

Weeds, Mustard, & Yeast: The Dark side of the Kingdom of God. Matthew 13:33-35

Wow. This week's Sermon preparation has been both confusing and enlightening. Confusing in that – depending on which commentator I read – what I always thought Jesus meant in His kingdom parables turned out to be completely wrong. Enlightening because, when I learned what Jesus was probably talking about, all seven of these parables finally made better sense ... sort of. So today, keep an open mind and prepare to have your Sunday School understanding of the next two parables – of the mustard seed tree and leavened dough – turned on their heads.

Perhaps you remember the story of the tiny mustard seed growing up to become a big tree as representing the dramatic growth of the church – or God's kingdom – in the world. The only debate about the birds nesting in its shade was whether they were good or bad. But, the mustard plant is also considered a weed and that those nesting birds had previously served as representatives of the devil in Jesus' first kingdom parable, should give you a clue that this story is saying something else.

In a similar way perhaps you heard the parable of the yeast permeating the dough as illustrative of the quiet, hidden, way in which the kingdom of God will eventually fill and conquer the world. But again, your Biblical warning bell should be sounding, for nowhere else in the Bible have you ever read of yeast, "leaven," being used as a positive illustration. Usually leaven symbolizes the corrupting nature of sin. And, while many modern translations used the word "mixed," what Jesus actually said was that the woman "hid" the yeast in the dough. Leavened bread could never be considered holy, so her actions in leavening over 60 pounds of dough should be questioned.

Now that I have sowed some doubt in your minds, let's put these two parables into their Biblical context to see if we come out with a new and perhaps better understanding.

By the time we come to Matthew, chapter thirteen, Jesus is nearing the end of His ministry. The Pharisees and Sadducees were challenging His authority at every public event; even accusing Him of being from the devil. Large crowds were still following Him, but Jesus, realizing that their presence was more for entertainment purposes, had begun to differentiate between what He taught His disciples and what He said to all those others. In fact, twice in this string of seven parables, Jesus told His disciples that He was teaching in this manner so that those who were not truly seeking to follow Him, would be kept in the dark: *the reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."* 13:13 (cf: 13:11-15, 34-35) He did explain two of His parables – The Sower And The Seed and The Weedy Wheat Field – but only when just His disciples were present.

Now that we understand Jesus was speaking intentionally to confuse a largely disinterested crowd and only explaining things to His true followers, let's reexamine these first four "kingdom parables," where we will discover two basic themes:

- The planting of God's kingdom is within a largely corrupt world.
- And the intentional invasion and imitation of God's kingdom by the devil.

Jesus would go on to tell three more parables, in private only to His disciples, about finding buried treasure or precious pearls and God's final dragnet of the world, these all illustrating ...

- The precious value of the citizens of His Kingdom to God, who willingly paid the greatest price to buy back those for Himself and who will eventually gather everything together in the end to sort out His own.

But these three will have to wait until next week.

The first parable given to the crowd, but only explained to His disciples, was that of **The Sower and the Seed**. The four fields represent God's word landing in different types of hearts.

1. Seed falling on the dry path, represented those who do not seek to understand, so the devil – here, represented by birds – comes and *snatches away what was sown in their heart*.
2. Seed falling on the parched ground represented those who never grew deep in their faith, so in times of trouble they soon die off.
3. Seed falling in the ditch are those believers who receive God's word, but *the cares of the world and the lure of wealth, choke the word and it yields nothing*.
4. Only the seed that fell on good soil – the ones who heard and grew in God's word – bore fruit in abundance.

Pastor Warren Wiersbe, one of my seminary professors, commented on this parable: "Why compare God's Word to seed? Because the Word is "living and powerful" (Heb. 4:12). Unlike the words of men, the Word of God has life in it, and that life can be imparted to those who will believe. The truth of God must take root in the heart, be cultivated, and be permitted to bear fruit. **It is shocking to realize that three fourths of the seed did not bear fruit.** So, here Jesus was not describing an age of great harvest, but one in which the Word, and God's kingdom, would be largely rejected." (Wiersbe. NT Commentary, pg 37).

So in the first parable, Satan opposes God's kingdom by snatching the Word from inattentive hearts, by troubling those who remain immature, or by using "*the cares of the world*" to choke out other's growth. But he also has other ways of attacking God's work. **The next three parables then go on to reveal Satan as primarily an imitator and a corruptor. Other tricks of his trade are that, beside or within**

God's kingdom, he plants false Christians, he encourages false growth, and he introduces false doctrine.

Jesus' next parable, told to the crowd, was of the Weedy Wheatfield, which we covered last week. This parable illustrated that wherever God plants His Kingdom, the devil plants counterfeit Christians in their midst for the sole purpose of attempting to damage or choke out any growth among the real believers. The devil wants to turn every good field into a weedy ditch, but at harvest time – the end of the age – God's harvesting angels will carefully separate the real from the fake; saving the good and throwing the fakes in the fire.

Professor Wiersbe continues ...

From this parable we must learn to beware of Satan's counterfeits. He plants counterfeit Christians (2 Cor. 11:26) who believe a counterfeit gospel (Gal. 1:6–9), he encourages a counterfeit righteousness (Rom. 10:1–3), and even has a counterfeit church (Rev. 2:9). At the end of the age, he will even produce a counterfeit Christ (2 Thess. 2:1–12). (ibid. 38)

So the Weedy Wheat Field is now a second parable largely exposing the devil's attacks against God's kingdom. Jesus would later also explain this parable to His disciples, but with the crowd – without any explanation – He immediately launches into another parable about a tiny mustard seed that becomes a great tree, in which – hint, hint – birds can nest.

Mustard is a delicious spice, but because the mustard plant grows aggressively and spreads its seed widely, it is also an invasive species. Like Darnell – the fake wheat in the previous parable – the mustard plant is another weed. And while it does produce a large bush from a very small seed, it is not a tree; and while birds can sit in it, they do not nest in it. So again Jesus is hiding something in this parable that we need to tease out.

In the previous parable, the Darnell weed represented imitation believers living among real believers, who only God could separate out at the end. So what might this out of proportion mustard weed tree, in which birds build their nests, illustrate?

Professor Wiersbe concluded...

Since Jesus did not explain this parable, we must use what He did explain in the other parables to find its meaning. The birds in the parable of the sower represented Satan (Matt. 13:19). Passages like Daniel 4:12 and Ezekiel 17:23 indicate that a tree is [often used as] a symbol of a world power. (ibid. 38)

Thus, these symbolic parallels in this parable suggest that Satan will raise up an imitation kingdom – beside or inside – God's real kingdom, just as large, just as impressive, but still a weed in which the devil's forces can find places of influence; can build their nests

Probably one of the worst defeats of the Christian Church happened when Emperor Constantine declared the Roman nation as officially Christian. Suddenly all temples became churches, all princes became high priests, and along with too much power and too much wealth, much of pagan Roman religion got married into Christian tradition.

After that, "Christendom" became a worldwide power; a complex organization of many different branches. What started in a humble manner, today still boasts large material possessions and political influence, but with a checkered history of doing as much evil in the name of God as it has done good.

Some commentators suggest that this parable teaches the worldwide success of the Gospel. But that would contradict what Jesus was teaching in the previous parables. Like the weedy wheat field of the world, the church has grown to become a largely infested reflection of what it should have been, which is in line with what the New Testament teaches about a growing decline in the ministry of the Gospel as the end of the age draws near.

Then before leaving the crowd to go into a house with only His disciples, Jesus tells a fourth parable of a woman hiding yeast in the dough, until it permeates everything.

Since Jesus' previous three parables have apparently been about attacks against God's kingdom:

- Heart attitudes that hinder its reception.
- Fake believers that harm real believers' growth.
- And an imitation church that does as much harm as good.

So we should assume that the yeast in the dough illustrates another such Satanic attack.

The fact that the Bible NEVER uses yeast to illustrate anything good, is the clear giveaway here. While "seeds" in these parable have represented both the real and false outward growth of God's kingdom, the "yeast," (leaven), illustrates the insidious growth of false doctrine within the kingdom.

Professor Wiersbe concluded:

Throughout **the Bible**, leaven is a symbol of evil. It had to be removed from the Jewish homes during Passover (Ex. 12:15–19; 13:7). It was excluded from the sacrifices (Ex. 34:35), with the exception of the loaves used at the Feast of Pentecost (Lev. 23:15–21). But there the loaves symbolized Jews and Gentiles together in the church. **Jesus** used leaven to picture hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), false teaching (Matt. 16:6–12), and worldly compromise (Matt. 22:16–21). **Paul** used leaven to picture carnality in the church (1 Cor. 5:6–8) as well as false doctrine (Gal. 5:9). **Sin is like leaven (yeast): It quietly grows, it corrupts, and it "puffs up"** (1 Cor. 4:18–19; 5:2; 8:1). [Thus,] it would seem that making the growth of the leaven a picture of the spread of the

gospel throughout the world would violate the meaning of this important symbol. It would also contradict the other parables. (ibid.)

Satan has worked hard to introduce false doctrine into the ministry of the Word of God. From the very early days of the church, true believers have battled false doctrine and hypocrisy. How sad it is that in these modern times, some churches and schools have turned from the truth of God's Word to follow modern fables of progressive theology and cultural relativity. ***"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" has always been wise counsel*** (1 Thess. 5:21).

In conclusion, as recorded in the first four parables of Matthew thirteen, the Kingdom of God began with the sowing of the Word of God in the hearts of its hearers. Much of the seed did not bear fruit, but some was fruitful. Satan has opposed the work of God by sowing counterfeit Christians, by encouraging a false growth, and by introducing false doctrine. It would seem that Satan is winning! But as Jesus also twice told His disciples – in the midst of these parables - the testing of what is real and what is not, belongs only to God and only comes at harvest time; not during this age.

Thus, for real Christians, living and growing within the real Church while holding fast to sound doctrine, our task is to patiently keep growing, keep speaking the truth in love, keep praying for and being hospitable to everyone – even God's enemies – and always leaving all judgments about who may be a fake, strictly to God alone.

Next week, when He goes into a house alone with His disciples, Jesus will tell them three more kingdom parables about a hidden treasure, a precious pearl, and a dragnet pulled through the sea, all three about how valuable we believers are to God, who willingly gave His all to purchase us as His own. And again how God will sort everyone out in the end.

But this is enough for now and certainly enough to be praying about as we continue to strive to grow within, and to bring God's kingdom to pass, even in this very weed infested world and church.