

WHAT THE KINGDOM IS LIKE

The chief emphasis in the preaching of John the Baptist was that the kingdom of God was close at hand and men should prepare to meet the King (Matthew 3:2-12). Then Jesus and His disciples went throughout the land teaching as if the chief aim in anyone's life was to enter into the kingdom (See John 3:3, 5; Matthew 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 20; 6:10, 33; 7:21; Luke 4:43; 7:28; 8:1).

Jesus had preached in Judea about eight months (until He was leading more to baptism than John was—John 4:1-3). After that, He had preached in Galilee at least eight months or more. About half of His entire ministry was past. Many miracles had been wrought. Great throngs of people were following Him, so that He had not time to eat and sleep. Some of the Pharisees were trying desperately to combat His popular influence. His family sought to take Him home for a rest. That was the time when Jesus taught the sermon all in parables about the kingdom (just before He left on a boat trip during which He was so tired that He slept right through a terrible storm).

The people were excited about the kingdom message, but they did not understand it. The Jews expected a kingdom of military power and material wealth. They were not listening well to Jesus' teaching about true religion and obedience to God. When Jesus taught them about the kingdom of God, they did not understand or even realize that He was talking about it. They thought of the kingdom as a form of national power, a relationship between their own nation and other nations. But Jesus thought of it as a relationship between each individual and God. They thought of it as the possession of material security and power to rule over others; but He spoke of it as the possession of God's word and as submission to God's rule over one's own life.

To help them overcome their habitual, mistaken ideas of the promised kingdom and to show how near it was to each of them, Jesus told these simple illustrations, which were called in Greek, "parables." Jesus is famous for His parables on various subjects. Some notable ones had been told before the time recorded in Matthew 13. But on this occasion He spoke nothing but parables! An immense crowd was gathered on the shore of Galilee, so that Jesus got into a boat in order to speak to them all. He taught "many things in parables," perhaps more than are recorded in the combined accounts of Matthew 13:1-53; Mark 4:1-34; and Luke 8:4-18. But all that are recorded are comparisons to describe and identify the kingdom. Instead of defining or explaining the kingdom in abstract terms, Jesus pictured it in concrete comparisons. They were pictures to show the characteristics of the kingdom which the Jews had not seen or had never expected it to have.

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Jesus was asked by His disciples why He spoke only in parables to this crowd. He said it was because the crowd did not know the secrets which He had been revealing about the kingdom, as the apostles knew them. The "mysteries" of the kingdom meant simply the things about it that were revealed and which could not be known unless they were learned by revelation. Jesus had been revealing them in His teaching, but the people did not give as much attention or have as much faith as the apostles did, and their old mistaken notions were very much in the way. Even in this sermon, if He spoke in plain terms about the kingdom without parables, they would not perceive what He meant.

No doubt the picture stories which He used left many of the people wondering and unconvinced; but they also left them with some clear and easily remembered pictures to refer to frequently until their minds were able to accept the truths of the kingdom to which they pointed.

We are helped in understanding the parables by the explanations which Jesus gave of two of the most complex ones to His disciples that very day. His interpretations of the soils and the tares give us a guide to the meaning of all the parables. The interpretation is also helped by the fact that two or more parables point to the same feature of the kingdom. Two or three illustrations of the same thing make one more sure of the point of each illustration.

LIKE THE PRODUCT OF SEED GROWING IN SOIL

The first parable shows that the kingdom is like the results obtained when seed is sown on various kinds of soil. In explaining this one, Jesus said, "The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11).

Some hearers of the word are like the soil of the beaten path, not receptive to the word, and Satan takes it away from their consciousness, as birds eat the seed off the roadway.

A second class of hearers is like the thin soil over a slab of rock. The word gets from them an immediate response. They make a good start in letting the word of God live in them. But when trials and hardships come because of the word, their citizenship in the kingdom immediately withers away. They are not the stable kind of people who endure steadfast in what they know is right, but are like plants without roots deep enough to endure when the sun is hot.

A third kind of hearer includes those who have too much else occupying their minds and affections. They are like good soil with the seeds or roots of thorns in it. The word is received, but the cares of this world and the enticements of riches soon outgrow the desire to do God's will. The Lord's control is choked out by other controlling interests as wheat is choked out by Johnson grass.

SPECIAL STUDIES

The fourth class of hearers is like the good soil that bears much fruit. They hear the word of the Lord, understand it, and hold it fast in a good and honest heart (See Luke 8:15), hence they bring forth the fruit of living faithfully according to the will of God.

Another short parable, which is recorded only in Mark 4:26-29, says that the kingdom is like the growing of seed in the ground. The sower, having sown the seed does no more work on it, and does not know how it grows. But the earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear (or head of wheat), then the full grain in the ear. So the kingdom does not come like a finished product delivered from the factory, or like ruling power is seized in a revolution, but it grows by the effect of God's word in each person's mind and heart.

LIKE WHEAT IN A FIELD WITH WEEDS

Again (in Matthew 13:24-30) the kingdom is pictured as good seed growing in a field, but an enemy has sown tares (weeds that look like wheat) in the same field. Some servants suggest pulling out the weeds. But the owner said that wheat might be pulled up with them, therefore both would be allowed to grow together until the harvest, when they would be separated and the weeds would be burned.

Jesus explained this parable, being asked by His disciples, so we do not have to guess at its meaning. The field is the world. The good seed, or the plants that grow from it, represent the people of His kingdom, planted in the world by Christ. The devil is the enemy that sowed the tares, which are the people who serve the devil. Jesus did not say who the servants were that suggested pulling the weeds; perhaps they might be men who propose to serve God by killing off wicked men. But in the harvest, which comes at the end of this age, the reapers will be the angels, who will gather all the wicked to be burned. Notice that He said they will be gathered "out of His kingdom"! He had said before that "the field is the world" and the plants from the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. Either this views the whole world as the realm of His rule, potentially His kingdom, or the angels are to gather some wicked ones from among those who were the kingdom.

Then the righteous shall shine as the sun *in the kingdom* of their Father, when the kingdom apparently will be free from all offenses and evils.

LIKE A NET FULL OF FISH, GOOD AND BAD

Another parable pairs with the one about the tares to picture the fact that some unacceptable persons are to be sorted out of the kingdom at the end of the age. In this one the kingdom is compared to a dragnet gathering all kinds of fish. It is brought to shore, and the bad ones are thrown out, which represents the work of angels at the end of this age, separating the wicked from the just and casting them into fire (Matthew 13:49, 50).

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The parables reviewed thus far show that the kingdom is not national and material, but spiritual and individual; also that it is not all *glory* and success, but some people start in it and fail, some are cast out at last, and others are unaffected by it though in contact with it. These comparisons indicate that the kingdom is not a time when the Lord forces His rule upon all, but those who accept His word yield to His rule and are the kingdom while they live on this earth in the midst of the ungodly.

LIKE THE BEST KIND OF GROWERS

Jesus said the kingdom is like a seed of mustard and like leaven. Both of these picture its growth. The mustard seed, though very small, produces a large plant, sometimes fifteen feet high, in one year. The leaven may not look like much alive and may be only a little bit hidden in a large batch of meal, but quietly and unnoticed it multiplies itself. Thus Jesus' kingdom, beginning with twelve humble men (or even 120, or 500) looked insignificant, but by a spiritual vitality put into it by the Lord it had power to grow and encompass the earth.

The parables were not intended to be prophecies, but illustrations. The parable of the leaven represents the growth of the kingdom without noise or show, by transfer of transforming faith from one person to another; it probably does not predict the complete transformation of the world by the growth of the church or (as some say who consider leaven always a symbol of evil) the complete corruption of the church by evil growing in it. There are predictive elements in Matthew 13:41-43 and 49, 50, but these are subordinate parts of comparisons which describe the nature of the kingdom in pictures rather than *telling the high points of its history* in predictions.

LIKE THE MOST PRECIOUS THING KNOWN

Two other parables picture the kingdom as having greater value than everything else combined that any man can have.

It is like a treasure lying hidden in a field. Whoever finds it will joyfully sell all he has to buy that field.

It is like one priceless pearl so precious that the owner of a great collection of prize gems will give all that he has to buy it.

Whether to the poor laborer, working in another man's field, or to the rich merchant admiring his collection of jewels, to everyone the kingdom of God is the opportunity of a lifetime. Perhaps by this we should test the reality of our faith in Christ's words:—Are we eager to sell all else to have Him rule in our lives? And how great is our joy at the opportunity to make the transaction?