

#### 4. PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Many of Jesus parables begin with ‘The kingdom of God is like . . .’ Jesus in his teaching and in his person and in his work is opening up to us the operations of God ruling this world, over against the way the world in opposition to God sees itself. In the face of the judgment that is coming, this requires of us a humble, receptive, and willingly active mindset, and a decisive response.

##### **The Secret of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:10–11, 34–35)<sup>1</sup>**

I will open my mouth to speak in parables;  
I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world. (Matt. 13:35).

This quote is from Psalm 78:2, which introduces a clear, lengthy and detailed setting-forth of God’s dealings with His people Israel (see particularly Psa. 78:1–4). The implication is that, whether the crowds understand Jesus’ parables or not, their meaning is plain for all who will hear with a willing heart, as the revelation of God in Christ is made plain (compare Ephesians 3:1–6; John 7:16–17).

Each time he spoke, Jesus was opening up a mystery not normally accessible to human minds. He began these parables with ‘The kingdom of God is like this’. What is ‘the Kingdom of God’? It is God at work, ruling His universe, bringing it to the goal He has purposed for it. That He has purposed for us. Jesus was revealing the working of God in human hearts, in human communities, and in the whole of the created order. And what God is doing is not always obvious to everyone. There is a hidden mystery to it. Like the seeds planted in the soil, from which ‘the earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head’, while we ‘sleep and rise night and day’, all unknowing, until we reap the benefit, all undeserving (Mark 4:26–29). It takes something more than raw intelligence to appreciate this. A certain unfussed acceptance of the way things are, a humble awareness of our limitations, and a positive hope that good will come, and a secure trust that what little we have done will help to bring it about. A lot of country people have got that. More so than a lot of city-dwellers, who think they have all power to do anything, and it all depends on us. But country or city, it eludes all of us if we don’t have the right mindset. God working in the human heart, and at the heart of human society and the world in which we live, is not always evident to the ‘outward appearance’.

What an amazing thing that we can come here on a Thursday morning and hear things that have been hidden since the foundation of the world—in other words, things that are not accessible to normal human knowledge! ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven’—to know how God operates in His universe, in His ruling over all things. And we’re hearing it in these parables, or picture-sayings, of Jesus. And they’re not too hard to understand—that’s why Jesus spoke them in this way—everyone can imagine a picture when it is put into words; everyone loves a story, and can identify with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Parallels in Mark 4:10–12 and Luke 8:9–10. Matthew uses ‘kingdom of heaven’, where ‘heaven’ is a respectful circumlocution for ‘God’. Matthew is from a Hebrew background, where it was customary not to pronounce the name of God, but substitute something else (as many translations of the Old Testament use ‘LORD’ for *YHWH/Yahweh*, and as we do with phrases like ‘Heaven knows’. Part of this was a literal and sometimes legalistic avoidance of taking the Lord’s name in vain (Exod. 20:7). Matthew and Luke use ‘secrets’ in the plural. The word is *musterion*, ‘mystery’, in the sense of something that has always been there, and has now been openly revealed. ‘A mystery is not a puzzle to be solved, but a reality to be lived in’. See further: Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Glory of the Mystery and the Mystery of the Glory*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1998.

So here we are, being let in on the secrets of the universe—how God runs His creation—and we're going to hear it in a most accessible form—it can be received and understood by anyone who wants to hear:

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing (Matt. 13:34).

Mark's version says, 'With many such parables he spoke the word to them, *as they were able to hear it*' (Mark 4:33)—no one has any excuse for not understanding these secrets of God's working, because Jesus put them over in such a graphic way. But there's a catch to it. Jesus' parables are a bit of a two-edged sword. He always said, 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear'. Anyone who wants to hear will understand. But if we do not want to hear what God is saying to us, we will not be able to understand—the parable itself will obscure or withhold the meaning from us—until we want to do what God says. Jesus also said:

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' (Matt. 13:13).

So hearing and understanding Jesus' parables takes a certain attitude or condition of heart: are we in a position to want to hear what God has to say to us, and to want to do what God says?

### **The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26–29)**

You can picture that as you hear it. Almost like a speeded up sequence in a documentary on the life cycle of a grain of wheat. You can see the grain going down into the ground, breaking open, shooting, growing to maturity and being harvested. Jesus was the master storyteller. He had the gift of painting a vivid picture in just a few words.

Part of the appeal of Jesus' word-pictures that he put together is that they were always part of everyday experience, immediately accessible to those who were listening. Every farmer would have known straight away what Jesus was talking about. They'd done their seeding. They'd been out to inspect their crops. They'd seen the new green shoots coming up from the soil, and they'd waited with expectant hope for the rains to come, and the harvest to be safely gathered in to the silo. And each year the mystery of that natural multiplication of grains, that was their livelihood, and knowing that there was nothing they could do to make it happen. It just did.

Could it be that God is actually working in our hearts? In ways we may not be aware of, over which we may have very little control? Do you think God may actually be working to multiply the seed, in our own lives, in the life of our churches, in ways we might never have suspected? Can we let that vivid word-picture-story do its mystery-work inside us, and see what happens?

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### **The Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31–32)**

Here is an instance of Jesus' quirky, almost Monty-Python-type sense of humour in the way he told his stories. He used comic cartoon-like elements of exaggeration, even absurdity, to get across the surprising and most unexpected way God operates in this world:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (Matt. 13:31–32).

Some Bible scholars take this all very seriously: ‘there are actually some seeds that are smaller than a mustard seed (but we won’t worry about that), and the mustard plant does not actually grow into a huge tree—more like a bush, really—but a sizable shrub at that’. What a wet-blanket way of reading the parables! Jesus and his hearers would have known that—and that’s the point! Jesus is not talking botanically here—He’s talking about the kingdom of heaven, about God’s action in ruling the world. You’ve got to get the joke. Jesus is telling them: ‘You know that tiny little mustard seed? Well, you plant it, and it grows, and grows’—and Jesus gets to the normal size of a mustard plant, but he doesn’t stop there, he keeps on going—‘and it grows and it grows, until it’s a massive tree, with great thick branches, and birds come from all the corners of the earth to nest there—that’s the way God operates, that’s the kingdom of heaven!’ Not what you’d normally expect, but who’s talking normal here? This is God, in action! Those who had listened to the prophets would have understood—Ezekiel had a picture very like that of one of the great empires of that time that were now no more (Ezek. 31). And now, Jesus is saying, the empire of God is here—in this tiny little mustard seed of Jesus and his little band of disciples.

### **The Leaven (Matthew 13:33)**

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Matt. 13:33).

A couple of things about that. It wasn’t actually yeast, it was a little bit of sour dough that you kept from last week’s batch, that by now has fermented, and when you add it to this week’s batch it helps it to rise. So it was a bit of dough that had actually gone bad. That’s why in most of the Bible ‘leaven’, as it’s called, is used as a picture of what has gone wrong or bad. It stood for everything that is unclean. Before the celebration of the Passover every bit of leaven had to be removed and cleaned out from the home, so you could start afresh and celebrate the feast of unleavened bread (see Exod. 12:15, 19; 13:7).

And the woman in the parable doesn’t ‘mix’ the leaven in the flour—the Greek original says she ‘hid’ it there. Why would she do that? It’s going to make all her flour go off! Jesus’ hearers would have known that. And maybe they’re thinking: ‘What’s she doing that for? Is she a bit stupid—or what?’ David Seccombe, who spoke at a CMS Encounter weekend, suggested maybe it was Passover time, and she hadn’t got rid of all the leaven in the house as she was supposed to, and she saw the Rabbi coming to check on her, and in her hurry she went and hid the bit she had left—but she puts it in the flour bin, of all places! Oops! And of course it all goes off. And do you know how much three measures of flour is? 50 litres! She’s not going to use all that in just one week. That’s enough to make bread for 150 people!

Do we get the point? That’s the kingdom of heaven. That’s the way God is operating right here and now. Jesus is saying: this motley little group of sinners that I’ve gathered round me, that you consider so unclean, they are going to infiltrate and infect the world with the ferment of my purity and light—and there’ll be enough bread of life there to feed the whole world!

### **The Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43)**

A farmer puts his crop in, and his neighbouring farmer, who doesn’t want him to get a good price for his grain at the silo, creeps in one night and spreads grass-seeds from weeds right across the paddock to contaminate the whole crop. Nasty. The rains come, and the seed begins to shoot, and up come these weeds with the wheat. And if you’ve ever done any gardening you’ll know that the weeds always grow better than the things you’ve planted that you want to thrive. So it’s not looking good. And the farm workers come to the farmer and say, ‘What do you want

us to do? We could go round and pick out all the weeds for you now before they get too big'. Well, that's what you'd normally do, isn't it? See a weed in the garden, and you pull it out, if you've got the time, before it gets too big or goes to seed. In recent seasons we've had soursobs at this time of the year—oxalis weeds—and I sprayed them, and then I sprayed them again, and they started to look a bit yellow and droopy, so we're getting somewhere! I've done that in previous years too, and maybe we're making a bit of headway, but they always come back. If you try to dig them up of course they just multiply—they like that. So the farm workers come to the farmer and say, 'Do you want us to get rid of the weeds right now?' And the farmer, surprisingly, says, 'No. I know what's going on here. That neighbour of mine has always hated me, and he's trying to do us harm. I'm actually going to leave it for now, and let them both grow up together.' And they say, 'Both grow up together—what are you thinking?' And he says, 'Uh—the time will come, when they will get sorted.' And by now Jesus' hearers would be saying: 'What? Is he crazy?' Not what you'd normally do. But this isn't about what you'd normally do. It's about the kingdom of heaven. It's about what God is doing in this great world of His.

And, if we think about it, isn't that more the way things are in real life, in this sinful world? In our community, on the global scale, maybe even in our own lives, or in the life of our churches, we've always got the bad with the good. Compare *Wolves in Sheep's Clothing* and *Good and Bad Fruit* (Matt. 7:15–19) and *Unclean Spirit* (Matt. 12:43–45). And it doesn't always do to try and fix it all here and now—if we ever could! Being sinful ourselves, it's not always easy for us to tell what is right and what is wrong anyway—we've all got our own opinions on that. If we launch out on a heresy hunt, or a moral crusade, we won't always get it right, and there most likely will be collateral damage: 'in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them' (Matt. 13:29).

Besides, this is about the kingdom of heaven—God in charge. Of course we need to be vigilant, and disciplined, ourselves—that is part of the Christian life. But only God sees the full picture, and only God knows the secrets of all hearts, and only God is the righteous judge. Paul the apostle says:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart (1 Cor. 4:3).

We're good at prejudging—and getting it wrong. There will come a time of true and just judgement, and that time is in our heavenly Father's good hands, and that judgement has been committed to His Son who has saved us. We are to entrust ourselves, and the outcome of all things, to Him, in His sovereign justice and mercy. That's the kingdom of heaven. That's the rule of God. So the master of the house in Jesus' parable says: 'Let both of them grow together until the harvest' (Matt. 13:30). The time will come when they will be sorted.

Only Jesus knows, so much better than we do, what the Bible calls 'the mystery of lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2:7), and only Jesus knows how best to deal with it. We would like to see a scenario by which the power of goodness gradually increases and takes over the world, bringing everyone with it, and so brings in the final kingdom of heaven. The revelation we have in the Bible is very different from that. There—in this parable, in the pronouncements Jesus makes about the end time (see e.g. Matt. 24), in the Book of Revelation, and elsewhere, we see that as the kingdom of heaven comes, so the power of evil grows commensurately, sometimes appearing to have the upper hand—'both grow together until the harvest'. Then there is a great and final judgement, and evil falls away forever, and all that is left is God's righteousness, and the righteousness of all those who have been purified in their belonging to Christ Jesus. It's not difficult at this time to see which of those two pictures is more true to life: the gradual progress of goodness—there was a time when we might have thought it would be like that, but do we see that happening now?—or the cataclysmic struggle preceding the final victory. Isn't that more what we see that in our own day? Why is it that in many parts of the world today antagonism and violence against

Christians is increasing so sharply? Is it not because the kingdom of God is growing—more and more people are becoming Christian believers—and that doesn't go down well, and so the opposition grows more fierce. That's the way it works, and that's how it will be up to the end: 'Let both of them grow together until the harvest' (Matt. 13:30). And then let God's victory be revealed in the final defeat of all evil. And in that grand victory of God, 'Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matt. 13:43). That is the good news for our day, and for every age.

Jesus didn't always explain his parables. Mostly he left them to do their own work. But he did explain this one. And he did so in no uncertain terms:

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels (Matt 13:37-39).

That's pretty clear and direct, isn't it? Jesus knows the mystery of evil and the mystery of the workings of God's rule, and he's opening them out to us. Jesus has already faced the one behind the workings of evil, 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9). Jesus has his measure, and has defeated him. Jesus knows our sin from the inside better than we do—he has borne it in his own body on the cursed tree of the cross. And Jesus has lived in daily fellowship with the God and Father of us all. Jesus has entrusted himself entirely to the Father's just and righteous judgement on our human sin and all evil, and he has held on in love to the end, and he has won through. Jesus knows what he's talking about from the inside. And he's bringing it now to us.

There is one part of this parable that scares people, so that they often take offence at it, and it's not hard to guess which part it is. It's what happens to the weeds:

Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned . . . Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:30, 41-42).

What does Jesus say again at the end of this parable? 'Let anyone with ears listen!' (Matt. 13:43). How we react to this parable, and whether this parable is good news or bad news for us, will depend on how we listen—how we hear. Are we hearing this as the wheat? Then that is good news for us:

gather the wheat into my barn . . . Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:30, 43).

For all eternity! Isn't that something we long for?

What about the weeds? When I do dig up soursobs and other weeds I don't put them in my own compost, for them to reinfest the rest of the garden again. I put them in the green bin to be taken away and composted at temperatures that ensure they will not do any more damage. So, do we want there to be traces of evil—ours or anyone else's—still floating around and polluting and spoiling God's new heavens and new earth? Does not the prospect of being utterly free of that forever please us mightily?

Some of us may say, 'But what if you are not righteous? What if you are one of the weeds?' Some of us may feel like that. But why would you ever want to be a weed? When the one who is speaking to you, the one who is telling us this, has done everything necessary to take away every scrap of your sin forever in his great cleansing and forgiveness—have you received that, do you have the faith to believe it—and he's going to make you shine like the sun with his purity

and righteousness for ever in the kingdom of your everlasting Father? Listen to what he's saying. Take that now, and live in it forever.

Or are we worried about some people we know who may not yet be in this righteousness from God? Then if we know it, and if we're concerned for them, why don't we tell them? Do you think they really enjoy being weeds? And do you think they wouldn't want to change it for being wheat given half the chance? And if that's what Jesus has done for us, surely he can do it for anybody.

So, 'those who have ears, let them hear!' Are we in a position this morning to hear what God is saying to us in these wonderful parables of Jesus? Do we have a heart to want to hear what God is saying, and to want to do what He says? 'Let anyone with ears—listen!' (Matt. 13:43).

### **The Net (Matthew 13:47–50)**

An image that would resonate with some of the disciples and Jesus' calling of them (Matt. 4:18–22). The emphasis is on the mixed composition of those who are drawn to the kingdom. Thus it compares with the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23, where not all bear fruit), and the parable of the grain and the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43. Compare especially 13:49–50 with 13:40–42). Emphasizes again the decisiveness of the judgment at the end of the age. The implication is that, in a church of mixed composition, we are not to take prematurely into our own hands the judgment of God. Nevertheless, the gathering of people, and the gospel that effects it, is to have this judgment firmly in view (as in e.g. Matt. 3:10, 12; or Paul in Athens in Acts 17:30–31). This decisiveness, and opportunity for the decision that is required by it, is presented in all Jesus' parables and teaching.

### **The Scribe (Matt. 13:51–53)**

Have you understood ...?': See 13:23 ('the one who hears the word ... understands it ... bears fruit and yields') and 7:24 ('who hears these words of mine and acts on them').

A 'scribe' is a teacher of the law of God (compare Heb. 5:12–14: 'you ought to be teachers') while remaining a disciple or learner—the word 'trained' is literally 'discipled'—rather than a rabbi or master (see Matt. 23:8–12). A scribe 'trained for the kingdom of heaven' brings out 'what is new and what is old': Not necessarily as a balance or a blending of the two, but in the sense of Matt. 5:17–18, where Jesus has come in the present as the fulfillment of the law of God from of old. In Matt. 5:21–48, Jesus rejects the partial, distorted or legalistic application of the law of God outside of this present and dynamic fulfillment. Such a 'scribe', then, is exemplified by Paul in Eph. 3:2–6, with his wide-ranging understanding and explicating of 'the mystery of Christ', and John in 1 John 2:7–8, with the commandment that is both old and new, Peter on the prophets and the gospel in 1 Pet. 1:10–12, and indeed Matthew himself in the whole of his gospel which highlights the fulfillment of what had been spoken by God through the prophets.