

Bible Study of the Parables in Matthew's Gospel
By Rev Norman Hiley

Parables of Jesus - Parable of Tares and Wheat Matt.13 vv24-30; 36-43

No.2

In the 2nd Parable Matthew records that Jesus employed another agricultural theme -**The Parable of the Tares and the Wheat** - or simply the "Parable of the Weeds".

Read vv24 -30 - that is the story. What about the meaning?

When Jesus had left the crowd and returned to the house where he was staying the disciples took the opportunity to ask him what the Parable meant.

Read vv34-43. This is the meaning given by Jesus.

It reveals a mixture of the true and the false - between the sham and the imitation.

1. There are 2 Sowers v37

v37 - The sower is the Son of Man ie Jesus who sows good seed with a view to reaping a better harvest.

The seed in this parable is not the Gospel, but people (men and women) cp v38 who are planted in the field which is the world. They are the "sons of the kingdom".

The 2nd Sower is the Devil v39 who is sowing imitation seed - described here as "sons of the evil one"- the Devil's children. This sower operates at night - in the dark.

The work of both sowers is deliberate.

Jesus sows children of the kingdom in order for them to grow to spiritual maturity.

The Devil is out to see that it doesn't happen.

There is only one field -but there are 2 sowers at work- one openly and the other secretly.

The field is God's world which Jesus came to save - and which the Devil seeks to destroy.

2. There are 2 Sowings -

a) Of Wheat v38 - the children of the kingdom are planted here in the field of the world to grow to maturity and reproduce a fruitful harvest. They are primarily sustained by the soil - They are in the world, but not part of the world.

We are planted here to do something to enhance the glory of God. We are to have growing within us the Fruit of the Spirit - a harvest of righteousness which will please the Lord.

b) Of Tares (Weeds) vv25 and 38

The Devil came at night whilst others were asleep and sowed tares among the wheat.

How shall we know the difference? "By their fruit you shall know them." Matt 7 vv16-18

It is hard to tell the difference at the beginning as the Tares grow among the Wheat.

This is typical church life - within the average congregation they both grow together and it is sometimes hard to tell the difference.

However, there is a difference even at the early stages when the shoots break through the surface of the soil. Not everyone can see that difference, but there are some who can – e.g. the servants knew the difference. v27- and the Master also knew v28 - "An enemy did this", he said.

It may be possible for someone who is only pretending to be a believer to fool many, but never the Master- or some of his most faithful servants.

The Tares could be called hypocrites - which simply mean pretending to be what you are not. Those who nourish and care for the flock can tell the difference between sheep in sheep's clothing and wolves in sheep's clothing - and so could these farm workers tell the difference between wheat that was real, and tares that was just a look-alike.

What can they do about it? They had a remedy - "Shall we pull up all the tares?" v28b
But the Master curbed their enthusiasm with an emphatic "NO". And he gave the reason for saying NO. v29- There will be a time to separate the true from the false - but not yet - because in pulling up the false you may root up the wheat as well. His solution was - "Let them both grow together for now. When it is time for harvest it will be time to separate the good from the bad."

The sower who directed the sowing has also a say in how to tend the growing seed, and to the destination of the expected harvest.

3. There is only one Harvest v30

The instructions will be to the harvesters - "Separate the true from the false. Put the wheat into the barn - and burn the weeds."

When will it be harvest time? v39 - "at the end of the age".

Who are the harvesters? The angels are the reapers.

Who will be involved? Those represented by the wheat - and those by the weeds.

The "Wheat" have nothing to fear, because they will be gathered together and safely stored in the Master's barn.

It will not be so for the Weeds - which although it still looks like wheat there is one very important difference - there is no ear of corn at the head of the stalk. There may be plenty of shoot, but no fruit.

The responsibility of dealing with the tares is not ours, but His.

The Lord has the final word vv30 -41. The situation is now during the time of Grace (which is where we are now)

The real and the sham grow together. - But not forever - there will be a separation at harvest time.

Tares grow with a striking resemble to the wheat, as do those who are true believers and those who only pretend to be. They are difficult to separate by the untrained eye - but the harvesters sent by Jesus know the difference.

Apart from the difference at the end - so many things are the same.

e.g. The tares grow in the same environment as the wheat - ie within the church -

They both draw the sustenance from the soil, but only one has the potential to reproduce the likeness a 100 fold. The tares will never produce a harvest of wheat, because they are not wheat.

These differences may be concealed from all but those with the most trained spiritual discernment - but one day all will be revealed. cp 1John ch.3 vv8 and 10.

v8 "He who does what is sinful is of the devil - the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil"

That is how it will be at the end of the age - but it seems that in the meantime the devil continues to try to destroy the growing of the wheat.

v10 - "this is how we know who the children of God are, and who are the children of the devil. Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God " (ie true wheat)

The Parable is not only about recognising the true and the false - but it is a warning to all who hear the Gospel to believe it and accept it so that they might become children of the kingdom. In the natural world wheat cannot become tares, and tares cannot become wheat - but in the spiritual world this change is necessary because we all start off as tares and are changed by faith and grace into the true wheat as we become the children of God instead of children of the Devil.

Which are the real and which are the imitation? By their fruit you shall know them.

Wheat which is good seed can become unfruitful v22 - and tares can be changed into wheat. Eph 2 vv1-5 (Read this passage)

For the disciples in Jesus day - and for us in our day - the lesson is clear.

We can either be wheat or weeds - but we cannot be neither. We are either one or the other.

As we through faith grow into Christ-likeness we are not to judge others as they grow alongside us, even if we think that they are just a sham.

That is the task of the angel reapers at the harvest at the end of the age.

What we have to do is to grow gracefully and fruitfully for the Master, and then we will be safe at harvest-time and be safe in the place he has prepared for us.

Look at the end of the tare's v42 - and the wheat v43.

v43c "He who has ears to hear let him hear" -

ie We are to use our ears for more than holding our spectacles in place. We are to use them so that the truth goes in both ears into our hearts and takes root there to grow for the glory of God.

In Matthew 13 vv31-33 follows two more short Parables concerning the Kingdom – both of which follow the same pattern of teaching as the Parable of ‘The tares and wheat’ i.e. the bad effect of allowing worldly ways into the church which will adversely affect the character of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

These are The Parables of Jesus - Concerning the ‘Mustard Seed and the Leavened Meal’

In between the parables of the "Sower" and "The Tares and Wheat" Jesus told two more parables to the crowds. Neither of these is explained by Jesus, to either the crowd or to the disciples in private - and they did not ask him to do so.

I wish they had because this is a case of those only wanting to understand being able to do so.

The Parable can have 2 quite different meanings depending on whether each is taken separately, or whether they are taken together in Matthew 13 as one parable with 7 parts.

Remember the definition of a parable –

"It is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" -

and its purpose is to Reveal, and not to conceal.

Remember the rules about parables -

They are meant to help some people to see the truth and others not to see it.

Whether the listener sees and understands depends on the frame of mind they are in.

Do they want the Truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Unfortunately, we are as guilty as others in hearing what we want to hear, and seeing only what we want to see.

This is how we should approach scripture if we are to understand it and benefit from it.

1. The Parable - What does it say?
 2. The Purpose - What does it mean?
 3. The Plan - What does it say to me? ie How does it apply to me?
-

The Parable of the Mustard Seed Read vv 31-32

1. The Parable - what does it say?

It says something simple about a tree growing from a tiny seed.

It is about small beginning which have significant endings.

Anything worthwhile often has a small beginning. eg Child's savings start with pennies and end up in pounds. Marks and Spencer began as a 1 penny stall in Leeds Market.

Never judge anything by its size at the beginning - whether it is a work done for God, or a person. Every great person started in a cradle - even those we consider to be giants of the Faith. As the saying goes - "that small is beautiful"

So here we have the sowing of a tiny seed growing into a big tree instead of a small bush.

2. The Purpose - what does it mean?

This is not so easy to determine, because it can mean 2 things depending on where your mind is when you read it.

- It teaches - a) that God prefers to use small things
b) that small things often grow too big - bigger than intended.

God's method certainly is to use small and insignificant things and people to do great things for Him eg 1 Cor.1v26ff – there were not many wise, powerful or of noble birth used by God. He seems to prefer and to use the "foolish, weak and despised" to do his work.

WHY? So that no-one can boast of what they did for God.

eg Gideon was the least in the smallest clan, who became a mighty warrior used by God.

David was the youngest of Jesse's family - a shepherd who became a king.

Jesus uses the microscopic mustard seed to illustrate the kingdom.

The kingdom is in one aspect at least "like" the mustard seed - it is small, but within that smallness is the potential to become something great.

The mustard seed is the "least of all the seeds". It is small - a mere speck. But when it is planted in the earth it has the potential to grow. We all know this to be so.

What is inside the packet of seed looks nothing like the plants shown on the outside - but we see the transformation when we plant the seed and wait for it to grow.

In Rev.ch19 we read of a heavenly choir of 1000's of redeemed people praising God.

It is a choir that no man can count - but how did this great choir begin?

It began with God choosing 1 man, and from that one man, Abraham, came 2 (Isaac and Ishmael); and from Isaac came Jacob and Esau; and from Jacob came the 12 tribes of Israel.

Start with 1 - then there were 12 sons - and they had children so that 70 souls went to Egypt - and 400 years later 2.5 million came out.

This tiny seed certainly had grown - but it had grown too big for God

The nation became self sufficient and complacent. In their over-confidence they didn't need God, and they began to tell God what was best for them that he should do.

Disobedience kept them out of the Promised Land, and they all died in the desert.

We read that in addition to the true Israelites that came out of Egypt there was also a mixed "rabble". There was a mixture of the true and the false - as we saw in the 2nd Parable of the "Tares and the Wheat".

Disobedience toward God led to disillusionment with God, and they replaced him with gods of their own making. Sin and Idolatry brought disaster in the desert - as in later years it would, bring deportation to Babylon.

In the recent gales many trees have been blown down - Do you know why?

They get too big - the growth above ground becomes bigger than the growth below ground.

They became too big for their roots - as many men get too big for their boots.

Such trees - and men - should be cut down before they fall down.

We all need to be chopped down to size from time to time -

eg In John 15 we read of the pruning of the vine to make it more fruitful;

cp Isaiah 10 v33 "See the Lord Almighty will lop off the boughs with great power,
the lofty trees will be felled and the tall ones brought low".

11v1 "A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse- from his roots a branch will bear fruit"

53 v2 "He grew up before him like a tender shoot, like a root out of a dry ground" –

and Ezekiel 17 v22 "I the Lord will take a tender shoot from the very top of a cedar tree and plant it on a high and holy mountain"

Surely this refers to Jesus. Israel the first shoot got too big for its roots and had to be cut down - and so it was - and then out of the stump came the Branch who we recognise in Jesus.

How can this be possible? God could have sent a ready grown King, but he didn't.

He started with a baby in a manger. Can one with such a lowly beginning be the one who would become the King of Kings and rule not only this world, but the heavens as well?

Many have tried it - Caesar - Alexander -Napoleon - Hitler - but they came to nothing

Great national and military leaders like Nelson -Churchill –Montgomery - all were babies once.

The Kingdom begins like that when the king is born.

He was tiny, insignificant yet was destined to change to world.

Remember - every great work, idea or fortune began small. A single atom can do what 1000 tons of dynamite cannot do. There is "Good stuff in little bundles"

A king - yet he had no palace to live in; no throne to rule from - no army with which to conquer others. He was only a carpenter's son, and it was the wood he worked with day by day which would be fashioned into a cross on which he died.

Like the mustard seed the kingdom is tiny but mighty

3. The Plan - What does it mean to me? How does it apply to my life?

a) The seed had to be planted v31

There has to be a beginning. You will never arrive anywhere unless you set off

The pictures on a packet will not produce results - the seed in the packet will if it is planted.

This is where God starts by planting one seed at a time.

This is selective planting - not indiscriminate scattering.

Every seed is important to God, as every seed represents a life that can grow to please him

To become what God knows you can be means that you have to have a beginning.

My 56 years old son was once just big enough to fill the palm of my hand -and before that he was even smaller.

We cannot grow as God intends us to grow, unless he plants the seed of faith into the soil of our hearts. How does he do this?

Just as in the OT he began with one man - so it is in the kingdom.

He started with Jesus - the Seed. Cp. John 12 v24 - He was the grain of wheat that should fall into the ground and die - and from that death would spring up new life in abundance.

Look at the growth of the early church.

It started with 12 - grew to 120 before Pentecost - and on the Day of Pentecost became 3000 more - and a few days later grew by another 5000.

They were "nothings and nobodies" who turned the world upside down. - And so it went on across the Mediterranean world through the Apostle Paul - and then to our own land - and then across the sea to every land.

A multitude that no man can number - but it began so small. The Gospel may seem so small compared with man's ideas, but it is charged with life - it has concentrated growing power.

Take our own Baptist beginnings - started with one small group of dissenters 400 years ago who learned that Faith was the only means of admission to the church.

They were exiled for their practice of Believers Baptism as practiced in the N.T. and as commanded by Jesus to be practiced throughout the world. Now it is reckoned that there are some 50 million Baptist believers in the world - "Out of little acorns might oaks may grow"

Jesus knew that. cp. John17v9 and 20

"I pray for them who will believe in me through their message"

Mustard, as we all know, is Hot stuff. So is the Gospel.

It is the spice of life – it sets you aglow, if not on fire. It only takes a little - so people should not stand too close to a Christian who is on fire for God or they too might catch fire.

How must the seed grow? It must grow naturally - it must not be forced

There is no such thing as instant Christ-likeness. We are to grow up, and grow more like Christ as we grow older.

The Normal Christian life is to grow like Jesus in love, meekness, lowliness and holiness.

But what in fact do we actually see in the church?

This is the 2nd meaning of the parable.

Instead of being the horticultural variety of a shrub - the mustard seed grew into a big tree.
This is the opposite of the meekness and humility shown by Christ.

So often this unnatural growth leads to un-spiritual attitudes.

The church has spread its branches world-wide, and in the process the "established church" has sought to rule the world. Instead of piety we see power; instead of humility we see pride; instead of love we see hate; instead of forgiveness the church seems better at judgement.

Mohammed Ali was not the first to say - "I am the greatest"

The disciples even sought that role. cp Mk 9 v34

The world wide church is largely a worldly governed church. It may be Bigger -but is it better?

It is no longer a shrub as the mustard was intended to be - it is a great tree.

The result is that it provides shelter and shade for all kinds of birds. cp v4 and v18.

One interpretation would see the birds as being believers of every kind - Others would see the birds being of the same origin as the birds in the 1st parable - the children of the devil - the birds that eat up the Gospel seed so that it cannot grow.

Now the church has to attract sinners of every kind and help them to find Jesus - but it is not to be a breeding ground for Satan and his like. Birds destroy the Gospel seed - Jesus said so.

Does this really happen?

In our western world under the guise of co-operation and fellowship the True church has embraced from others many of the things that cease to make it effective. cp the situation in Eastern Europe where the church had to grow with Communist persecution on every hand. The Ecumenical church tried to work with the State - whereas the Evangelical church sought to keep itself separate from such worldly domination. They suffered in the desire to be exclusive, if not small.

How does that affect us? What can we learn from this parable?

We must grow - naturally - which will also be spiritually.

- In grace - 2 Peter 3 v18. In Love - 1Thess. 3 v16
- In faith - 2Thess. 1v3 In the word - 1 Peter 2v3
- In the likeness of Christ - Ephesians 4 v15

We must not grow too big for God to use. We must remember his Greatness and our own smallness. Smallness is no deterrent to God, and He will delight to use our "5 loaves and 2 small fishes" if we bring them to him. We are not to get too big for our spiritual breeches.

God will give the increase as we are prepared to give him the glory.

Take this lesson of the Mustard seed - and have a faith that looks too small for God to use and see that it has the potential in his hands to "move mountains". cp Matt 17 v20

Paul knew the truth of this when he said - "When I am weak then I am strong - for God's power is made perfect in my weakness."

So the "Parable of the Mustard Seed" tell us that it is not our smallness that matters, it is growing for God where he has put us, and letting him do the Kingdom's work through us in our weakness. That is the sure way to growth- and the only way that God gets the glory and not us...

Norman Hiley January 2009

The Parable of the Leaven (or the yeast) Read v33

1. What does the Parable mean? There are 2 interpretations.

The usual one is that of the hidden activity of the yeast working in the whole batch of dough until the whole lump is affected

The 2nd is obtained by reading the parable in the context of the teaching of Jesus throughout these discourses, and also in the light of other scriptures referring to leaven.

The 1st Interpretation suggests that the Kingdom is like leaven- and even though small in comparison with the large amount of flour into which it is mixed it will eventually pervade the whole world for God.

In the 2nd Interpretation the leaven is seen as something evil, and which if introduced into the kingdom will corrupt it completely and cause it to disintegrate.

If the 7 Parables in Matt 13 are taken as one form of teaching, we have already seen that in the case of the Sower. Seed and Soil only part of the seed fell on good ground

In the 2nd - of the "Tares and Wheat" - there was a further attempt by the devil to spoil the harvest intended in the kingdom - and the false grew alongside the true until the harvest of Judgement Day.

In the 3rd Parable the church grew above its intended size, and the birds which snatched away the gospel seed took the opportunity to nest among the branches of the overgrown tree,

The central fact in the parable involves more than the leaven - it also involves a woman and the flour - (3 measures of meal in the AV)

What is the story and meaning of the parable?

Whenever mentioned in scripture the "3 measures of meal" represented unspoiled Fellowship" - and by the introduction of leaven that fellowship can be spoiled.

a) Gen 18v6 Sarah prepared unleavened bread for the 3 angel visitors.

b) Judges 6 v19 Gideon prepared an ephah of fine flour for the angel who visited him.

An ephah is 3 measures.

c) 1 Sam 1 v24 Hannah -an ephah of fine flour was part of her gift to God at the birth of Samuel.

There was no leaven in these offerings of fine flour, baked as unleavened bread.

It is expressly forbidden in 1Cor. 5 v6 where Paul chastises the Corinthian church for allowing unholy things to spoil their fellowship with God

"Don't you know that a little yeast worked through the whole batch of dough - Get rid of the old yeast (leaven) that you may be a new batch without leaven"

There is specific instruction by God to the Israelites in the night they left Egypt not to bring any dough that contained leaven. Ex. 12 v8 v15;

"Wherever you live you must eat unleavened bread to maintain pure fellowship with God".

In the AV this type of self aggrandisement is described as being "puffed up" as leaven puffs up the lump of dough. cp Habakkuk described of Cyrus as having his soul "puffed up".

What does the Parable mean?

It means in this interpretation that the kingdom depends on its purity in order to pervade the world. eg Abraham could only pray for Lot in Sodom as he himself stayed outside that corrupt place. Effectiveness depends on cleanliness. Our effectiveness for God as individuals, or as a church, depends on us being unspoiled by the leaven of the world around us.

Jesus spoke at various times about leaven and usually as a warning to his disciples eg.

- a) The Leaven of the Pharisees – i.e. Hypocrisy -their play-acting with a mask.
- b) The Leaven of the Sadducees – i.e. their rationalism in dismissing the miraculous and resurrection. Mt. 16 v6
- c) The Leaven of Herod – Materialism. Mk. 8 v15

So we are to beware of leaven, and take care that it is not introduced in any form into our Fellowship with God.

What is leaven? It may be people, practices or prejudices - and if introduced no matter how small it will pervade and spoil the whole lump.

(I remember going to the store to buy yeast for my mother - she put it in water in a jug as she kneaded the dough- and at a particular time in the preparation she dipped her hand into the jug and introduced such a tiny amount of yeast. But it did its work and it puffed up the dough ready for the oven.)

We have to take care with what we allow in our lives and in our life within the church because a little of the wrong things can do enormous damage.

How much will it take? "A little leaven will leaven the whole lump"

eg. Put 1 drop of ink to a glass of clean water- and see what happens to it all. It is undrinkable.

There is no way in the natural course of events to remove the leaven once it is introduced.

However, in spiritual things it is possible for the leaven to be removed to make the life clean and ready for renewed fellowship with God

1Cor 5 v7 "For Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed - therefore, let us keep the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast - the bread of sincerity and truth".

Jesus is that unleavened Bread that came down from heaven.

His life contained no sin - no yeast to spoil his fellowship with God his Father.

We are to like him- and we can be as we consider the promises of 1John 1v3

"Our Fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ"

By applying v7 - "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin"

Jesus is the only one who can remove the leaven of sin from our lives so that we can be as unleavened bread - and have fellowship with God and with each other as members of his kingdom here on earth.

We are not to let anything spoil that wonderful relationship and fellowship.

Norman Hiley January 2009