).

The Parable of the Leaven Explained

Next is the fourth parable -- about the leaven: “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” (Mt. 13:33).

William Barclay gives the historical background, “In Palestine, bread was baked at home; three measures of meal was the average amount which would be needed for baking bread for a fairly large family, like Jesus’ family at Nazareth. He took his parable of the Kingdom from something that he had often seen his mother, Mary, do. Leaven was a little piece of dough kept over from a previous baking, which had fermented in the keeping.

“The whole point of the parable lies in one thing—the transforming power of the leaven. Leaven changed the character of a whole baking. Unleavened bread is like a water biscuit, hard, dry, unappetizing and uninteresting; bread baked with leaven is soft, porous, spongy, tasty and good to eat. The introduction of the leaven causes a transformation in the dough, and the coming of the Kingdom causes a transformation in life. One way is how Christianity transforms the

individual person. In 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Paul gathered together a list of the most terrible and disgusting kinds of sinners, and then, in the next verse, there comes the tremendous statement: 'And such were some of you.' We must never forget that the function and power of Christ is to make bad [sinners] good."

Thus, this parable about leaven is similar to the last one about the mustard seed, but from a different perspective. A small amount of leaven, that seems so insignificant, can eventually make the dough expand many times over. This shows, collectively and personally, how the kingdom of God can grow. Personally, God's spirit works in us at first almost imperceptibly, but continues silently enabling us to grow spiritually. Most of the unconverted will not notice much change, as Peter said, "having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12). Most will realize the truth only when Christ comes back and they are resurrected in their turn. Collectively, again, just as leaven seems imperceptible but works so powerfully, so the Church will one day make a big difference in the world, when the end time events overtake us and when Christ returns, His kingdom will expand forever (Luke 1:33).

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

Christ now gives the fifth parable: "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" (Mt. 13:44).

This has to do with one of the two main ways a person arrives at God's truth, remembering always that God has the last word and permits the calling (John 6:44). Here, it's an example of one who is not directly looking for the truth but suddenly finds it. Yet, does he embrace it and put it first in his life or does he let the opportunity pass by? For one has to accept that calling for it to be applied. The other way is to consciously look for the truth and one day come across it, which is covered in the next parable.

William Barclay explains the background, "Although this parable sounds strange to us, it would sound perfectly natural to people in Palestine in the days of Jesus. In the ancient world there were banks, but not banks such as ordinary people could use. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most cherished belongings. In the parable of the talents, the worthless servant hid his talent in the ground, lest he should lose it (Mt. 25:25). There was a rabbinic saying that there was only one safe repository for money – the earth. This was still more the case in the land where a man's garden might at any time become a battlefield. Palestine was probably the most fought over country in the world, and when the tide of war threatened to flow over them, it was common practice for people to hide their valuables in the ground, before they took to flight, in the hope that the day would come when they could return and regain them. Josephus speaks of 'the gold and silver and the rest of that most precious furniture which the Jews had, and which the owners treasured up underground against the uncertain fortunes of war'...The Jewish Rabbinic law was quite clear in this case: 'What finds belong to the finder, and what finds must one cause to be proclaimed? These finds belong to the finder—if a man finds scattered fruit, scattered money...these belong to the finder.'"

So, in this case, one stumbles upon the treasure chest of God's truths and is willing to sacrifice anything and everything to make it his own. We see Christ using the symbol of God's truths being a treasure a bit later, in the parable of old and new things in Mt. 13:51-52, which we will shortly cover.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price

Here is the sixth parable: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went out and sold all that he had and bought it" (Mt. 13:45-46).

Barclay comments, "In the ancient world, pearls had a very special place in people's hearts. People desired to possess a lovely pearl, not only for its money value, but for its beauty.

They found a pleasure in simply handling it and contemplating it. They found an aesthetic joy simply in possessing and looking at a pearl. The main sources of pearls in those days were the shores of the Red Sea and far-off Britain itself, but a merchant would scour the markets of the world to find a pearl which was of surpassing beauty....The pearl of great price is suggestive that there were other pearls but only one pearl of great price. That is to say, there are many fine things in this world and many things in which a man can find loveliness. He can find loveliness in knowledge and in the reaches of the human mind, in art, music and literature and all the triumphs of the human spirit. He can find loveliness in serving his fellow man, even if that service springs from humanitarian rather than purely Christian motives. He can find loveliness in human relationships. These are all wonderful, but they are all lesser loveliness. The supreme beauty lies in the acceptance of the will of God. This is not to belittle the other things; they too are pearls, but the supreme pearl is the willing obedience which makes us friends with God.

"We find in this parable the same point as in the previous one but with a difference. The man who was digging the field was not searching for treasure; it came on him all unaware. The man who was searching for pearls was spending his life in the search. But no matter whether the discovery was the result of a moment or the result of a lifetime's search, the reaction was the same—everything had to be sold and sacrificed to gain the precious thing. Once again, we are left with the same truth—that, however a man discovers the will of God for himself, whether it be in the lighting flash of a moment's illumination or at the end of a long and conscious search, it is worth anything unhesitatingly to accept it."

The Parables of the Dragnet and Treasure

Here are the seventh and eighth parables that go together: "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, and threw

the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from the just, and cast them in the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Jesus said to them, 'Have you understood all these things? They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then He said to them, 'Therefore every scribe [a Bible teacher like Himself] instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven [about the truths of God] is like a householder who brings out of his *treasure* things new and old" (Mt. 13:47-52). It's the new wine in new wineskins.

Barclay explains: "It was the most natural thing in the world that Jesus should use illustrations from fishing when he was speaking to fishermen. It was as if he said to them: 'Look how your daily work speaks to you of the things of heaven.'

"In Palestine there were two main ways of fishing. One was with the casting-net, the *amphiblestron*. It was a hand-net which was cast from the shore... The second way of fishing was with the dragnet, the *sagene*. This is the way referred to in this parable. The dragnet was a great square net with cords at each corner, and weighted so that, at rest, it hung, as it were, upright in the water. When the boat began to move, the net was drawn into the shape of a great cone and into the cone all kinds of fish were swept. The net was then drawn to the land, and the catch was separated. The useless material was flung away; the good was put into containers."

This parable is similar to the one of the wheat and the tares, and it can be applied to the world and to the Church. Regarding the world, everyone will eventually be judged and sorted out -- some will get most of their just desserts in this life, others mostly in the next. Similarly, many come into the Church and not all are converted although they may go through the motions. Ultimately, only God can see the heart, true motives and real conversion. We must be patient, for God sorts out things, sometimes surprising us with who truly overcame the trials. When Christ returns, the angels will sort out the truly faithful from the unfaithful in the Church and during the entire judgment period.