

# Mysteries of the Kingdom - Matthew 13:31-33

## The Kingdom's Opposition-The Mustard Seed & Leaven

We continue this series on kingdom parables by examining here two short parables. It has been said that great things come in small packages. That is certainly true here! In this study we need to three things; the first from experience and the next two from the Scripture.

First of all, our experience of this parable speaks to us about **a stumped church**. Perhaps no two parables have evoked more differing interpretations than these. A person could read two commentaries on these parables and get diverse opinions. The net result often leads to confusion - a stumped church.

What are those interpretations? Some see these as parables of the kingdom's expansion and growth. Consider these quotes:

"A great result from a small beginning, a large growth from a little germ - that is the one thought of the parable"

"The great truth here illustrated, then, is that the Lord Jesus Christ, by his coming and work, introduced into humanity an element which works a change on it, that shall continue to operate until the whole is transformed - therein resembling leaven, hidden by a woman in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened."

"Behold how vast a tree has grown from so small a seed. A despised Rabbi in a despised corner of the Roman Empire, coming from despised Nazareth, sowed the seed Himself and entrusted it to a dozen untrained, non-university men of lowly birth and little influence - and the world-wide Church is the result."

Herbert Lockyer says, "this may be attractive and appealing writing, but it is not truth!"

The other interpretation speaks of the abnormal and unnatural extension of the church, contrary to divine design. This is the interpretation of most conservative scholars and it is also the interpretation I believe to be accurate. Here is why I believe it is the abnormal growth view.

First of all, the growth of a mustard seed into a tree is an abnormality. A mustard seed will grow into a shrub but not a tree. The original hearers would have known that and immediately, "something is wrong!" I think if Jesus had intended to communicate the "amazing growth" view, He might have spoken of an acorn growing up to be an oak, or a cedar seed growing up to be one of the mighty trees of Lebanon!

Another reason I would hold to the "abnormal growth" view is because of consistency in interpretation. Jesus does not use a figure of speech to mean one thing here and another thing there. The birds had previously been identified as the devil (13:4, 19). How can they then here be believers? But if they be representative of counterfeits (i.e. tares), we have a consistency. Furthermore a victorious view here would contradict Jesus' teaching otherwise: that things will become worse before the end!

A third reason to hold to the "abnormal growth" view is because of scriptural symbolism. In nearly every Old Testament case, leaven or yeast is a symbol of evil. It was excluded from the sacrificial offerings made by fire. During the feast of Unleavened Bread, each Jew had to cleanse his house of leaven. Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herod, meaning their evil influence. And then Paul uses leaven to speak of

terrible sin (incest) in 1 Cor. 5:1-7. With such scriptural use, how could Jesus then use it as a symbol of something good?

A reason to reject the “amazing growth” view relates to popularity of interpretation. Just because a lot of people believe something does not make it so. In fact, often that is a good sign that it is not so! It was acceptance of the popular interpretation of Scripture that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. As one commentator put it, “whatever the popular interpretation may be, it is not therefore necessarily the correct one.”

One final thing to consider in this issue is the placement of these parables in Jesus’ teaching. These could be called sandwich parables, coming between the telling and the explanation of the tares. To me, this suggests that it is not teaching something different from the tares, but expanding upon it!

I believe we can learn an important lesson from these reasons. The best commentary on Scripture is Scripture. If you have a question, do not go immediately to another book. Go first to the Word of God. If some interpreters would do that, I believe they would not view these parables as they do.

We should see then that these two parables continue the theme of opposition to the Kingdom! Satan is opposed to the plan of God. True, God has established the church - “I Will build My Church,” Jesus said. But even Satan will work within that which God has established to seek to thwart His plan. As we continue, let’s notice how. Each parable shows us one of those ways.

First of all, the parable of the Mustard Seed speaks to us about **a secular church**. The story is told of Thomas Aquinas, the great philosopher / theologian of the Middle Ages. Once when he was visiting the Vatican, he was given a tour by the Pope. He was shown all the riches and treasures of the church. The Pope commented, “no more must we say, “silver and gold have I none.” Aquinas sadly responded, “neither can we say, rise, take up thy bed and walk.”

That the church became secular is demonstrated by this encounter between Aquinas and the Pope. That it continues to be secular to this day could be documented numerous times over. Most convincing, however, is that it is a truth we learn from the parable of the Mustard Seed. I think Jesus had another passage in mind when telling this:

*“Now these are the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed; I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew large and became strong, and its height reached to the sky, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, and all living creatures fed themselves from it” (Daniel 4:10-22).*

This is a vision of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The passage continues and Daniel gives an explanation of the vision to Nebuchadnezzar:

*“The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong, whose height reached to the sky and was visible to all the earth, and whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged – it is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great, and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth” (Daniel 4:20-22).*

All of Nebuchadnezzar’s power and growth were achieved through purely secular means. The imagery Jesus used is strikingly similar to that used by Daniel. But remember, “. .

. *an angelic watcher, a holy one, descended from heaven. He shouted out and spoke as follows: 'Chop down the tree and cut off its branches, strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit; let the beasts flee from under it, and the birds from its branches' (Daniel 4:13b-14).*

When did this secularization, this abnormal growth begin? Historically it began with the ascension of Constantine to power. He co-mingled the church with the state, contrary to what Jesus said in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world." A good summary of this is given by G. Campbell Morgan: "That was the darkest day that dawned in all history of the Church. His espousal of Christianity was an astute and clever political move and he grafted upon Christianity much of paganism, and elevated it to a position of worldly power; and in that hour the whole Church passed under the blight from which it has never completely escaped. That is the whole sin and wrong of Papacy, domination done in the name of Christ, the claiming of power to rule over kings, emperors, and rulers and dictate terms to them; a great tree, spreading its branches. That spirit remains in every attempt even today, to realize the divine purpose by high organization, vested power. It is not a good thing. It is an abnormal growth."

Today, the secularization of the church is reaching new heights. James M. Boice states, "The secular church is one dominated by the world, as much of the contemporary church is. It is characterized by the world's wisdom, the world's theology, the world's agenda, and the world's methods. The evangelical church, when it is secular, is one that seeks to do God's work, but in the world's way. It looks to the media and money rather than to God and His power, which is unleashed through prayer."

Don't misunderstand – I am not preaching against church growth. Church growth is a natural result of obedience. The church is a living organism and living things are intended to grow. But when that growth is achieved through secular means, we have done nothing but fertilize a tree planted by the evil one and invite his birds to come lodge in the branches! Secularization says get the people in at whatever cost. bigger is better, or so we often think. And all the while, Jesus' heart must continue to break at the folly.

It has been well said that the organized church has wrongly changed the emphasis from seed-sowing to tree growing. Lockyer says, "Ours is not the task to Christianize society and assist in the development of a great tree springing out of the least of all seeds. . . . Loftiness, pride, mastery, love of prominence and position are adverse to the character of Him who humbled Himself. The fowls of the air must not be given lodgment in the tree of our life." May we always be on guard so as not to become a secular church!

But let us also consider the parable of the leaven which teaches us about a **sinful church**. Sin is a cancer that might start small, but before you know it, it will spread to every part of your being. The parable of the leaven well illustrates this principle.

Earlier, we referred to 1 Cor. 5:1-7, a passage where a man was committing immorality with his father's wife. It could have been his mother or it could have been his step-mother. In either case it was wrong. Yet the church at Corinth accepted it - a little leaven had leavened the whole lump.

What of the parable itself? It speaks of a woman who "hid" leaven. This is identified by many as the Roman Catholic Church. It may be or it may not be – my point is not to make a judgment but to state what many believe to be true. Whoever it is in actuality, it is important to remember who is behind it - SATAN! He is always seeking to distort God's plan.

Notice also that the woman "hid" the leaven. If this was God expanding His church why would the agent of expansion be hidden?

Notice also in the parable that it was hid in “three measures of meal.” This is not just a coincidental amount. In Scripture, the law of first mention is important. The first mention of three measures of meal is in Gen. 18:6: “*So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of meal, knead it, and make break cakes.’*” In the context, Abraham is preparing a meal for the Lord Himself! Thus, returning to the parable, leaven (a symbol of sin) being hid in three measures of meal (a symbol of something meant for God) is evil infiltrating the good!

How prevalent that is in our world today! Indeed we find the existence of a sinful church. I knew guy in North Carolina who went to pastor his first church. He had been there less than one year when he discovered that the music minister was having an affair with a deacon’s wife. The music minister was unrepentant, so the pastor went to the deacons with the situation. The deacons were hesitant to act, so the pastor took it before the church. The church actually voted to keep the music guy on staff. They said it was his personal business, and as long as it did not affect how he led worship they did not care! A little leaven had leavened the whole lump!

One of the most puzzling of all Scriptures to me is what our Lord said in Matt. 11:12: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.” I am not quite sure of ALL it means, but one thing I believe it tells us is that to be a kingdom citizen is contrary to the way of this world. Unfortunately, that is a reality also experienced in the church. As these parables show, the church has become and will continue to be secular and sinful. To truly live for Jesus will bring not only scorn and derision in the world, but in mainstream Christendom as well!

But the good news is that we can remember who is behind all this. It is Satan who is opposing the work of God, but ultimately Satan is a defeated foe. American writer Wilson Mizner was also a talented fighter. Once he was in a San Francisco bar with another boxer. A fight began with some longshoremen. At the end only one longshoreman was left standing. Mizner rained punches at him, yet he stayed obstinately upright. The other fighter said, "Leave him alone, Wilson! I knocked him out five minutes ago." As it turns out, a punch from that fighter had knocked the longshoreman out cold, but had also wedged him vertically between two pieces of furniture. That is an accurate picture of our already-defeated but still standing enemy Satan! Satan may oppose, but I tell you, He will NOT win!