

19 June 2016

Parables of the Kingdom
Matthew 13:3-9, 24-33, 44-50

I went to hear the new Galilean. To be honest, I wasn't hopeful. The last few Galilean messiahs just ended up on Roman crosses and made things worse, but this one's attracting even bigger crowds, and that's good. If we're going to drive the cursed foreigners out of our land, we need a lot of committed people. So I went to hear him.

I listened for a while, getting more and more frustrated. Yeshua – that's his name – was interesting, but he talked for over an hour and never said anything about stockpiling weapons or battle plans. In fact, he never mentioned the Romans at all. So I asked him, "Teacher, here's what most of us want to know: when are you going to drive the Romans out?"

A lot of people cheered, but Yeshua just nodded slowly and said, "For how long?"

"What? Forever, of course!"

"And when they're gone, what then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he said. "Once we were slaves of Babylon."

"That's right. And God delivered us."

"For a while. Then we were servants of the Medes and Persians. And after that of the Greeks."

"And God raised up Judas the Maccabee and drove the evil Greeks out!" I shouted. "He established a Jewish kingdom!"

"Which was corrupt," Yeshua said. "And then the Romans came. So, it seems that there is always another empire waiting."

"Maybe so," I argued, "but we still have to do what we can *now!*"

"But what if I care as much about the people who will live a hundred years from now as I do about the ones who live today? Then I would be looking for a different kind of kingdom. Not one that appears for a few years, then is replaced. Let me tell you about the Kingdom of Heaven.

"It's like a mustard seed. Picture a mustard seed, how tiny it is. Smaller than anything, right? And it falls to the ground and for a while you see nothing. But then, one tiny shoot above ground, a few thin roots below. But soon it's thicker, stronger, healthier. How does that happen? It just does. And then? It's a towering shrub, large enough for birds to make their nests in,

producing shade enough for the animals to take shelter in. The Kingdom of Heaven's like that: tiny and uninspiring now, but always promising more.

“Or it's like yeast. You have a lump of flour, a little oil, a little salt, you mix it up with water, and you have . . . a wet lump of flour, oil, and salt. But if you work in just a tiny bit of yeast, it looks the same at first, right? But then you wait. An hour later, the lump is bigger. Why? It just is. Two hours, even bigger. You divide the lump into two, and it keeps growing. No one knows why, but it does. The Kingdom of Heaven's like that: invisible, but it changes everything.”

“But you're talking about waiting! I don't *want* to wait!” I snapped. “We're oppressed *now*! We are being beaten and crucified *now*! We need to act *now*! Are you with us or against us?”

Yeshua smiled. “Can I be for you without being with you?”

“No! There is no middle ground! Some are on God's side, and others with the enemy! Don't you see that?”

He looked troubled, but he said, “Yes, I do. But maybe not the same way you do. It's not as easy as you think to tell which side is which. Here, let me tell you a story. A man tilled his ground and then sowed a field with good seed. But he had an enemy, who came into the field at night and planted weeds and thistles among the good seed. Some people are like that: unable to produce anything good themselves, they can only corrupt the good that others have done. When the field began to sprout, the landowner saw that his good field had been defiled. His servants wanted to go out and pluck out the weeds at once, but the man said, ‘No, don't go trampling among the fragile new plants. Let them all grow together. In the end, at the harvest, we will separate the enemy's weeds from the good plants. The first we will burn, and then we'll bring the grain into my barns. For now, wait.’”

“More waiting?” I repeated.

He ignored me, looking around at the crowd. “Sorry about all the farm stuff. Some of you are fishermen. Let me tell it a different way. When you cast your nets, you don't just cast them for the good fish, do you? If you did, you'd never catch any at all. No, you cast your nets for all the fish who swim together, good and bad, clean and unclean. Then, when you haul the net in, you separate them. In the same way, the Father will divide the good from the bad at the end. For now, all are mixed. One day, there will be a separation.”

I started to argue. None of this was helping me to raise an army against the Romans. I needed to separate the patriots from the traitors *now*, the heroes from the cowards, the winners from the losers. But Yeshua was saying to leave it up to God. He held up his hand to silence me.

“Listen,” he said. “And I don't just mean to listen to me now. I mean, learn to listen. Because that's how God decides who is with him. It is the one who listens.”

“Listen, all of you: a sower went out to sow. He cast his seed in a wide circle, and the grains fell everywhere. Some of the seed fell on the path, rattling on the hard ground, and the birds came and ate them. Some of the seed fell in rocky places. There was soil there, and the seeds sprang up, but the soil was shallow, and the roots couldn’t go deep. The plants shriveled and died. Other seed fell among thorns and thistles, which choked the young plants so that they bore no fruit. But some seed fell on good ground, took root, sprang up, grew strong, and produced fifty – a hundred! – times as much as had been planted.” He looked around. “Do you understand this story?”

“No,” I said.

His disciples came up behind me. “Um, we don’t either.”

Yeshua sighed. “The seed is the word of God. Some people are stubborn, convinced that they already know it all and won’t let the word in. Those are the hard ground on the path, where the seed never grows at all. Some hear the word and rejoice. But only on the surface. They have no root in themselves, so when troubles come, they forget all they’d heard. Those are the rocky ground. Still others hear the word and take root and grow, but they are surrounded by the cares and desires of this world that distract them. They look like servants of God, but they bear no fruit. These are the plants among the weeds and thistles. But some . . . some hear the word, take it to heart, let it take root in their very being, and bear fruit – these make up the Kingdom of Heaven.”

I wasn’t sure if he was aiming that at me. Did I think I was the hard ground? The rocky soil? But one thing was certain, and I spoke it aloud. “We aren’t talking about the same thing, are we? I mean, your kingdom isn’t the one I’m talking about.”

“No, my child,” Yeshua said, even though he was younger than I was. “But the true kingdom can yet be found. Imagine you’re walking in an abandoned field that belongs to a neighbor. You see something poking out of the ground and look more closely. It’s a buried treasure, worth more than all that you own, all that you’ve ever imagined. You can’t dig it up. People would see you taking it from the field that is not yours. What do you do?”

“I’d sell everything I owned to buy the field,” I said.

Yeshua smiled. “Yes. When we’ve found something that’s worth more than anything, none of the things we used to care about matter any more. Or, imagine a jewel merchant. He’s spent his life among gems, but one day, in a dirty old store at the end of a street, he finds one perfect pearl. It is deeper, richer, more beautiful than anything he has ever seen. Every other precious stone is just a pebble compared to this. So he sells all he owns just to buy this one perfect pearl. All his previous plans – to become wealthy, to buy a house in town, to become powerful – none of that matters any more, now that he’s seen the pearl of great price.

“Do you understand, my dear child? The Kingdom of Heaven’s like that.”

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

Matthew 13:24-33

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

Matthew 13:44-50

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'