

Matthew 13:31-35 – “The Parables of the Seed and the Leaven” – Nov. 12,

2023

1. Alfalfa seeding – first only weeds, after one cutting, mixture of weeds and alfalfa, after two cuttings – a healthy crop of alfalfa
 - a. Each cutting was stressful on the plants, but it was fatal for the weeds and the path to growth for the alfalfa
 - b. So it is with the kingdom of God in history – through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22)
2. The kingdom of God is again in view in these parables, and we’ve already seen what a central theme this is in the gospel of Matthew
 - a. The kingdom of God is everywhere the rule and reign of Christ is present
 - i. So this means that all created reality is encompassed by the Kingdom of God
 - ii. All is subject to King Jesus
 - iii. The difference is not about whether Christ has authority over something or not, it’s about whether or not people and institutions and practices knowingly submit to His authority or not
 - b. So the work of God’s people in history is to make Christ’s rule and reign obvious and visible
 - i. It already exists but through evangelism, we want people to acknowledge it and gladly receive it
 - ii. This is what the preachers of old meant when they said the whole work of the Christian life is to make the kingdom visible

- iii. The kingdom of God is spiritual in origin, but we must resist the notion that it stays spiritual, as though the kingdom is merely in our hearts
 - iv. The kingdom must become manifest in the real world
 - 1. In this sense it is a very physical, real-world, historical kingdom
 - 2. It builds marriages, plants churches, disciples children, pulls down empires and vain philosophies that are opposed to God
 - v. By using agricultural imagery, Christ is showing just how earthy and practical and everyday the kingdom of God truly is
3. VV.31-32 – *“He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*
- a. Once in conversation with an older minister, I was surprised to hear his opposition to my view that the Bible is both inerrant (*the Bible doesn't err*) and infallible (*the Bible cannot err*)
 - b. He used this passage to show me that even Jesus got things wrong at times, for we have discovered seeds that are indeed smaller than a mustard seed
 - c. But biblical inerrancy allows for the normal usage of language
 - i. We still talk in scientifically imprecise ways without communicating error
 - 1. ‘rain fall’, ‘sunrise’, ‘sunset’, ‘the whole town...’
 - ii. In the agricultural world, you have large seeds, smaller seeds, and the smallest seeds

1. And the smallest seeds being used for agriculture among these people was the mustard seed
 2. Christ is not saying that he's unaware of other plants in other parts of the world, but He is talking to His audience in a normal, everyday way like we continue to do today
- d. Aside from that particular distraction, what is Jesus teaching here?
- i. He is teaching the advance of His kingdom, and He is using a dramatic picture to do it
 - ii. Despite the mustard seed's small size, the mature plant grows up to 12', and gets sturdy enough for birds can nest in it
 - iii. This is an unlikely but fitting one
 1. Jesus ministry is met with rejection by the religious authorities
 2. Jerusalem is rejecting her Messiah
 3. The group that Jesus is starting with is indeed very small
 - a. So the picture of the mustard seed is fitting
 4. What would have been jarring and difficult to believe with this audience was the picture of growth and expansion that Christ gives
 5. He's not making modest claims, but just after telling us in the last parable that the field in which the kingdom is planted is the whole world, He's now telling us that this tiny little seed is growing to grow up into a vast reality
 - a. God's people have often struggled with seeing this promise when times are tough

- b. Given the 100 or so years of decline that the church in the west has been faced with, I am convinced that many Christians find this promise very difficult to accept
- 6. The way Christ speaks of the kingdom always involves growth and advance and victory, and I think the way we live and work for the future need to reckon with these promises and these pictures more seriously than they have in recent times
- 7. The fact that Christ uses optimistic language that features not decline and escape, but growth and victory puts Him in line with the OT prophets
 - a. God created the world in order to display His majesty, and He creates man as His deputy
 - i. Man's task is to take dominion and to push that glory into all the corners
 - ii. Sin interrupted this but did not alter God's zeal for His own glory to cover His creation
 - iii. Because of sin, this glory is now brought about by Christ instead of by Adam, but the purpose of the world did not change
 - b. In Genesis 3, God promises enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman
 - i. Notice something important – there is enmity between them, which means that the seed of the

woman is not destined to be in league with the
serpent seed against God

- c. In God's covenant with Abraham, it is promised that all the nations will be blessed by this covenant
 - i. We later see that the offspring of Abraham grows to include those grafted in by faith from all the nations
 - ii. A single seed, Isaac, has grown to include the world
- d. When Israel is to take the promised land, they do so bit by bit, often despite sin and setback
 - i. This is a type and a shadow of the Great Commission, of the Church slowly and imperfectly, but also most certainly taking the dominion of Christ to the far corners
- e. Daniel 2 gives a vision of a stone hurtling down and demolishing a statue which represented the various empires which occupied Jerusalem
 - i. This rock comes in the days of the Romans and over time grows into a giant mountain
- f. Ezekiel 17 contains a parallel picture to Christ's where God breaks off a sprig and plants it on a mountain top, and this grows into a cedar that houses every type of bird from many various places

g. In Ezekiel's temple vision (ch. 47) Ezekiel sees a stream of water coming out from the temple, and when he goes back to check again the water is ankle deep, then it is knee deep, and finally he goes back one last time – "*Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. 6 And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" (47:5, 6)*

i. What is this? Now we have a whole temple of stones with running, that is *living water* flowing down from it

ii. Ezekiel is seeing the Christian church, with rivers of living water, that is, the Holy Spirit, flowing out to cover the nations

8. Moses and Daniel and Ezekiel are not strange outliers in their expansive and optimistic outlook either

a. The prophetic hope, across many prophets as they look to the new covenant era is that "*the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the deep*"

(Habakkuk 2:14; Isaiah 11:9; Psalm 72:19)

e. A view of history in which the kingdom of God slowly but surely conquers does seem odd to some of us today, after 2 or 3 generations of evangelicals having largely moved from an eschatology of victory to one of defeat

- i. So this may seem strange to those of us who have lived after the two world wars, but this is classical Christianity in the main, including among conservative evangelicals
- ii. Not so interested in the different 'millennial' positions here, or the schedule of events, but about an overall demeanour to the history that is still in front of us
- iii. Spurgeon (technically premill, but with an optimistic demeanour)– *“Some narrow-minded bigots think that heaven will be a very small place, where there will be a very few people, who went to their chapel or their church. I confess, I have no wish for a very small heaven, and love to read in the Scriptures that there are many mansions in my Father's house. How often do I hear people say, 'Ah! strait is the gate and narrow is the way, and few there be that find it. There will be very few in heaven; there will be most lost.' My friend, I differ from you. Do you think that Christ will let the devil beat Him? That He will let the devil have more in Hell than there will be in heaven? No; it is impossible. For then Satan would laugh at Christ. There will be more in heaven than there are among the lost. God says, that 'there will be a number that no man can number who will be saved; but He never says, that there will be a number that no man can number that will be lost. There will be a host beyond all count who will get into heaven. What glad tidings for you and for me! For, if there are so many to be saved, why should not I be saved? Why should not you?”*

- iv. *“It would be easy to show that at our present rate of progress the kingdoms of this world never could become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. Indeed, many in the church are giving up the idea of it other than when they think of the return of Christ, which, as it agrees with our own idleness, is likely to be a popular doctrine. I myself believe that King Jesus will reign, and the idols be utterly abolished; but I expect the same power which turned the world upside down once will still continue to do it. The Holy Ghost would never suffer the allegation to rest upon His holy name that He was not able to convert the world.”*
- v. This was spoken by a man who wasn't living in a dream world – he battled depression daily, he was censured by the British Baptist Union, and he was deeply involved in many serious controversies in which he was fighting the liberalism of his day
- vi. Spurgeon was not looking through the lens of personal ease
 - 1. Quite the opposite, he was willing to persevere because he was convinced of the victory of God's kingdom not only after history, but also in history
- f. The growth of the kingdom is consistent with the stated purposes of the King
- g. This is His land, and He will yield the harvest He desires on the terms He desires
- h. Our job is to see our calling in that light
- i. This optimistic and positive vision of God's kingdom marching victoriously through history ought to fill us with optimism and purpose, even when our present circumstances look like the weeds are doing quite well

- i. Our view of the future very often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy
- ii. We've spent roughly two generations now with a kind of humanism and secularism that is convinced it's going to win
- iii. We've spent one generation with Islam moving west convinced it's going to win
- iv. Weve spend one and a half generations with a sexual revolution assured of its own advance and victory
- v. In that time, we've had a church that is convinced that its future is to get choked out by the darnel before the threshers come
- vi. Interestingly, everyone has been getting what they've been playing for
- vii. This hasn't always been the case, though
- j. We've seen the decline in our lifetimes of the old Christian order
 - i. But how did that Christian order get there?
 - ii. Was it all there in mature form right after the days of the apostles and it's been getting pillaged since?
- k. The Christian culture that is currently being eroded certainly didn't exist in the year 100 or even 500 or 1000
 - i. It's not like a mature Christendom existed in the year 200 and ever since it's been in the process of decay
 - ii. The Christian order of the west took centuries to build, often through seasons setback
 - iii. It didn't just drop out of the sky in the year 200 and has been eroded since

- iv. It's been built up slowly but surely since the time of Christ and the Apostles, often through suffering and setback, but always expanding over time
 - 1. How did we get from 11 guys with no Bibles and no churches to Bibles in every language, churches on every continent, awareness of biblical stories and language across cultures, and a world in which 40% of the people at least say they're Christian
- l. It was built by Christians who were convinced that the biblical vision of the kingdom was one of gradual and inevitable victory through history, despite expected ages of decline and setback
- m. Before Puritan England was pagan England where 25% of the women in London were prostitutes, and where many brothels specialized in offering girls under the age of 14
- n. Within a few generations of the intense persecutions of the early Christians by Nero and Domitian, the Roman Empire was Christianized and eventually gave birth to a Christian Europe
 - i. And as we deal with the weeds in the world, in the church, or even in our own lives, it is good that we remind ourselves of Christ's slow but sure victory over history
- o. This may be easier to understand when we scale it down to the level of our own personal sanctification
- p. We are justified in an instant, but the growing up into holiness is a lifetime of work

- q. This work is made possible and even enjoyable when we have a confidence in God's purposes for our victory
 - i. He who began a good work will complete it (Phil. 1:6)
- r. We fight our own personal battle for holiness out of victory, not for victory
- s. The same is true when we move out into the church's calling in the world
- t. Christ's purpose was to save the world
- u. We labour on behalf of the One who has overcome the world, the same One who has promised that His Word will bear fruit, that it will accomplish its work, and that the wheat field will be just fine until it is time to destroy the weeds once and for all
- v. The mindset of expansion that built the Christian order that we have enjoyed is the result of those Christians who took seriously the work and the promise of Christ's kingdom
 - i. This is what is needed today again, as always
 - ii. Some of the spies of Israel saw giants in the land God had promised them
 - 1. Others saw an abundant grape harvest
 - iii. Just as Ezra and Nehemiah had the vision to rebuild from the ruins, we need men today who can rebuild Christendom from the ruins
 - iv. Yes, secularism and pluralism has done great damage, but we still have much better field position to start with than many of our fathers in the faith had

- w. Because this vision of Christ's kingdom has been largely set aside, I want to do a short survey over church history to see that this idea has permeated God's people through all different ages
- i. I think this is because the idea is biblical, but even if you're not convinced, I hope you'll see that it's a common thread
- x. Schaff on Origen – *“expected that Christianity, by continual growth, would gain the dominion over the world.”*
- y. Athanasius – *“Since the Savior's Advent in our midst, not only does idolatry no longer increase, but it is getting less and gradually ceasing to be...while idolatry and everything else that opposes the faith of Christ is daily dwindling and weakening and falling, see, the Savior's teaching is increasing everywhere! So also, now that the Divine epiphany of the Word of God has taken place, the darkness of idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world in every direction are enlightened by His teaching.”*
- z. Augustine – *“history will be marked by the ever-increasing influence of the church in overturning evil in the world before the Lord's return”* (Zoba, *“Future Tense” Christianity Today [October 2, 1995]: 20*). *This would eventually issue forth in a “future rest of the saints on earth” (Augustine, Sermon 259:2) “when the Church will be purged of all the wicked elements now mixed among its members and Christ will rule peacefully in its midst.”*
- aa. Calvin – *“Micah proclaims how all the world will be brought to God at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. This reunification has already begun, is taking place now, and will continue until the end of the world. Jesus Christ has been*

designated the Lord, not simply of one corner of the world, but of all nations. Since our Lord Jesus Christ's kingdom has hardly begun (late 1500s), it is necessary for it to be implemented little by little, until it achieves its full perfection."

- bb. Puritans were almost universal in their belief in the nations streaming to Christ over the course of history
- cc. William Carey, father of the modern missions movement, held to the same view as his heroes Jonathan Edwards, John Eliot, and David Brainerd – known for “*Expect great things, attempt great things*”. This cannot be divorced from his view of the future - “*If the prophecies concerning the increase of Christ's kingdom be true, and if what has been advanced concerning the commission given by him to his disciples being obligatory on us, be just, it must be inferred that all Christians ought heartily to concur with God in promoting his glorious designs, for he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit...[Y]ea, a glorious door is opened, and is likely to be opened wider and wider, by the spread of civil and religious liberty, accompanied also by a diminution of the spirit of popery; a noble effort has been made to abolish the inhuman Slave- Trade, and though at present it has not been so successful as might be wished, yet it is hoped it will be preserved in, till it is accomplished.*”
 - i. Carey's view was that the Great Commission would indeed be successful in history – the nations would be discipled in obedience to Jesus, and that was his incentive for sending and going; Carey believed that God's

kingdom would continue to come, and that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven

- dd. B.B. Warfield held to this same vision so much so that his view was that when Christ returned, every last person living on earth at that time would be saved (1 Corinthians 15 where the ascended Christ is reigning from heaven until *all* His enemies have been put under His feet)
 - ee. In *The Rise of Puritanism* by William Haller, he says that “*men who have assurance that they are to inherit heaven have a way of presently taking possession of the earth.*”
 - i. This is also consistent with Christ’s own teaching that the meek are not destined to be taken out of the earth but rather destined to inherit it
 - ff. And when we read statements like Carey’s which involve the change in laws and culture around slavery, we can make an easy transition into Jesus’ second parable here
4. V.35 – “*He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”*”
- a. Again we’re dealing with a large scale image here
 - b. Three measures is about 50lbs, so this is enough bread to feed 100 people
 - c. If the first parable provides a picture about how *extensive* the kingdom gets, this one teaches us about how *intensive* the kingdom get
 - i. The yeast gets into everything – this isn’t so much a picture of expansion as it is a picture of how everything gets touched when the yeast of the gospel gets thrown in to the batch

- d. Matthew Henry – *“The leaven thus hid in the dough, works there. The leaven works speedily, so does the word, and yet gradually. It works silently and insensibly, yet strongly and irresistibly. Hide but the leaven in the dough, and all the world cannot hinder it from communicating its taste and relish to it, and yet none sees how it is done, but by degrees the whole is leavened. Thus it was in the world. The apostles, by their preaching, hid a handful of leaven in the great mass of mankind, and it had a strange effect; it put the world into ferment, and in a sense turned it upside down. It was thus effectual, not by outward force and therefore not by any such force resistible and conquerable, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts, who works, and none can hinder.”...“Christianity should be twisted in with national constitutions, that the kingdoms of the world should become Christ’s kingdoms, and their kings the church’s nursing fathers. Do your utmost to make the nations Christian nations.”*
- e. This is the genius of how Christ establishes His gospel and His kingdom in the world
- i. It doesn’t come by top-down force or spread by the sword like Islam
 - ii. The kingdom of Christ spreads through the preaching of the gospel, which is aimed at the heart of man
 1. The gospel changes the heart, the heart changes the man, and the man changes his surroundings
 2. These parables are telling us that this is not only possible in small temporary pockets, but that this is how the future will be as the kingdom moves on in history

- iii. We sometimes speak of a post-Christian world
 - 1. This is true in that clearly the heart religion of the world today is not the gospel of the living Christ
 - 2. And yet since His leaven has been sprinkled into the world in actual history, in another sense, there can never be a post-Christian world
 - a. Once the yeast is in a loaf, there is no way to take it back out again
 - 3. Christianity is now a permanent feature – it may indeed have seasons of setback, but it is here to stay for good, and according to this parable, its future is to keep pressing even deeper into everything
- f. So the arc of redemptive history can be summarized
 - i. God created a physical cosmos in which He desires to be glorified
 - ii. Through sin, man fell and this sin slowly spread out and corrupted everything in creation
 - iii. Through the gospel, man is redeemed and this redemption slowly spreads out and heals everything in creation
 - iv. God is not interested in discarding His creation by a final catastrophe, but in redeeming it; His goal of being glorified in His creation has not changed

1. What has changed, humanly speaking, is that this goal is now achieved through the gospel of Christ instead of through the work of Adam (from God’s perspective, this was the plan all along)
- g. The Bible promises that there will be suffering and setback all the way through this, but the advance is equally promised
 1. This is an important distinction to make
 - a. Culture wars are ineffective if we fight the symptoms
 - b. *Politics is downstream from culture, and culture is merely the external form of a people’s heart religion.*
 - c. So to make changes in the political realm, the culture must be teaching us what is good and true and beautiful, and for the culture to do that, it must flow out of the hearts of men, and for goodness, truth, and beauty to flow out of the hearts of men, the yeast of the gospel must get in there to do its work
 - d. None of this happens by our efforts, and yet our efforts should be consistent with the design and the direction of Scripture
 - e. The gospel changes the heart, the heart changes the man, and the man changes his surroundings
5. VV.34-35 – *“All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:*

“I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

- a. We looked at v.34 a few weeks ago when Jesus started speaking in parables
- b. He started this approach to serve as a dividing line between believers and unbelievers – to drive the truth deeper into believers and to leave the unbelievers in their confusion
- c. V.35 says that this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet
 - i. In this case, the prophet is the Psalmist, since Matthew then cites Psalm 78:2
 - ii. *“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, 3 things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.”*
 - iii. Then the Psalmist goes on and on reminding the people of how God established His testimony with Jacob and set up His law in Israel, how they were to teach their children, how God turned the Ephraimites back and opened up the sea for Moses and how the people still forgot God and He returned this with the kindness with water from a rock and bread from the sky
 - iv. An entire summary of the OT is given in this passage to demonstrate that God will keep His word, despite impossible odds

- d. One of the benefits of getting older is that there are more instances to look back upon of how God has delivered when we couldn't see our way forward
- e. I will be the first to admit that if we look at the world around us in terms of probability, it doesn't look good
 - i. But how do you think Abraham felt when he was promised a son in old age?
 - ii. Are we looking with the eyes of chance, or with the eyes of faith?
- f. Can we trust what Jesus says about the kingdom?
- g. Can we press ahead with a mindset of the victory that has been promised?
- h. Look at what has been brought upon the people of God, in the Bible and through church history, when they retreat or when they trust their circumstances more than they trust God's blueprint. Then compare that with what happens when they press ahead against all odds and see their circumstances in light of God's promises.
- i. My alfalfa was harmed each time I cut it, but the weeds were killed. When God shakes things, it unsettles His people, but it removes His enemies, so that only that which cannot be shaken will remain.
- j. Application for our own church – dealing with struggle even as we keep pressing ahead, keeping our eyes on the promises of God
 - i. Slanders – gossip
 - ii. A vibrant Christian life is an indictment against those who are happy to be lukewarm

- iii. Misery loves company, and this is why some of you are getting encouragement to compromise, to not take your Christian walk so seriously
 - 1. This is not because people in our lives want us to find more joy – there is no joy apart from peace with Jesus
 - 2. It is because they don't want to do the work of questioning their own ideas or of changing their lifestyle
 - a. It's easier to pull others down with them so they feel better about themselves
 - b. This is the psychology of vandalism – if I don't have something nice, instead of working towards it, I'll just vandalize other people's nice things
 - c. These people have no positive vision – they're content to throw rocks at people who are imperfectly doing constructive things
 - i. *“I like my way of doing things better than your way of not doing them.” — D.L. Moody.*
 - d. Jesus says to count this all joy – if you're in a war and people start shooting at you, it's a good sign that you're flying over a pretty strategic target
- iv. At root of all of this is human autonomy
 - 1. Things are not true because some person said them

2. The standard of truth is the God who created all facts and who created the relationships between all facts
3. He has shown us His mind in Scripture, and this means that *absolutely everything* must conform to that standard
 - a. When people challenge you on something, the authority to which you must ultimately appeal is Scripture
 - b. By what standard do we judge ideas and doctrines and practices? If you ask the right questions, you can hear what another's ultimate authority is (familiarity, personal opinion, etc.)
 - c. Our task as Christians is to always get back into the Word – *by what standard*
 - i. We're seeing the fruit of compromised Christianity
 - ii. The lukewarm Christianity of the last number of years is heading somewhere
 1. For some it is moving towards deconstruction and secularization. They are in the process of leaving the faith altogether, or at least of helping their children leave.
 2. For others it is moving back towards the ancient paths. A more robust and biblical faith that would be recognizable to the men of old

6. CHARGE – *“The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian cannot therefore be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated false or else in order to be made useful to the kingdom of God. The kingdom must be advanced not merely extensively, but also intensively. The church must not only seek to conquer every man for Christ, but also the whole of the man.”* – J. Gresham Machen

7. BENEDICTION

- a. 2 Corinthians 10:5 – *“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”*