

What is the Kingdom of Heaven Like?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Mark Vroegop

24 He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, 25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

31 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." 33 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."

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed is the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43).

Personal expectations can be very powerful, can't they? I wonder how many of you would say that your life has turned out like you expected? How many of you would say that life has **not** turned out like you expected? Sometimes that can be bad. Sometimes that can be good.

In 1995, we joyfully discovered that we were pregnant. After a number of weeks, Sarah was measuring little ahead of where the doctor thought she should be so he ordered an ultrasound. After 30 minutes, the technician said "Okay, we're about half-way done." I was thinking "What is taking so long?" And then I saw her type in "Fetus A" on the monitor. I noticed that and said, "Wait a minute...you just wrote Fetus A. That implies..." "A fetus B," she said. Twins!

Not what we had expected, and the next few moments were a flurry of emotions as my expectations for my life were being seriously altered.

Expectations can be very powerful not only when it comes to your personal life, but also as it relates to your spiritual life. Let me give you a few statements that reflect powerful personal expectations:

- I thought that coming to Jesus meant that my life is going to get better
- If God is good, then why did he allow my son to die
- There is no point in what I'm going through
- Church people are really disappointing

Ever felt like that? I'm sure most of us have. Let me give you one more:

- I know Jesus is a winner but it doesn't look like that right now.

So what are your expectations of Jesus and his kingdom? This is the primary question that Jesus is trying to help his followers understand in our text today. The main point that we find in Matthew 13 is that Jesus wants us to **be careful about how we evaluate the success of his kingdom**. To show us this he gives three parables: Weeds, Mustard Seed, and Leaven.

What is the Kingdom of Heaven Like?

The question as to the nature of the kingdom of heaven is critical because it is directly connected to how you think about life, how you process events, and even what you do. Your understanding and belief about the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven are a filter through which life is processed and actions are determined. In other words, if you have the wrong expectations for what the kingdom of heaven is like don't be surprised if you are really disappointed or disheartened. Additionally, the wrong expectations can also cause you to celebrate over the wrong things or point to the wrong things as evidence that God is blessing.

There are two main points about evaluating the success of the kingdom that we are given here. After we look at these, we draw some conclusions as to how this impacts us.

1. The Kingdom of heaven involves a vindication that is delayed

Yet again Jesus begins with a familiar beginning, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared..." And once again he uses an agricultural context to teach an important lesson.

The storyline is fairly straightforward. A man sowed good seed his field, and in the night his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. Many of you will know the weeds as "tares" from the King James translation. The meaning of the word "weeds" implies a

"variety of darnel weed that closely resembles wheat and is almost impossible to distinguish from it until the wheat ripens and bears grain."¹ An enemy secretly plants seed that will be hard to differentiate from the good seed. So there is a deceptiveness implicit in the sowing and the in the seed that is sown.

However time revealed that the field was full of both weeds and wheat (v 26). The servants then approach the master and enquire as to what has happened. They are confused. The master tells them that an enemy has been at work, and they suggest that they should pull up the weeds immediately (v 28). However the master replies with a different plan:

29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matt 13:29-30).

The master's instructions are for them to wait, allow the weeds and wheat to grow together, and then to address the problem at the time of the harvest. That's the story.

Gratefully, we not only have the actual parable, but we also have Jesus' explanation of the meaning behind the parable. Almost everything in the parable has an allegorical connection to something else. There are eight observations for us to note:

- **The sower is the Son of Man (Jesus) (v 37).** This should be fairly obvious, but what is interesting is the fact that the verb sowing is in the present tense, indicating that his sowing activity is continual.
- **The field is the world (v 38).** Jesus is trying to explain to the disciples how to interpret the large crowds that are following him.
- **The good seed are the children of the kingdom (v 38).** They belong to God which is why they are called "children of the kingdom." They live in one world while belonging to another.
- **The weeds are the sons of the evil one (v 38).** Once again Jesus identifies that there is no neutrality when it comes to him. There are only two camps. Those who are evil do not just do bad things; they are sons of the evil one.
- **The enemy is the devil (v 39).** Jesus sets up the explanation to make the contrast between good and evil very clear. There is a kingdom conflict that is happening.
- **The harvest is the close of the age (v 39).** This is the end of life as we know it – the consummation or the completion of God's activity.
- **The reapers are the angels (v 39).** Angels are often connected with the completion of this age (see 16:27; 24:31, and 25:31).

¹ John MacArthur, Matthew 13-28, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1987), 367.

- **The harvest is the judgment day (v 40).** It is this last point that gets the most information and is the most important. Jesus indicates that it will be at judgment day that the weeds and wheat are truly separated. Regarding the weeds he says:

“Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:40-43).

The explanation of the parable reaches its climax in the first word of final verse: “Then!” Finally, after the wicked are identified, displaced, and judged – “then!” “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v 43). Notice how personal, how glorious, how triumphant the tone is here! Wickedness is finally contained. All the causes of sin and all law-breakers are rounded up and punished. Justice has finally come. And now the righteous can shine in their Father’s kingdom without the continual and nagging presence of evil. Righteousness has won!

The meaning should be obvious: vindication for the people of God and plan of God is delayed. Justice is not immediate but it is certain. Righteousness may seem to be losing but will, in the end, be victorious. Therefore, be careful how you judge the success of God’s kingdom. The kingdom involves a vindication that is delayed.

2. The Kingdom of heaven has an influence that is deceptive

The next two parables are listed in close proximity of each other because they carry the same meaning. Both parables involve natural elements and both are very small.

The first is the parable of the mustard seed, and Jesus begins like he did in the former parable – “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field” (v 31). Now the point is made clear as to why Jesus chose a mustard seed in the next verse: “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” (Matt 13:32).

A mustard seed is about the size of a piece of fertilizer, and it grows into a very large tree (8-12 feet) in comparison to the other garden plants. Jesus says that the mustard seed can produce a tree large enough to hold the birds of the air and their nests, which is probably a reference to the broad reach of the kingdom (see Ezekiel 17:23-24).

Now it is important to note here that technically there are seeds smaller than the mustard seed. Jesus was merely making this comment in light of what his listeners knew and experienced for

the purpose of comparison. His point is that some very small can produce something very large. You shouldn't equate small size with little power. Size can be deceptive.

The second parable is about leaven. In the New Testament times, leaven was a piece of last week's dough, and it was used to make the next week's dough rise. You could think of it like Amish Friendship Bread where you receive the batter from a friend, let it set for a week, and it grows. This is the same concept.

Now often we think of leaven in a bad context because of how often Jesus uses leaven to describe fake, external religion (Matt 16:6, 8:15), and it was forbidden in offerings because it was viewed as corrupt. But here Jesus is showing his disciples how effective a little bit of leaven can be. It is hidden inside a large amount of dough and the leaven permeates the bread. The point is that something hidden can affect the whole.

So we have two parables with very similar points. Something small can grow into something large; small seeds do not equal small plants. Something hidden can have a profound effect. The influence of a small seed or hidden leaven can be deceptive.

What should we do if the kingdom is like this?

These three parables show us a vantage point on the kingdom, and they should not only help us know more about the kingdom; they should help us look at life differently. Let me give you some thoughts or applications of these parables.

1. Realize that God is not like us nor does things in the way we would often do them.

In order to understand the ways of God and the kingdom, we have to see that God works in ways that do not make sense to us, and that we are often dumbfounded and surprised at what God does and how he does it. Think of all the examples in the Bible that God's ways are so backwards to our thinking: he chooses Israel to be his people, he puts questionable people in the genealogy of his son, his son enters the world as a helpless baby, the first followers of Jesus are uneducated non-influential men, and the death of his son is scandalous. God often works in ways that make us shake our heads. Small, insignificant, "scum of the world" and surprising are his specialty because it gives him the most glory (see 1 Cor 4:13, 2 Cor 4:1-6).

2. Know that delayed judgment is still judgment

A delay in judgment can create two emotions: apathy and anger. When a person commits evil, seems to enjoy it, and there is no direct consequences the human heart can easily begin to believe that he or she has gotten away with it. Apathy toward God can set in. Often non-Christians can convince themselves that since there is no immediate divine pushback that there

is no problem or (worse) that God doesn't exist or sin isn't a real problem. The kindness of God is meant to lead us toward repentance (Rom 2:4). Don't make the mistake of thinking that delayed judgment means that no judgment is coming.

This also applies believers who live in a world filled with unfairness, injustice and persecution. The desire for justice to be done and wrongs to be made right is not sinful. But there is a tendency is to think that if you can't see it on your time frame, then it isn't fair or right. We learn from Matthew 13 that God is not surprised about the weeds in the field, and he is going to make it all right. He will separate those who are his and those who are not, but not now. So don't be angry. Trust and wait.

3. Never underestimate the power the gospel

These parables remind us that we cannot see clearly what God is doing and what he is going to do. You need no better example of this than the person and work of Christ. Consider how backwards the plan of God seems. The Son of God comes to the creation as a helpless baby, permanently taking on flesh. He lives a sinless life and is abandoned by everyone. He is killed in a way that is cursed by God, and then he is buried. One man, one cross, one death, and three days of waiting. Then! Vindication and eternal influence beyond which anyone could have ever imagined. And this is what the kingdom of heaven is like! The gospel is loaded with divine power. Something so simple can radically change a person's heart, a family's orientation, and an entire nation.

But even more don't underestimate the power of the gospel as lived out through you. God wants his children to be the salt of the earth. The kingdom of heaven is meant saturate your life, your family, and your work. Just because you don't "preach" on Sunday don't make the mistake of thinking that you not a minister. The gospel is like leaven; so make it permeate everything you do (1 Cor 10:31).

4. Be careful how you define success

The final thing that just jumps out of this text is a cautionary note about how we define success when it comes to the kingdom. It would be easy to think that a field full of weeds and wheat was a mistake. It would too common to dismiss the small seed as having little potential. And it would be too familiar to think that if you can't see something happen, then nothing is. But God doesn't work that way. Therefore, we should be careful about how we define success, his blessing, or even how we define failure.

Tonight we will break ground on the largest expansion project in our church's 25 year history, and I want us to rejoice at what God has done and continues to do at our church. But at the same time, I want to remind you that kingdom of heaven is not defined by large buildings, positions of power, credibility with the world, or even the number of people. It is true that

healthy things grow; but cancer grows too. I think it is often the case that God is more involved in less than we think and less involved in more than we think.

My caution is just to be sure that we keep our eye on the real prize which is not a facility or expansion or growth. The real prize is Christlikeness which is marked by fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). The real prize is not just to have great gifts but to know that if we have great gifts and no love, we are nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3). The real prize is that we might know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering (Phil 3:10). It is that we might live out the words of Micah 6:8 –

“He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? “

So let us be sure that we know that the kingdom of heaven is often surprising. It shocks our expectations in order to remind us that we are not God. It challenges our preconceived ideas about what success looks like. It calls us to look at life differently, serve with humility, and trust in God’s sovereignty.

The kingdom of heaven involves a vindication that is delayed and an influence that is often deceptive. Jesus calls us to be careful about how we evaluate success when it comes to the kingdom because, after all, it is his kingdom – not ours.

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