

Mustard Seed and Leaven Parables

Our study is about two parables. The first is the parable of the mustard seed and the second is about leaven. Have you ever noticed that some parables of Christ are recorded in one gospel and not in other gospels? For example, in the three gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John there are fifty-one parables and twenty other teachings of Christ that some consider to be parables, but are actually illustrations with a spiritual message. Thirty-four of the fifty-one parables are recorded in only one gospel. Seven parables are recorded in two gospels and ten parables are recorded in three gospels. But none of the parables are recorded in all four gospels. Why did God do that? The parables of the mustard seed are recorded in the three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but the parable of leaven is recorded in only Matthew and Luke. Now why would the Holy Spirit do that? In this study you will discover the meaning of these parables and why Luke records both. Both parables follow the events of our last study and, like every serious preacher, Jesus used these parables to drive home an important spiritual point. This study comes from Luke 13:18-21.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION. In the previous study, Luke 13:10-17, Jesus healed a woman who was bent over for eighteen years. She was demon possessed and Jesus healed her. Everyone was rejoicing “over all the glorious things being done” (Luke 13:17), except for the leader of the synagogue. The synagogue official was angry that Jesus had ignored the Sabbath laws and healed the woman. As a result, Jesus rebuked him for his lack of compassion. It is sad that the man cared more for his donkey than for the woman.

Then immediately Jesus told two parables. The first was a parable about a mustard seed and the next parable was

about leaven. Each parable has an important truth, but put together they send a powerful message.

So He was saying, “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and THE BIRDS OF THE AIR NESTED IN ITS BRANCHES.” Luke 13:18-19 (NASB)

THE KINGDOM OF GOD. The term kingdom of God refers to God’s eternal kingdom. It has existed in eternity



past, today and into the future for eternity. It includes all of God's creation both in heaven and on earth. However, those who are part of that kingdom will eventually only be the saints of the past, present and future. Today, it includes both Christians and non-Christians. Eventually, it will include only Christians and the Old Testament saints.

Some believe that the Kingdom of Heaven includes everyone while the Kingdom of God includes only Christians. Therefore, a quick summary of these two expressions is needed before we explore these parables more closely.

The kingdom of God appears 52 times in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and 14 times in the rest of the New Testament. The term refers to God's king-

wrote primarily to the Jews and, consequently, he used the term kingdom of heaven 32 times and kingdom of God only 4 times. It appears that he was being sensitive to his Jewish readers.

The term "kingdom of God" reminds us of the Creator and owner of the kingdom. In Matthew 25:34 Jesus tells us the kingdom was created by the Father. Matthew 26:29 teaches us that the Father owns the kingdom. The term "kingdom of Heaven" reminds us of the origin of the kingdom. That is, the kingdom started in heaven and extends to all of His creatures. But the final phase of the kingdom will only include Christians and the Old Testament saints.

In one sense the kingdom is the realm of all that God rules

The Kingdom - Realm of God's Rule

"Kingdom of God" reminds us of the Creator of the kingdom. "Kingdom of Heaven" reminds us of the kingdom's origin. Together they remind us of the Ruler and Destiny of the saints of the ages.

dom that will exist on earth for 1,000 years sometime in the future. When we read the gospel of Matthew, we find another called the kingdom of heaven and it occurs 32 times in Matthew and only in Matthew. A careful comparison of Matthew 19:23-24 and Luke 18:24-25 will reveal that the two terms are used interchangeably. Again if we compare Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:30-31, and Luke 13:18-19, we discover that Matthew uses the phrase Kingdom of Heaven in his record of the parable of the mustard seed, but Mark and Luke use the term kingdom of God.

That is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke use the two terms interchangeably in the first parable of our study. The same is also true if we compare Matthew, Mark, and Luke's record of the kingdom parables. Why did this occur? Matthew

from heaven to the universe and to the earth. But the term "kingdom of God" or "kingdom" is also used in a technical sense to refer to the millennium or 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ. It is described in the major and minor prophets and discussed in the New Testament, especially in the book of Revelation. That is, the term "kingdom" can refer to the time that Christ sits on a throne in Jerusalem and rules the world. At that time Jerusalem is the capital of the world (Zechariah 14:10-21).

Now why was this background information important for this study? The answer is that the parable of the mustard seed describes the external growth of the kingdom. It will grow and expand, including both Christians and non-Christians. The parable of leaven describes the internal character-

istics of the kingdom.

PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED. The first parable that Jesus gave was a parable about a mustard seed that grows into a tree. On this occasion, Jesus repeated the parable of the mustard seed and leaven that He had given on other occasions (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32). He had given both parables of the mustard seed and leaven in the early part of A.D. 32. It is now the later part of A.D. 32 and He repeats the parable again. This time He leaves out some details. Like any good teacher, he repeats certain teachings. Here is the version of the parable of the mustard seed that He gave on this occasion.

So He was saying, “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and THE BIRDS OF THE AIR NESTED IN ITS BRANCHES.” Luke 13:18-19 (NASB)

The Greek text reveals that the words “like” and “compare” in verse 18 are translated from the same word *homoioo*. This word just means “like or similar.” That is, Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God *like*, and to what shall I *liken* it? It is *like* a mustard seed . . .” That is, Jesus is going to explain the nature or character of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

Mustard Becomes A Bush. Now we know that a mustard seed is very small and yet it can grow into a tree. Botanists tell us that the mustard seed that Jesus referred to can become a large bush.

Some scholars and botanists believe that the Biblical mustard seed and tree was the *Brassica nigra*. *Brassica nigra* is also known as *Sinapis nigra*, black mustard, and shortpod mustard. Others believe it was the *Salvadora persica* commonly called the toothbrush tree. I favor the *Salvadora* because it is a larger plant than the black and better able to accommodate birds resting in its branches. The toothbrush tree grows up to 20 feet in comparison to (sic) the much shorter black mustard plant. The mustard tree grows throughout arid Africa and the Middle East. The mustard tree grows in the Judean Desert, Dead Sea Valley (around Ein

Gedi) and in southern Israel deserts. Pilgrims to Israel can see the mustard tree growing in the Biblical Landscape Reserve between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.¹

This species, like white mustard, grows wild in Erez Israel but was also cultivated. Given favorable conditions, the plant reaches a height of more than six feet. The *aggadah* relates that a man having sown “a single seed of mustard... would climb it as he would a fig tree” (TJ, Pe’ah 7:4, 206). The seed of this species is very small (1–1.6 mm.) and was used to indicate the smallest measure of size (Ber. 31a). The contrast between the size of the plant and the seed is used in a parable in the New Testament (Matt. 13:31). Although these two species of mustard belong to different botanical genera they are very similar in appearance (except that the white mustard plant is smaller and its seed larger). Hence the rule that mustard and Egyptian mustard do not constitute *mixed species (*kilayim*; Kil. 1:2). Both have conspicuous yellow flowers (cf. Kil. 2:8–9). In Israel there are many species belonging to the family of Cruciferae which have yellow flowers and seeds with a pungent flavor. Among these the species *Sinapis arvensis* is very widespread. This is called in the Mishnah *lafsan* (“charlock”) and it was laid down that “mustard and charlock, although resembling one another, do constitute *kilayim*” (Kil. 1:5).²

It is important to note that the Greek *dendron* that Jesus used for “tree” can be translated as either tree or bush.

Birds of the Air View - Kingdom Transforms the World. Next Jesus tells us that every kind of bird makes a nest in the tree. At this point the interpretations of the meaning of this parable diverge. Here are some of the views. First, some believe the kingdom is spiritual and, consequently, teach that this means the kingdom of God will spread throughout the world and eventually dominate the world with massive numbers of people coming to Christ. The world will be christianized and then Christ will return. Consequently, they believe we are living in the kingdom today.

Birds of the Air View - Kingdom Benefits the World. Secondly, others teach that the expanding kingdom is spiritual

1. God As A Gardener (www.godasagardener.com/2013/06/20/mustard-seeds-are-small-beginnings/)

2. Jewish Virtual Library (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/mustard).

and provides spiritual benefits to the world, but it is not transforming the world. Ezekiel 17:23 reveals that this is true.

On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. Ezekiel 17:23 (NASB)

Notice that we are told every kind of bird will nest in the tree. The context reveals that this verse describes the events that will occur in the millennial kingdom. The world will benefit during the millennial or 1,000 year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:4-6; Zechariah 14:9-21). During Christ's earthly rule both Christians and non-Christians will be present and benefit from His rule. The kingdom is advancing in a spiritual sense and one day the kingdom will become an earthly reality (Daniel 2:35, 44-45).

Birds of the Air View - Kingdom Includes Unbelievers. The key to understanding this parable is to understand that the birds include believers and non-believers. For example, God warned the Israelites to not eat some birds. In Leviticus 11:13-19 and Deuteronomy 14:11-20, the Jews were told they could eat some birds but not others. That is, some birds were good and some were detestable (Leviticus 11:13).³

Therefore, we must understand that in this parable both good and detestable birds or good and evil birds will land on the branches of the mustard bush and make their home in the mustard bush. That is, the righteous and wicked or Christians and non-Christians will be in the kingdom. Notice that God's kingdom includes everything over which He reigns. His kingdom will include both non-Christians and Christians. That is the message of Zechariah 14:9-21. The kingdom was small in Jesus' day. It is going to grow and will eventually be monstrous in size. The birds are the key to understanding this parable. The kingdom will grow large, benefiting everyone and include everyone. That is the

idea that God communicated in Ezekiel 31:6, 13; 32:4 to the nation of Egypt.

All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs,
And under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth,
And all great nations lived under its shade. Ezekiel 31:6 (NASB)

On its ruin all the birds of the heavens will dwell, and all the beasts of the field will be on its fallen branches. Ezekiel 31:13 (NASB)

I will leave you on the land;
I will cast you on the open field.
And I will cause all the birds of the heavens to dwell on you,
And I will satisfy the beasts of the whole earth with you. Ezekiel 32:4 (NASB)

In summary, the parable of the mustard seed teaches us that the kingdom will grow and include everyone. In the last study, Jesus had healed a woman and rebuked a wicked synagogue official. Both were included in the growing kingdom.

PARABLE OF LEAVEN. The next parable helps us understand that the kingdom of God is growing more evil with time. The subjects or people of the kingdom are becoming more corrupt.

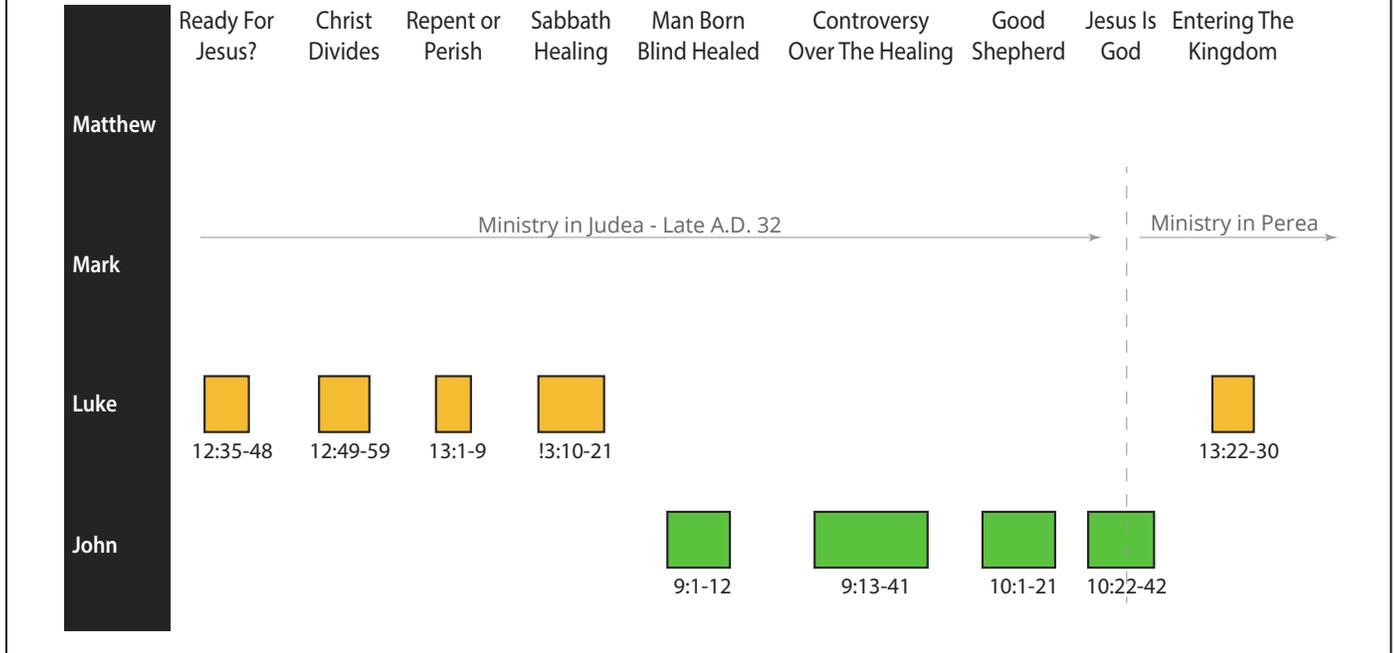
And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." Luke 13:20-21 (NASB)

Leaven is a yeast that is put into bread to make it rise during baking. It is frequently a symbol of sin or evil. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 the apostle Paul refers to leaven as permeating a whole lump of uncooked bread and then equates it to sin.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us cele-

3. Leviticus 11:13 states, "These, moreover, you shall detest among the birds; they are abhorrent, not to be eaten: the eagle and the vulture and the buzzard, 14 and the kite and the falcon in its kind, every raven in its kind, and the ostrich and the owl and the sea gull and the hawk in its kind, and the little owl and the cormorant and the great owl, and the white owl and the pelican and the carrion vulture, and the stork, the heron in its kinds, and the hoopoe, and the bat."

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brate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 (NASB)

Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Luke 12:1 and Galatians 5:7-9 are other examples. Dr. J. Vernon McGee writes,

Leaven represents not the gospel but a principle of evil. Leaven never represents good when used in the Bible. Leaven occurs about ninety-eight times in the Bible - about seventy-five times in the Old Testament and about twenty-three times in the New Testament. It is always used in a bad sense. Although many sincere folk think of leaven as representing the gospel, which will spread over the entire world and convert the world, they are doomed to disappointment. There will be no kingdom and no peace until Christ returns to establish His kingdom on this earth. The organized church cannot bring in His kingdom. In His own good time Christ Himself will come and establish His kingdom.⁴

This helps us understand that Jesus' parable of the leaven is about sin permeating the kingdom of God. If we understand that the kingdom of God includes the entire realm of God's rule, it includes every creature in the universe. For example, Matthew 24:12 says,

Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. Matthew 24:12 (NASB)

In 2 Timothy 3:1-3 it is prophesied that sin will grow worse in the latter days.

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. 2 Timothy 3:1-3 (NASB)

4. J. Vernon McGee. Matthew through Romans. Thru the Bible. Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1983. p. 307.

Later in Luke 17:22-30, Jesus will warn us that sin will become worse. People will become more wicked as we approach the Second Coming of Christ. The earth will become evil again as it was in the days of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah.

Even the earthly reality of the kingdom, the millennial or 1,000 year kingdom on earth, will grow from bad to worse. The millennial kingdom will start with Christians but will eventually contain non-Christians as children are born. Zechariah 14:9-21 teaches us that these children will have the freedom to reject Christ and remain non-Christians. Eventually, the earthly reality of the kingdom will become so corrupt that Christ will allow a rebellion to occur and non-believers will rebel under Satan's leadership (Revelation 20:11-15).

CONCLUSION. Together both parables paint a picture of God's kingdom or realm of rule growing more evil. We have been told that both good and detestable birds will come into the kingdom and evil will grow like leaven permeates bread. The kingdom will grow in number, but it will become more evil as it increases in size.

Now why did Jesus give these two parables after rebuking

the religious synagogue leader and healing the woman in the preceding verses of Luke 13:10-17? The answer is that He took the opportunity to teach the crowd that the kingdom of God's rule is going to grow and include everyone. That is the message of the first parable.

The leaven paints the picture that the kingdom has spiritual problems. Its citizens are increasingly becoming more evil. Evil is permeating the world. The synagogue official had no compassion for the woman who was bent over and Jesus warns us that this world will only become worse. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 prophesies that an apostasy is coming before Christ's return.

What is the application for this study? It is simply this. Christ told us that His realm of rule is increasing in size but is growing more evil with time. Someday He will come and set up His rule and suppress evil. Eventually, both men and angels will discover that men are evil continually and the only solution will be the elimination of mankind. The current universe will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:8-13; Revelation 20:11). Then eternity will follow with Christians in heaven with God and the Christ rejectors will spend eternity in the Lake of Fire.