

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 07/30/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, July 30<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### Scribes of the Kingdom

This week's lectionary text ends the Parabolic Discourse with six more parables about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. These are the Parables of the Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Value, the Net and New and Old Treasures. These parables inform modern-day disciples not only of the nature of the Kingdom, but the behaviors required to reflect the Kingdom to the world.

#### Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 Commentary

Carrying on from last week, the lectionary text begins with two short parables omitted from last week's text (13:31-33) and then three more parables (vv.44-50). Verses 51-52 are also considered by some as a parable. All five (or six) of these parables are used by Jesus to continue to explain the nature of the Kingdom to His disciples. All these parables begin, "*The kingdom of heaven is like...*" There first two of these parables (The Parable of the Seed and the Leaven) are addressed to the crowds (v.24) and the remaining parables are addressed only to Jesus' disciples.

*<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> 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."*

Some people use the fact that the mustard seed is not in fact the smallest of all seeds and thus they argue the Bible should be dismissed entirely. Such skeptics must assume Jesus should have said, the smallest seed is that of the epiphytic orchids. At which point someone in the crowd would no doubt have asked, "Teacher, what is an epiphytic orchid?" Jesus would then have had to explain how these "air plants" are found in tropical rain forests with seeds so small they are designed to blow in the air so that they can attach themselves to trees at the top of the canopy where there is more sunlight. No doubt the question would then have arisen, "What is a tropical rainforest?" At some point in this conversation someone in the crowd would surely have asked, "What has all this got to do with the Kingdom?" This is perhaps why Jesus stayed with what His audience was familiar with, much to the chagrin of twenty-first century skeptics. Of course, there is no pleasing some people (Matthew 11:16-19) and some people are destined never to have the truth revealed to them (13:10-17, 34-35).

The expression as small as a mustard seed was a common occurrence in Jewish culture and was the proverbial for smallness.<sup>1</sup> Jesus used this same expression elsewhere – faith as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20). Thus, the kingdom starts in the smallest possible way yet ends up surprisingly large. The portrayal of a mustard tree so large as it would attract birds is perhaps not an exaggeration given some commentators observations but the single message here is clear.

<sup>33</sup> *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."*

In this parable, another common occurrence from daily life is used: breadmaking. A small piece of dough left over from the last batch (which contains yeast) is placed in about three gallons of flour (enough to feed a hundred and fifty people). Soon, the whole dough will be transformed. "*Three measures of flour*" is also found elsewhere in Scripture that seems to be associated with a divine visitation (Genesis 18:6; Judges 6:19; I Samuel 1:24). Typically, leaven is used in a negative connotation in Scripture (cf. Matthew 16:6) but in this case the positive connotation is used. A small piece of leaven can transform a whole batch of dough. This parable emphasizes how the Kingdom is at work, often in secret (hidden), yet great transformations occur. Like the Parable of the Mustard Seed, this is another example of a contrast between size and effect.

<sup>44</sup> *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*

Another common occurrence is used in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Valuables were often hidden in the earth at the first sign of trouble. There are many examples across history where hordes of gold coins have been found. Obviously, the original owners never returned to claim them. It is possible to dig into the details here such as the man, probably a day laborer, must have been working diligently since he tilled the earth deep enough to find the treasure in the first place or look at the legal specifics as to who owns the treasure under Jewish law. The straightforward simple message of this parable is the man valued the treasure so greatly that "*in his joy*" he was willing to sell all he had to secure it. For the children of the Kingdom, they must reflect the same joy in finding the Kingdom as the man did at finding the treasure and pursue it in the same way.

<sup>45</sup> *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, <sup>46</sup> who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."*

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value is a similar parable to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. On this occasion the man is a merchant rather than the day laborer. Perhaps the merchant can be compared to someone who has diligently been seeking the Kingdom compared to the day laborer who just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Regardless, the behavior of the two men (and the message) is the same.

<sup>47</sup> *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. <sup>48</sup> When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

The Parable of the Net is like the Parable of the Weeds. Here the separation of the wheat and the weeds used to illustrate the final judgment at the end of the age compares to how fishermen separate the good fish from the bad fish that become caught up in the drag net. While the fishermen would have understood the Parable of the

---

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 88.

Weeds, they certainly would have connected more to one involving their own profession. In case there is any misunderstanding, Jesus explains this parable (vv.48-49) just as the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds also had explanations. Today, dragnet fishing is not looked favorably upon by conservationists since the process is so notorious for bycatch leading to large numbers of marine life being killed. There will be no escaping the dragnet at the end of the age.

*<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”*

This final parable concludes the third teaching discourse (the Parabolic Discourse) in Matthew’s Gospel with: “*And when Jesus had finished these parables...*” (v.53). Jesus checks if His disciples understand what has been revealed and yet hidden to others. They are quick to respond in the affirmative, but their eyes will not be fully open until after the resurrection. Jesus then compares His disciples to the Jewish scribes – those trained to correctly interpret Scripture. Jesus’ disciples, however, are scribes trained for the Kingdom of Heaven (v.52). Through Jesus’ training, the scribes of the Kingdom can unlock the treasure from the Old Testament Scripture and Jesus’ new and hidden teaching that dates to the foundation of the world (v.35).

### Reflections and Application

Jesus’ parables about the Kingdom must have been very reassuring to His disciples. The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven tell us from small beginnings the Kingdom will have a transformative effect many orders of magnitude greater than its size. While Christ’s disciples knew just exactly how small their little band was, today the institutional church has already achieved the status of the largest of all the “garden plants” based on the number of followers of Christianity (including Roman Catholics). Yet the big bush we are used to is now dying – at least in the west. The church of course is not synonymous with the Kingdom but rather it is meant for others to get a glimpse of life in the Kingdom under God’s rule of mercy and justice. These parables paint the picture of a Kingdom that is quite different than much of the church reflects. These parables contain simple messages that help the people of the church, the *Ekklesia*, to behave in a way to ensure they reflect the Kingdom:

First, in the Parable of the Leaven, the yeast must be in contact with the dough to have its transformative effect. The church must be fully present in its community living out the Gospel in order to fulfill its mission and purpose. Yet what transforming effects does a church have whose behavior is no different than the surrounding community? Does the church behave like leaven if it compromises the Gospel to fit in? Perhaps the leaven in this case is working the other way around like in the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). What about those churches who have legalistic barriers to entry? Perhaps this reflects more of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees that Jesus warned us about (Matthew 16:6, 12). Rather, Kingdom life means getting one’s hands dirty.

Second, the Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value illustrate the surpassing value of the Kingdom and the exclusive demands it places on our lives. Participating in the Kingdom brings great joy but demands everything. Are we willing to express the same commitment as the man who found the treasure and the merchant who found the pearl? A quick audit of where our time, talent, treasure, and longings are currently invested will reveal the true answer. What sort of kingdom do our lives reflect?

Third, as disciples, we are all scribes of the Kingdom. Our responsibility as being trained in the knowledge of the Kingdom is to bring out the value of the Gospel, without distortion or dilution, and make it relevant to contemporary audiences.