

June 10, 2018

Lesson 2: Parables of God's Just Kingdom

Scripture: Matthew 13: 24-33

Context:

This unit's series continues with the theme of God's justice and mercy. Our lesson once again comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is in the middle of a teaching session with those who have gathered around him. Using parable, or stories with allegorical meanings, Jesus tells them what the Kingdom of God looks like. It is not just for his time though; Jesus's parables stress God is always at work and present in the lives of people.

Jesus was a master communicator and teacher. He knew the right words to speak to the right crowds. When it comes to judgment, Jesus had a way of giving a twist to traditional interpretations of what is just. Throughout the parables from today's lesson, he makes the assertion that human beings are not the ones to make judgment about others. Instead, they are to show grace just as God shows grace.

The first parable hints that the church should listen to Christ's words and let God do the reaping of who is in and who is out. The risen Christ is into the business of sowing seeds and thus creates the church. Yet it seems that the author of Matthew had concerns with those who were in the church, but not putting their words into action.¹ Thus, Jesus makes it clear that he will be the one to judge people and the church should do its job by focusing on the fruit of their lives.

The second and third parables have a different meaning as Jesus expands the understanding of justice as well as who receives God's grace. The first parable focuses on the kingdom of heaven as that of a tiny mustard seed planted in the field. When grown, the seed surpasses all other plants and becomes a tree, in which the birds of the sky come and rest in the branches. The focus is not so much on the church as it is on Jesus and how his ministry has mysteriously began and will continue.² The text sounds similar to Daniel 4:21 in which the author describes a kingdom whose dominion extends to the ends of the earth and incorporate all peoples.³ Thus, the parable is a foreshadowing of Christ coming for all, including the Gentiles.

The final parable comes from the same train of thought with a woman baking bread with yeast. Apparently the woman who hides the yeast in three measures of wheat flour would have made approximately fifty pounds of flour!⁴ Thus she could feed over

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1993), 155.

² *Ibid.*, 156.

³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

one hundred people.⁵ Throughout scripture, there is a focus on making food, especially for visitors. Take for instance, Genesis 18:6 where Abraham instructs Sarah to prepare cakes for visitors or the stories of Jesus feeding the crowds who followed them. These parables stress that Jesus has come and will dine with all people, including the Gentiles.

Application:

If you have ever had a garden, you know the frustration that comes with weeds. They have a sneaky way of appearing in your garden threatening the plants you have worked tirelessly to grow. According to Jesus, we live in a world full of weeds. From every part of the garden, bad things somehow find their way in the midst of the good. We see it even within churches and communities.

Otherwise good people are driven by selfishness and pride to do things they know are wrong. Acts of injustice are done and good people say and do nothing. Violence comes from all places in all sorts of way whether it's the school shooting (another one) or the woman who is abused by her husband, a "leader" in the community. Disappointments loom in broken marriages and relationships. All around us there are weeds.

As our parable reminds us though we are given things to do as those weeds creep up around us. We can listen to our neighbors and watch ourselves for the sins we love to practice. We can speak out against injustice and find better ways of talking about controversial issues, including gun control, mental health, and domestic violence. We can help marriages by encouraging people to deal with their own issues instead of seeing their identity as found in their spouse. We can have healthier relationships in general by seeing gifts in one another and supporting people at all stages of life.

The same goes for how we understand the kingdom of heaven like the mustard seed and the bread. Jesus used parables to describe how his kingdom will expound to all corners of this world. In this case we are reminded that the kingdom of God and the composition of the church does not depend on our approval of who is in and who is out. If anything, we are to be like the birds in the nests and the guests who come to the banquet. We are not to complain about who is in the nest next to us or about the person who is at the other end of the table. God has invited all to the tree and to the dinner table.

We are reminded that everything belongs to God and that our job is to share that good news with others. That was the point of Jesus' parables. He did not give them step-by-step instructions because he wanted them to get the bigger picture. The Kingdom of God and the grace of God are so huge that we cannot put them in nice neat boxes. But what we can do is celebrate the good news that God has invited all to be part of the story.

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⁵ Ibid., 157.

