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Matthew 13:31 - 13:33



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In Matthew 13:31-33, Jesus uses two parables to show how the Kingdom of God will advance without the use of physical force. The first parable compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed, which may be small at first but grows into a tree that provides a safe haven for birds. The second parable compares the Kingdom to leaven (yeast), which when mixed with dough, permeates and causes it to rise. According to Steve Gregg, these parables provide an optimistic vision of the Kingdom of God and demonstrate that it will continue to grow and spread throughout the world.

Transcript

Today let's look at Matthew chapter 13. And there are two short parables. Altogether they take three verses for the two of them.

And they are found in verses 31-33. Now, this chapter, if you weren't with us in the previous broadcasts, we are in the midst of this one chapter which is full of parables. The chapter is almost entirely made up of parables that Jesus taught about the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God, or as it's frequently called here, the Kingdom of Heaven. And these parables were there to tell something about the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. The first parable that Jesus told was, we usually refer to it as the Parable of the Sower.

And this was about a man who threw seeds out in his field. The seeds received a mixed reception from the ground. Some of the ground was more receptive to the seed than others and produced fruit.

Others had various problems and deficiencies that prevented them from producing fruit. Jesus said that that was like the Word of God being planted like seed in the hearts of men. And each condition of soil represented a respective state of heart that either was receptive and fruitful or unreceptive and unfruitful, ultimately, of the Word of God.

So what he's telling us about the Kingdom of God there is that unlike David's kingdom, which was spread by the sword, by military power, the kingdom Jesus was bringing was

spread by the Word of God. Rather than fighting and conquering his enemies with the sword, he was doing something more analogous to farming. This is a fulfillment, I believe, of what Isaiah predicted in Isaiah chapter 2, and which Micah also predicted in Micah chapter 4, where he spoke of the time when the Kingdom of God would come and he said they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

This is not literal, of course. Even those who might think it is literal and would apply it to a later age than this must realize that spears and swords are not really used anymore. And so it's not talking about literal spears or literal swords.

But what it's referred to there, I believe, is the fact that when the Messiah came and introduced his kingdom, it was a spiritual kingdom. And it was not spread by the sword or by the spear. And those who would be the agents of his kingdom would have no need of spears and swords.

They would have need of farming implements because the spreading of the kingdom of God under the Messiah is more like farming, more like cultivating, more like spreading the Word and cultivating the Word in the hearts of others than it is like converting people at sword point or conquering them by killing them. And so that is what Jesus is telling us about the kingdom. It is spread by the Word of God, not by military action.

The second parable Jesus told in this chapter, we call it the parable of the wheat and the tares. In this parable, again, we have seeds being sown in the world. And some of the seeds represent God's people and some represent the devil's people, said Jesus.

The bottom line in this parable was that the children of the devil and the children of God would grow together in this world until the end of this age. And at the end of the age, God would sort them out so that the kingdom of God and the persons of its citizens would continue to grow for a period of time. So far, it has been almost 2,000 years.

But so would the kingdom of Satan grow for the same period of time. And they would be growing side by side, hostile to each other, but neither extinguishing the other completely until the end of the age when Jesus would send his angels and they would weed out the wicked. And then, of course, the world would belong to the kingdom of God.

And the kingdoms of the earth will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. So that is what the second parable was about. Now we have two other parables.

In Matthew 13, verses 31 through 33, we read, Now, these two parables are put together because they are very similar to each other. Now, I would point out this, that having read these two parables, we now make the sum total of parables that have been considered in this chapter four. And the first two parables, Jesus gave elaborate explanations of, so that he explained every detail of the parable of the sower and of the parable of the

wheat and the tares.

However, here he gives two very short parables and he does not give explanations for them. Now, he may have given explanations for them privately to the disciples, and Matthew may simply have not recorded the explanations because he thought their meaning would be so self-evident. I mean, it's really quite easy to see what it says, is it not? The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

It's very small. It grows up into a great tree. That certainly seems to indicate that although the kingdom was having a small beginning in the person of Jesus and his disciples, yet in the end of the age it will have become a great spreading entity, which is extremely large compared to its early modest beginnings.

And likewise, the parable of the leaven and the lump of dough seems to teach the same thing. You put just a little pinch of leaven or yeast into a lump of dough, and that has an impact on the whole lump. The whole lump of dough rises.

And therefore, he is saying, it would seem that just like yeast, though it is introduced in small quantities, exerts an influence disproportionate to its own volume, so also the kingdom of God, which is small, or at least was small in Jesus' day, because it only comprised of him and his disciples at that time, it would nonetheless impact its environment, as yeast does a lump of dough, in a big way. So both of these parables would be saying something like this. As I stand here, Jesus would be saying, the kingdom of God is very small, like a mustard seed is small, very small like a pinch of yeast, a pinch of leaven, a very small amount that is put into a large lump of dough.

In a sense, it may seem insignificant, inconsequential, something that could be ignored with impunity. However, like a mustard seed or like a pinch of leaven, this small beginning tells you very little about the ending. A little bit of leaven can leaven a whole lump, and a little mustard seed can grow into a very big tree.

And therefore, what Jesus would be saying is, do not despise the day of small beginnings. This is a small beginning to the kingdom of God. It may appear only a mustard seed or a pinch of yeast, but if you wait and watch, you will see.

This kingdom will spread, this kingdom will advance, this kingdom will take over, this kingdom will influence its environment completely, it will spread out, it will be huge. That's what Jesus is saying. At least that's what these parables seem to be saying.

Now what I find interesting is what has happened in the modern church in regard to these two parables. As I said, these are the first two parables we read of that Jesus does not explain the meaning of. He explained the meaning of the first two, but here's two more, and he doesn't explain their meaning.

And wouldn't you know it, no sooner does he give us some parables without an

explanation, but the disciples of Jesus misunderstand it. Now I mean the disciples of Jesus today, because I don't believe that the early disciples missed it. I think that the reason that no explanation was given to them is because they did understand it without an explanation.

Or maybe Jesus did explain it to them, but Matthew didn't record the explanation because he figured everybody understands. This is simple, but wouldn't you know it, the church has fouled things up in more recent times. Less than 175 years ago, a new theory of biblical interpretation arose, originally in Great Britain and has spread to the entire civilized and Christianized world.

This view is a view that interprets almost everything in scripture differently than it was interpreted for centuries before by the Christians. When it first arose with a man named John Nelson Darby, it was a viewpoint that basically claimed to be a restoration of the original teaching of the apostles, which had been lost by the church by every generation since the apostles. Darby acknowledged, of course, that the church hadn't taught his views for 1800 years, but he believed that that was because the church had lost this truth and that what he was teaching was rediscovered truth.

Does that sound similar to anything you've heard before? It's interesting because Darby introduced this view about 1830. Just a little later than that, or about the same time, another man, Joseph Smith, said that he rediscovered truths that the apostles had taught and that had been lost by the church all the way through time since then. So we've got right around the same time in history, two men, one in America and one in Great Britain, claiming that they've rediscovered truths that the whole church had lost, but that the apostles had taught.

Joseph Smith, of course, founded the Mormon Church, and his rediscovered truths were Mormonism. Darby's rediscovered truths were called Dispensationalism. And while Christians generally reject the teaching of Joseph Smith because we recognize it as not agreeable with historic Christianity, for some reason Christians don't quite as readily recognize that John Nelson Darby's views also don't agree with historic Christianity.

In fact, in some cases, Darby's views take things that are very plain in Scripture and twist them to mean exactly the opposite thing. I wouldn't bother saying this, not for the fact that I wouldn't be surprised if many of my listeners understand the Scriptures through the lens of Dispensationalism, of John Nelson Darby. This originated in 1830, and when such people look at these verses, for example, the Scofield Reference Bible is a representation of Darby's views, and if you look at the notes of Dr. Scofield or Rye Restudy Bible or some of these other Dispensational Bibles, they will say that these parables mean just the opposite of what they seem to mean.

For example, take the parable of the mustard seed. Another parable he put forth to them, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his

field, which indeed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Certainly that sounds like an optimistic vision of the kingdom of God, but Dr. Darby, or excuse me, John Nelson Darby was not a doctor, I don't remember what his theological credentials were, but Mr. Darby, let's call him that, he said, well no, this is not an optimistic vision, this is a pessimistic vision.

He says this is a picture of the church growing into a great institution, but it is corrupted in its latter years. Now where does he get the corruption? Well it says that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Now what's that got to do with corruption? Well nothing at all really, but what Darby taught and what Schofield and others who have followed him have taught is this, that the birds that rest in the branches of this tree represent evil, evil people, maybe even the devil himself, because they say that the birds were in a previous parable, the parable of the sower, they came and ate up the seed and Jesus said that was like the devil coming and snatching away the word.

So if the birds eating the seed represented the devil taking the word, then the birds were evil. And for these birds to rest in the branches of the tree, so it is said, that represents that in the latter days the church will be infiltrated by evil. Well I disagree profoundly.

First of all, there's no reason in the world to say that simply because the birds represent the devil in one parable, they must represent evil in this other parable. After all, birds in relation to seeds are a danger. If you're a farmer and you're planting seeds, birds eating your seeds are undesirable.

They're bad guys. You put up scarecrows. You do what you can to keep the birds away.

They are unwelcome enemies. And therefore in the parable of the sower, the birds make a good example of the devil, a good illustration of what the devil does to the seed. But when it comes to birds perching in the branches of a tree, they are not doing any damage to the tree.

In this illustration, the birds are not some kind of enemy of the tree. The tree provides an environment of security for the birds, which are otherwise helpless creatures. And the message here is not that the tree is somehow corrupted by the birds living in its branches, but that the tree becomes a shelter to helpless creatures who come and live in its branches.

Now, this is very obviously the case, because in the Old Testament, there are at least three times that this same imagery is used when it's speaking positively about the impact that some kingdom or another has upon the nations around it. There are at least three times in the Old Testament when a kingdom is likened to a tree, and it is said of it that that kingdom, the tree, the birds were in the branches of the tree. And in the Old Testament, that always meant that that kingdom provided a safe environment for

otherwise helpless creatures.

If you would look, for example, at Daniel chapter 4, there is a vision there that Daniel interprets. Actually, it's a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had. And in the dream, Nebuchadnezzar himself was represented as a great tree.

And in that tree, there were birds lodging in the branches, which was not a bad thing. It says in Daniel chapter 4, verses 11 and 12, The tree grew and became strong. Its height reached to the heavens.

It could be seen to the ends of all the earth. Its leaves were lovely, its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

This is not a negative picture. This is a good picture. Now, of course, as the dream continues, this tree gets cut down, and it represents Nebuchadnezzar going crazy for seven years.

But the idea is that before he exalted himself against God and took credit for what God had done, he was like a great tree providing shelter for animals and birds and woodland creatures. In other words, he was ordained by God to be a shelter, a protector of the nations. The birds did not corrupt him, and they don't represent corruption in him.

In Ezekiel, twice this same imagery is found. In Ezekiel chapter 31, for example, there is a prophecy that had to do with Assyria, another kingdom, another big world empire like Babylon, only at an earlier time. And in Ezekiel 31, verses 5 and 6, this kingdom is also likened to a tree.

It says, We have again a nation, a kingdom, a large world empire, Assyria, and it's likened to a tree, and the birds nest in its branches, the woodland creatures bring forth their young under its shade. This is a positive picture. This is not a negative picture.

As in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, however, as the vision continues, this tree gets cut down because of its pride. So, we have two nations mentioned in the Old Testament, Babylon and Assyria, that are likened to trees, and before they are judged, when they are in their glory, they are providing a shelter. They provide a service, really.

They shelter and provide security for the helpless. And that's what kingdoms are supposed to do. Now, the same imagery is used in Ezekiel chapter 17, and this time applied to the kingdom of the Messiah, the very kingdom Jesus was talking about, His own kingdom.

And in that place, the Messiah's kingdom is also likened to a tree. In Ezekiel chapter 17, verses 22 through, well, let's see here, through 24, it says, Thus says the Lord God, I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar, and set it out. I will crop off from

the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on the high and prominent mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort, and in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree, and made the dry tree flourish.

I the Lord have spoken and done it. Now, the language, of course, as in these other passages, are symbolic, but this is a reference to God establishing his kingdom in the time of the Messiah. And notice that he talks about planting and becomes a great cedar, and the birds lodged in its branches.

This is not a negative picture in any of these Old Testament passages, and it isn't in the parable of Jesus. When Jesus says the mustard seed becomes a great tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches, he's not making a negative prediction. He's simply using the same imagery that is found throughout the Old Testament of a kingdom that is glorious and functional, and provides security and a home for the creatures, or in the imagery, the people of God.

And so this is not a prediction on Jesus' part of corruption in the last days of the kingdom of God. Likewise, the parable of the leaven. The dispensational view turns that all around, too.

In the parable, Jesus said the kingdom of God is like leaven, but the dispensational system says, no, leaven represents evil in the Bible. And therefore, he's talking about evil permeating the kingdom of God in the last days. Well, that's not true.

It is true that sometimes leaven represents evil, but it doesn't here. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like leaven. Okay? The kingdom of God is not itself evil.

The kingdom of God is like leaven. And therefore, if someone wants to say that the kingdom of God is going to be shot through with leaven, they're going to have to write a different parable if they're going to make leaven represent something evil. That's not the parable Jesus told.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like leaven itself, and it is placed into an environment where it is greatly outnumbered in terms of its volume, but it has a tremendous impact on its environment so that the whole lump of dough rises because of that leaven in it. You see, these two parables are saying the same thing about the kingdom of God. Notwithstanding the misunderstanding of some modern interpreters who seem to have come up with new rediscovered truths, they think, who are teaching that the kingdom of God will be corrupted in the last days, that's not what Jesus taught.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God will impact society powerfully like leaven impacts its environment in a lump of dough. The preaching of the gospel is to become a great tree, or as Daniel put it in Daniel chapter 2, it's like a little stone. It starts out small but grows into a great mountain to fill the whole earth.

Same idea. The idea is the kingdom of God starts out small. It started in the days of Jesus when he came and established it and became our king.

We who follow him are his subjects. As more people turn from their sin and defect from the kingdom of darkness and embrace Jesus as their Lord and King, that kingdom grows because a kingdom is measured by its citizenry. And anyone who is a follower of Christ has come into his kingdom.

Paul said in Colossians 1.13, he said that God has translated us out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of his own dear son. And so we are in it. And there are millions and millions of others in it too.

So that the kingdom has indeed grown from its humble beginnings, from its mustard seed size beginnings, into a great thing. From being a little stone in the days of Jesus into a great mountain that today does indeed fill the whole earth. Now it's still growing.

And the gospel is preached to new lands all the time. So the tree is still spreading its branches. The leaven is still permeating more.

But the ultimate destiny of the kingdom of God is to have its impact on its environment. And the world in which we live is to feel the effect of our loyalty to Christ. And it should change very much in the society of which we are part.

Tune in day by day and we'll continue studying what Jesus said on these subjects. Hopefully we will have an impact through preaching the word.