

him for personal interest without commitment, but understood by disciples who had responded and were committed to Him. Jesus gave explanations to some of the parables in chapter 13, but not of these two. Perhaps he was content that the disciples would understand what they meant, given his explanation of the parable of 'the sower', and the coming explanation of the 'wheat and the tares'. He may have been challenging them to interpret these two 'simple' parables for themselves. They certainly have an appealing, general truth to convey about growth, but there is certainly room within them to explore more.

Jesus lastly quoted (v35) an Old Testament 'prophecy' not from Isaiah or one of the well known prophets, as is usual in Matthew's Gospel, but from a Psalm; 'I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter hidden sayings from of old.' (Psalm 78:2). Some have assumed that the 'prophet' is therefore David, the author of many Psalms, but the heading of this Psalm indicates that the probable author was Asaph, who in 1 Chronicles 25:2 is mentioned as having the gift of prophecy through music! It may well be, however, that Jesus referred to this passage simply because He regarded all scripture as pointing to His parables as containing the 'secrets of the Kingdom' (13:11). It is therefore something we should all bear in mind as we search for the truth of God's Word and the Kingdom of God.

What can we learn from this passage?

The announcement by Jesus that He would declare the secrets of the Kingdom through parables draws our attention even more to the importance of the teaching we find in them. Whatever we have found so far, and chapter 13 of Matthew is just the beginning of the parables in this Gospel, there is a great deal more to come. They are not for everyone, however, but for disciples who have opened their hearts to receive Jesus and His teaching.

Much of our passage today is well known, but there are some surprising parts to it. As well as emphasising that God will produce the fruit of His Kingdom whatever the problems of evil and human rejection in the previous two parables ('the sower' and the 'wheat and the tares'), the parables talk of the enormous size and visibility of the mature Kingdom produced from the tiniest amount of seed hidden in the ground or yeast hidden in the dough. This unchanging truth of the Kingdom of God is a great encouragement to all who are disciples of Christ today.

I also believe these two parables illustrate the Lord's Kingdom work in individual people. Moreover, if we will be his disciples and learn from Him through these scriptures, then He can do through us far more than we can imagine. The size of the tree and the yield of the dough are indications that the Lord is able to do in us far more than we can imagine, and that is a Gospel message from throughout scripture!

Questions

1. Do you think that the parable of the mustard see is intended to be interpreted as 'individual'? If not, what is a seed?
2. How is it that the 'yeast' grows throughout the 'batch', and what does this tell us about Christian mission?
3. Is it right that the 'secrets of the Kingdom' should only be accessed by those who have responded to Christ? Or is it simply a reflection of the 'way things are'?

Lifestyle Challenge

To what extent is your life like a seed or a lump of dough? After reading this passage, this is an unavoidable question, and yet it is difficult to know what to do with it, particularly when the answer is; 'I don't know', for sometimes, like yeast within the lump of dough, the growth of the Kingdom is hidden, even from disciples! It is as hard to know how a seed grows into a tree, as it is to know why yeast grows within dough 'in secret'. Yet Jesus gives us both pictures to illustrate discipleship and the work of the Kingdom. Ask the questions and see where He leads you!

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Almighty God, for Your living Word. You speak to us not just of Your majesty and creative power, but of Your desire to know us, to love us and save us. Draw near to us in our need; speak to us through our Saviour Jesus Christ and empower us by Your Spirit for the life of faith. All praise to You, Almighty God; AMEN

Prayer

Hear me, Lord Jesus, when I cry to You. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with the things that are before me, yet I can no more escape them than run away from time. Give me the grace and strength to trust You in all circumstances, confess my sins to You and accept Your forgiveness. Change me, Lord Jesus, and make me more like You. AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: Sports in Schools

Pray for the young people you know and the hope and dreams that are generated in them by the sports industry. Pray that they are not led astray by all that the industry represents, and ask the Lord to help us change society so that normal competition, represented by the physical challenge of sports, becomes a loved part of everyday life with our countries once again.

Meditation

Recall how you first heard about salvation and the love of God in Jesus:

.....
Did you know then what God was saying to you and calling you to do?

.....
How does the Lord speak to you now, and what does He call you to do?

.....
Have you been faithful to the call God has placed upon your life?

.....
Do you have the same passion for the Lord's work as when you started?

.....
Now, wait upon God and listen to see what He would say to you now:

.....
If He is calling on you to do something specific, do not delay to do it.

Bible Study - Matthew 13:31-35

³¹ He put to them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;

³² it is the smallest of seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of plants, becoming like a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and nest in its branches."

³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour so that the whole dough rose."

³⁴ Jesus said all these things to the crowds in parables; he did not say anything to them without using parables.

³⁵ This fulfilled what the prophet said: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will announce what has been kept secret since the foundation of the world."

Review

The parables of the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13 all answer questions that arise from Jesus' teaching and ministry, and they therefore tell us something about the life and ministry of the church which is called to teach and preach the Kingdom as Jesus did. This is particularly true of the two parables in our passage today, together with Jesus' comments about the fulfilment of prophecy within this passage (13:35). They also follow on directly from the teaching Jesus gave in the first two parables in Matthew 13.

The first of these parables was 'the sower' (13:1-9) and the second was 'the wheat and the tares' (13:18-23). They parables both addressed the question as to why have some people rejected Jesus and his ministry, and other people accepted it. The answer the parables give is that this simply reflects the real world in which seed fall on different grounds, and the fact that soil of the world is full of evil from now until the end of time. In both cases, the problems of

growth experienced by the farmer involved does not prevent a harvest from being reaped; indeed, a significant and satisfactory harvest (13:9, 13:30).

These two parables sandwich a passage (13:10-17) in which Jesus explained to the disciples that the parables contained the 'secrets of the Kingdom'. Indeed, because the crowds had not accepted Jesus' call to 'repent' and follow him, they would not be able to understand the parables. The disciples, however, who had responded by faith and also followed Him, would understand their spiritual significance and meaning. It is very important to observe from this that the parables spoke prophetically to the disciples about what would happen when they, as leaders of Christ's church after His death, exercised the same ministry and proclaimed the same Kingdom of God in the era of the resurrection after His death. Now, all these parables are prophetic of the mission of the church.

The same is true of the parables we have read today. Whilst the parables of 'the sower' and 'the wheat and the tares' taught the disciples about different responses to the Gospel and the certainty of God's final harvest despite evil; in the world, the parables of the 'mustard seed' and the 'yeast' answer the question 'how does the Kingdom of God grow from small beginnings to a great harvest?' The disciples would surely have asked the same question that we ask today, which is about how small efforts such as ours can possibly bring about the Universal and radical changes which are necessary to defeat evil in this world and establish the Kingdom of God which is characterised by goodness and justice. The message for us from these parables is clear. If we will hear God's promise that the smallest of seeds or the smallest amount of yeast in a batch of dough are important for His great plans, then every small thing we do which points to the Kingdom of God is a potentially vital component of His plans for the future of the whole world.

The last two verses, 34 and 35, are a summary of Jesus' reasons for teaching in parables, and they have a similar theme to the earlier passage (13:11-13).

Going Deeper

Now, we will look at the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast in detail. As we do so, we will find that not only do they bring us this general message, but the connections they have with the rest of the Bible and the world of Jesus' day help us find even more! The text today contains some interesting twists which add to our understanding of Jesus' teaching about the nature of the Kingdom, and the life of the church.

The parable of the mustard seed

The first of our parables today, 'the mustard seed' (vv31,32), follows the previous parable by talking of a seed which is sown in a field and grows. We do not hear, however, about the problems of growth; simply the end result of the mature, spreading tree. At the very least, it appears to affirm therefore that whatever the problems mentioned in the previous two parables, God could still take a particular seed, plant it, care for it and see it grow into maturity. When we look at it like this, the parable appears to equate the growth of the Kingdom to that of an individual, presenting a wonderful affirmation from God that His purposes will prevail despite the problems indicated by the previous parables. This is a description of the personal and individual care of the Lord for each of us (His planting the smallest seed), and the godly goal of maturity (the tree which is useful in God's creation). Whether or not the disciples received this parable for the encouragement it gives, it can certainly speak this word to us.

It is normal to think of this parable as simply addressing the question of 'how does the Kingdom of God grow?' The answer the parable gives is that the beginnings of the Kingdom are very small (v31), but as it does not succumb to the problems mentioned in the previous parables, it grows into a large tree (v32). The parable therefore illustrates how a great harvest (the full grown shrub or tree) can be obtained from the smallest of seeds. You may have heard this explanation before, along with a discussion of what seed this is and what size tree or bush it might grow into. Recent horticultural investigations indicate that there was indeed a small seed, though maybe not the smallest, called a 'mustard seed' which grew into a very large shrub, like a tree, and was the source of proverbial sayings common in Jesus' day about 'big things coming from small beginnings'. Therefore, despite what some commentaries say, and preachers have said over many generations, this parable contains no exaggeration on Jesus' part, and everyone around Him was fully aware of what He was talking about.

Despite the undoubted and obvious truths of this traditional interpretation of the parable, the individual emphasis I brought out earlier is very important. The Kingdom grows through individual seeds which grow to maturity having been chosen, planting and care for by God.

Lastly, the final part of verse 32 talks of birds coming to 'nest' in the branches of the tree. This could either simply indicate the size and maturity of the tree, or suggest a connection with the prophet Daniel which elaborates on the purpose of the tree in the Kingdom of God. In the vision of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:12) and its interpretation by Daniel (4:21), a phrase almost exactly the same as this; 'the birds of the air nest in its branches' indicates that nations that will come to Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge his greatness. It is possible therefore for the birds in our passage to represent the Gentile nations who will eventually flock to the mature tree of the Kingdom God. It is impossible to know whether Jesus or Matthew had this text from Daniel in mind, and there are other passages of scripture which describe the nesting of birds without meaning anything to do with Gentiles (e.g. Psalm 104:12,17), so it is best to keep this idea as 'interesting but not proven'!

The parable of the yeast

Jesus immediately told another parable, that of the 'yeast' in the dough. Because Matthew put this together with the parable of the 'mustard seed', or maybe because Jesus told them as a 'pair', there is more than a casual connection between the two. Firstly, however, we need to look at some facts concerning the subject of this parable, yeast.

Bread has been made with yeast for centuries, as described in this parable. Most of us would naturally regard yeast as a good thing because it helps make an enjoyable food out of unpalatable wheat flour. However, yeast is often regarded as an image of evil in the Bible (see the 1 Cor 5:6,7,8; Gal 5:9). The reason for this is to be found in the important story of the escape of God's people from Egypt. On the night of the escape, Moses instructed the people to eat 'unleavened' bread (without yeast), and the reason for this was symbolic. Yeast is an organism that grows within dough and makes it rise, a process called leavening. The normal method of baking bread requires a small amount of leavened dough to be taken from an old batch of bread and kneaded into a new batch, thus symbolising the continuation of domestic life and dependency upon what has 'gone before'. Moses told the people to eat unleavened bread to indicate that their lives were to be cut off from the evils of the past, and they were to start anew with God. The old leaven (yeast) had to go, and therefore became a symbol to God's people of their separation from sin, evil and the world.

What is interesting is that Jesus takes this image of 'yeast' and turns it on its head! In the Kingdom, yeast is changed from being a sign of separation from the world into a sign of God's hidden work within the world to produce highly significant and observable results. Whilst it remains true that we must all be 'cut off' from evil in order to be a disciple in the first place (the Old Testament use of yeast), Jesus' new picture of yeast is about the growth of the Kingdom within the world. Jesus makes His Kingdom grow not by starting new batches of bread all the time from new yeast, but by being the yeast which grows within the batch of dough and being passed on to the next batch and so on, by the normal processes of baking bread.

The amount of flour mentioned in this parable is also very large, and must have some significance. It is reckoned that the 'measure' referred to is as large as 40 litres, or a substantially large commercial pack. Three of these packs of flour are generally reckoned to make enough bread for about 100 people!

Given these facts, the answer given by the parable to the question 'how does the Kingdom of God grow?' is similar to the parable of the mustard seed. Just as the tiny mustard seed mysteriously grew into a tree, the Kingdom will also grow through the smallest amount yeast permeating the whole batch of dough until it visibly rises and can be baked. In both parables, the work of God in the believer starts off small and hidden, and ends up substantial, visible, useful and fruitful. The encouragement this affords all disciples of Christ is huge. God works through the individual disciple, whether small seed or leavened dough containing yeast, for the greatest of work in the Kingdom. Make no mistake, what starts off hidden and small will, in the Kingdom of God, become large, substantial and visible.

The meaning of the parables

When Jesus completed this group of parables, he repeated to the disciples that in speaking like this the 'secrets of the Kingdom' would be missed by the ignorant crowds who listened to