PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 13:24–52

Key Verse: 13:43

“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Has anyone ever told you how a movie ends? Sometimes, if we’ve been told the ending, we don’t even want to bother to watch the movie! But in other cases in real life, we really would like to know how things will turn out. If we can’t be sure of a good outcome, we won’t even try to do something. In order to know life’s outcomes, we have things like a weather forecast, an economic forecast, “outcome-based education,” and even “outcomes theory.” But in this uncertain and complex world, it’s hard to really know what any outcome will be. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells seven parables, and they all have to do with the most important outcome: the kingdom of heaven. And each of his parables tell us of some struggles along the way. In our Christian life we face many challenges: some of them from within us, many, from without. In this world where there is much evil, many things that cause sin, and the wrong kind of values, how can we be sure God’s kingdom will prevail? May God open our hearts and help us listen to Jesus’ words today.

In last week’s passage we heard Jesus’ parable of the sower. In this parable, though the first three soils had a negative result, the last one more than made up for it all—it was abundantly fruitful. In the rest of the chapter Jesus tells six more parables about it. But before we look at these parables, we’d like to think about why Jesus was always talking about the kingdom of heaven in the first place. It all started back at the beginning. In chapter 3, John the Baptist first gave the message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2). In chapter 4, when Jesus began his ministry, he gave exactly the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). God was bringing his wonderful kingdom near to us through the coming of Jesus. It’s so simple: When we repent of our sins and believe the good news in Jesus, we become members of this kingdom (Mk1:15; Ac2:38; 3:19). The Bible says it’s a kingdom we experience now (Ro14:17), yet it’s not of this world (Jn18:36). This kingdom of heaven is our ultimate destination and our living hope (1Pe1:3,4).

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus went around proclaiming the good news of this kingdom (4:23; cf. 9:35). In chapter 5 he said the poor in spirit have this kingdom (5:3), those persecuted because of righteousness have this kingdom (5:10), and only those who practice and teach God’s commands are great in this kingdom (5:19,20). He taught us to pray for this kingdom to “come” (6:10), and to “seek first” this kingdom (6:33). He said only those who do the Father’s will can enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21). He told us there’ll be a feast in this kingdom, and that those who think they’re entitled to it will find themselves thrown out, while many others from the four corners of the earth will surprisingly join in (8:11,12). In chapter 10 he sent his twelve disciples to proclaim this same message: “The kingdom of heaven has come near” (10:7). And he taught his critics that because he drove out demons by the Spirit of God, “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (12:28).

Now Jesus teaches the crowds more about the kingdom. Six times he begins by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like…” (24,31,33,44,45,47). He's describing not only how it will be when we get there, but also what the kingdom is like in this world. In these six parables Jesus uses situations from ordinary life to help us understand. The kingdom of heaven is unlike any earthly kingdom we’ve ever heard of. Unlike human kingdoms, the heavenly kingdom doesn’t happen through human pride or honor or vanity, or ambition or power or force, or conquering or domination or cruelty, or or money or manipulation or scheming. God himself is the one who got this kingdom started, and despite all the obstacles, God himself makes it grow. It’s a kingdom of God’s goodness and God’s holiness, his righteousness and love. It may sound too good to be true, but it’s real. How is it possible?

Let’s look at today’s first parable, the one about the weeds. Read verses 24–30. Jesus is going to explain this later. For now, suffice it to say, the kingdom of heaven appears to be like a struggle between two neighboring farmers. One sows wheat, but his enemy sows weeds in his field. In Greek the word for “weeds” is a plant called “zizanion,” also known as “darnel” or “cockle”; it looks exactly like wheat but it has poisonous seeds. The other even more important thing to note in this parable is that the owner tells his servants not to try to pull up these weeds sown by the enemy. Instead, they should just let the weeds and the wheat grow together. At the harvest, he says, they’ll be sorted out.

Jesus went on with another parable, and this is his last parable taken from agriculture. Read verses 31,32. The point here is how small a mustard seed is, and yet how large it becomes when it grows. Jesus is telling us that God’s kingdom starts out with tiny things, so tiny they seem hardly noticeable. But by God’s own amazing power these tiny things grow into something so large that many can be blessed by it. Jesus’ discipleship ministry was like a mustard seed. He had just twelve disciples, who were mostly ordinary, unschooled men from the backwater area of Galilee (Ac1:11a; 4:13). But after being with Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit, they became powerful kingdom workers, and through them, the good news of Jesus spread to the whole world. Down through history, God’s kingdom has always spread through seemingly very small things. Before knowing Christ, Apostle Paul’s name was Saul, meaning “great one.” He was working for his own honor and glory and was breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. But when the Risen Christ met him and called him by his grace, he changed his name to “Paul,” meaning “small one.” And through just this one man’s change, God used him to spread the good news of Jesus all throughout the Roman Empire (Ro15:18,10). Before conversion St. Augustine was an intellectual hedonist who would have had very little significance in the world other than having a string of illegitimate children. But after meeting Christ, he became one of the greatest Christian teachers and thinkers who ever lived and who defended the Christian faith at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire. Martin Luther was nothing but a self-absorbed, guilt-ridden monk, struggling to find inner peace. But when he met Christ personally, he was totally changed, and through just this one man God changed the course of European history, and the world, to advance his kingdom and revitalize his church. William Carey was only a humble shoemaker in England. But when he came to know Christ, he was filled with missionary zeal at a time when the Protestant Church in Europe and America was not even interested in missions. He coined the phrase, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God,” went on to become a missionary to India, and sparked the modern missions movement that has sent countless missionaries all over the world with the good news of Jesus, along with education, medical care and abolishment of inhumane practices. Our UBF ministry started off as small as a mustard seed. A Korean youth pastor and an American woman missionary began teaching the Bible to South Korean college students in a town called Kwangju. Since the early 1960s, the ministry became a movement that has now sent over 1,700 missionaries all over the world. When the gospel of Jesus gets into our hearts, we become like a mustard seed for the kingdom of heaven. Who we are and what we do may seem so tiny compared with the things of the world, but God will surely use us greatly for his kingdom.

Let’s read verse 33. This parable of the yeast is similar to the mustard seed. This time, a woman is doing the work. It takes just a little bit of yeast, and the flour is sixty pounds, very heavy, but just a tiny bit transforms and influences it all. Likewise, we may not see great numbers of people joining the church through us or becoming disciples of Jesus. But like a tiny bit of yeast, when we have the gospel of Jesus in our hearts, we become a powerful influence for God’s kingdom. We influence all the people around us, each and every day, more than we know. Even one changed Christian can influence a campus, a community, a city, a society, a nation, even the world.

Look at verses 34,35. Jesus used parables, as we learned earlier, to sort out the truth-seekers from the mere spectators. But with this quote from Psalm 78:2 Matthew tells us how special Jesus’ parables were. Not only did his parable teaching fulfill this prophecy, but also it revealed things hidden since the creation of the world. God was choosing to make his great salvation plan known through Jesus. Now, those who believe and follow him have the great privilege of knowing these secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

Look at verse 36. We may wonder why the disciples were asking about not the mustard seed or the yeast but the parable of the weeds. Probably they identified with the owner’s servants, who wanted to go out like loyal and responsible stewards and get rid of those weeds before they caused trouble. It was hard to understand why they should just let the weeds grow with the wheat. Let’s read Jesus’ explanation in verses 37–42. In light of Jesus’ explanation, now we can understand why the weeds and the wheat need to be left alone to grow together. Actually, kingdom workers can never really tell who is a weed and who is wheat; they look exactly the same. If we start trying to pull up people who look like weeds, they might actually be wheat. This parable is teaching us to let God be the judge. Only God knows people’s hearts. In history many people have tried to have squeaky clean church fellowships. They wanted to admit only genuine Christians and root out all bad influences from the church. But Jesus’ parable here teaches us that we should welcome all kinds of people into the church, and feed and water them with the word of God, the love of God, and prayer, and let God work. This is how Jesus welcomed Matthew the tax collector and many other sinners into his ministry. We shouldn’t try to protect people from those who might be a bad influence on them. We should simply trust God to do his own work; he’s the one who will sort everything out. Later in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus will teach us that instead of focusing on fixing others, we should struggle with our own tendencies to cause others to sin (18:6–9). He’ll also teach us how to deal with sin in the church (18:15–20), and especially, how to forgive (18:21–35). But his main point in this parable is to trust God’s judgment. 1 Corinthians 4:5 supports this: “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.”

Read verse 43. It’s surprising that this is the final end of “the good seed,” “the people of the kingdom” (38). They were living in the midst of many things that cause sin and all who do evil (41). But they were not influenced. They were not tempted. They were not overwhelmed or discouraged or despaired. They held onto their hope in Jesus. Of course, there must have been many struggles along the way. It’s always hard to live among people of this world, who haven’t been transformed by the gospel. Sometimes we can feel drained, or used, or trampled on. Apostle Paul described it: “We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2Co4:8,9). And one day, Jesus says, we will “shine like the sun” in the kingdom of our Father. Honestly, we may not feel so bright. We may be struggling with our sins and the temptations around us, or with discouragement. Some days we’re not shining like the sun. We may feel so weak. But Jesus’ parable of the weeds is meant to give us hope. Apostle Paul taught us the same thing: “…being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Php1:6).

In this world, not only is it so hard to tell the good from the bad, but also, the kingdom of heaven seems so invisible, even non-existent. To encourage us

Jesus goes on to tell two more parables. Read verses 44–46. Many people with an untrained eye can’t recognize a priceless treasure or a pearl of great value. So in once sense, these parables teach us to have spiritual discernment to see the kingdom. But in both these parables, someone was actively searching for the treasure or the pearl. It also tells us we should be putting our heart into seeking his kingdom. In fact, just like the treasure-hunter and the merchant, we should be ready to sell everything we have, invest our entire lives, into his kingdom. It may appear foolish to people who don’t know the value. But in the end, it’s the wisest investment we can make. We’ll find what’s truly valuable. At various stages in life people struggle with what they should be doing. Jesus’ parables here remind us the most significant life we can live is a life totally sold out for his kingdom.

Now let’s think about Jesus’ last parable. Read verses 47–50. This parable of the net is essentially a repeat of the parable of the weeds. All kinds of fish represent all kinds of people, good and bad (cf. Mt22:10). The local church should be welcoming in all kinds of people in, by the grace of Jesus, trusting that in the end God himself will deal with those who refused to repent and remained wicked. Jesus really wanted his disciples to understand this (51). He concluded with an important saying. Read verse 52. Generally, the teachers of the law at that time were Jesus’ enemies. But Jesus didn’t totally write them off. Some of them would become disciples in the kingdom by accepting the good news of Jesus. They would enrich all God’s people with an even deeper understanding of both the Old and New Testaments.

Today we learned Jesus wants us to have faith in God in the final outcome of his kingdom. Right now it may seem like a little wheat surrounded by weeds, like a net full of lots of bad fish and a few good, like a tiny mustard seed or tiny bit of yeast, like a hidden treasure no one sees or a fine pearl amidst many cheap and ugly ones. But in the end, God’s kingdom will prevail; it will influence the whole world and be full of his light, with no sin and no evil. May God help us have the personal hope in his kingdom, the eyes to see it, the faith to value and seek it, and the confidence in his justice and power to establish it.