

# THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOKS SERIES

# THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Volume Three

by

Harold Fowler

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### INTRODUCTION

#### IS THE SERMON IN PARABLES ONE UNITED WHOLE?

The Apostle Matthew has a recognizably editorial style which he puts to good use by collecting together ideas and facts that logically go together. For example, he collected together a series of fast-moving illustrations to convince his readers that Jesus possesses the divine credentials to tell men what God wants them to know (Mt. 8, 9). In these sections at least we noticed that Matthew was driven not so much by chronological considerations as by his interest in assembling those events whose unified weight would have considerable persuasive power. Since the divine inspiration of Matthew as Apostle guarantees for us the rightness of his procedure, we are not surprised whenever his method surfaces at any given point in his work.

Now, does Matthew's chapter 13 represent this procedure? Did he collect these parables into one place without regard to context? That is, is the material contained in 13:1-53 the account of one particular sermon preached by Jesus in its entirety on a given day in Galilee?

Farrar (*Life*, 254) doubts it, offering the following arguments against its fundamental unity:

It seems clear that our Lord did not on this occasion deliver all of those seven parables . . . which, from a certain resemblance in their subjects and consecutiveness in their teaching, are here grouped together by St. Matthew. (Footnote: For the scene of delivery at least changes in Matt. xiii. 34-36.) Seven parables (Footnote: . . . Eight, if we add Mark iv. 26-29. . .) delivered at once, and delivered without interpretation, to a promiscuous multitude which He was for the first time addressing in this form of teaching, would have only tended to bewilder, and distract. Indeed, the expression of St. Mark—"as they were able to hear it" (Mark iv. 33)—seems distinctly to imply a gradual and non-continuous course of teaching, which would have lost its value if it had given to the listeners more than they were able to remember and understand. We may rather conclude, from a comparison of St. Mark and St. Luke, that the teaching of this particular afternoon contained no other parables, except perhaps the simple and closely analogous ones of the grain of mustard-seed, and of the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear, . . .

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Farrar's explanation, and any others of which his may be considered typical, does not take adequate account of the following arguments urging the fundamental unity of this discourse:

1. Matthew intentionally gives the distinct impression that he is recording both the beginning (Mt. 13:1-3), and the conclusion (Mt. 13:53) to a single discourse given in its entirety at least in the presence and hearing of His close disciples. Mark (4:1-35) and at least Luke 8:4-18 confirm this impression. (See critical note on 13:53 at that place.)
2. Again, it is Matthew himself who clearly notes the change from public discourse to private explanations and continued teaching which obviously came later (Mt. 13:36). The only problem that arises is that affecting the intervening material, i.e., "Why Jesus Teaches by Parables" (Mt. 13:10-17). "The Explanation of the Sower Parable" (Mt. 13:18-23) and probably also "The Use of Parables" (Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18). However, Mark (4:10) reveals that this intervening material, which Matthew has inserted before the end of the public discourse, was the subject of Jesus' remarks made privately to the insiders. Thus it would seem that only this aforementioned material became the private property of these intimates, whereas the parables recorded immediately thereafter are but the continuation of the public sermon. This is true, because, after the story of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29), of the Tares (Mt. 13:24-30), of the Mustard Seed and that of the Leaven, Matthew gives the discourse a definite rounding off: "All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables" (Mt. 13:34). Should any object that Matthew should have interjected an explanation or two out of order, when, as a matter of fact, they were given privately and later, let it be remembered that Mark and Luke do the same thing. Then, it is Mark who verifies this conclusion:

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it, he did not speak to them without a parable. But privately he explained everything to his own disciples (Mk. 4:33f).

Has anyone inquired into the psychological value of our author's making the very kind of parenthetical insertion that we find here (Mt. 13:10-23)? Since Matthew is not merely providing his reader with a full transcript of the sermon anyway, and since the readers of Matthew's gospel, faced with a barrage of unexplained parables,



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would have some of the same difficulties as the original audience to Jesus' sermon, the Apostle comes to the aid of his readers. (After all, the circumstances occasioning the sermon in the first place are changed at the time of the Apostle's penning the Gospel.) So, he furnishes early in this chapter not only the answer to the anticipated question of why Jesus used this method. He also provides an interpreter's key for the reader's appreciation of the parables that were to follow. (Cf. Mk. 4:13) So the insertion itself made by Matthew is no argument against the integrity of the discourse given that day by Jesus.

Accordingly, besides the above-mentioned material inserted out of its chronological order for psychological effect, the private explanations included the key to the story of the Weeds, and perhaps also the illustrations of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price and the Dragnet.

3. Again it is Matthew, an eye-witness to the event, who specifies that, besides the recorded stories, many more were delivered on the same occasion (Mt. 13:3, 34, 53). This would allow for considerable variation in reporting the stories, which, surprisingly, is limited mainly to Mk. 4:21-29, and Lk. 8:16-18.
4. The mere observation that some of these parables are to be found elsewhere, reportedly given by Jesus in differing circumstances, does not militate against their repetition on this occasion, especially since their character is general and the need for their retelling widespread.
5. The objection that a barrage of parables without explanation, delivered before a heterogeneous audience would have tended only to confuse, losing its value on listeners unable to understand, entirely misses the real purpose behind Jesus' tactics. In fact, it is His declared intentions to hide truth from some by letting each person's trust in Jesus determine how much truth he would be willing to learn. (See the section on the "Purpose of Parables.")
6. Farrar objected that the expression "as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:33) implies a gradual, non-continuous course based upon the listeners' ability to understand, hence not one continuous sermon. However, Mark's full statement runs: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable." The "word," here, is the description of the Kingdom Jesus revealed. Thus Mark is affirming, not that Jesus doled out the spoonfuls of information gradually or on different occasions as people could swallow them,

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but the victorious truth that Jesus actually succeeded in speaking the soul-saving truth to those people in the measure to which they were actually to grasp it. All this, despite His total use of parables to communicate that truth! The proof that some really understood Jesus' parables is seen in His question of His intimates: "Have you understood all this?" (Mt. 13:51). No doubt much of their affirmative answer is based upon His private explanations, but it by no means follows that all of their understanding was so founded. Much clear, unparabolic information about the Kingdom had already been laid openly before the disciples (Mt. 4:23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 12:28; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 4:43; 8:1). Therefore, it was not impossible that some disciples who had studied His clear teaching could have seen the connections intended between His former lessons and the point of the parables. For these people, then, the parables really illustrated, rather than hid, truth. So Mark's statement affirms Jesus' success in communicating truth instantly to some hearers that day, notwithstanding the fact that many different listeners, for just as many varied reasons, were unable to grasp it.

Upon closer examination, then, there is nothing that would sustain the hypothesis of fundamental disunity in this discourse of Jesus, whereas a comparison of the related texts discloses enough satisfying proof of its unity to convince the objective reviewer.

So what if the message reported by Matthew is one cohesive unit? Many Bible students would never have thought to fragment this chapter anyway, having no preconceived notions about where Matthew must have derived his materials. It is important to see this discourse as a unit for several important reasons:

- (1) If this sermon be one continuous speech, uttered at a given historical juncture of events in Jesus' ministry, its mysterious character, half-revealing, half-hiding precious truth about the nature of the Messianic Kingdom of God, will provide further insight into the plans of God. It will become increasingly clearer to the believer why God has made the choices He has. (Cf. Mt. 11:25ff; 1 Co. 1:18-31)
- (2) If this message was deliberately organized by Jesus, more or less as the Evangelists report it, our own understanding of the Lord as a Master Teacher and strategist is sensibly increased. For if this strange assortment of seemingly disconnected stories be but one lecture, intended to keep pushy, uncomprehending

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curiosity seekers at bay, if its definitely low-key disclosures are intended to cool Zealots' nationalistic messianism, if its intriguing but unexplained stories are aimed at keeping the scholars guessing, then Matthew is absolutely right to consider the great sermon in parables as symptomatic of the growing crisis in Jesus' public relations, and right to introduce significant portions of that message at this place in his account. There were various ways Jesus maintained His "messianic reserve" (not "messianic secret," as Wilhelm Wrede would have it) such as forbidding demons and men not to inform others He was the Christ until after His resurrection (Cf. Mt. 8:4; 9:30; 16:20; 17:9) This sermon, if our reading of Mt. 13:34 and Mk. 4:34 is correct, is typical of Jesus' approach during this increasingly stormy period that would finally erupt in the crack and collapse of His popularity with the crowds. So, in this very sermon Jesus maintains His messianic reserve in the sense that He deftly defers divulging His own messianic plans in the presence of any but the most dedicated.

Consequently, we see that the question of the sermon's unity is not one of dubious, abstract value, but rather integral to a correct understanding of Jesus, His message and ministry.

## ARE JESUS' "PARABLES" PARABLES?

That depends on what we think a "parable" is. If Jesus is using the word "parable" in harmony with modern technical definitions in mind, we will interpret His stories one way. On the other hand, if the word "parable" in the usage of Jesus and His contemporaries plays havoc with modern distinctions and rules, then we must get at the thinking behind His linguistic habits and let that be our guide to understanding His stories.

One must recognize that the ancients used the word "parable" to cover a rather kaleidoscopic range of figurative sayings. Further, since they did not make, nor necessarily respect, our nice distinctions between figures, it would lead to a mistaken interpretation of the ancient figures, were we to use modern rules governing the interpretation of what modern rhetoric would call a "parable." The Bible writers use the word "parable" (Greek: *parabole*) in the following senses:

1. A proverb (1 Kg. 4:32 [= 5:12 LXX]; Psa. 49:4 [= 48:5 LXX];

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- Prov. 1:6; Eccles. 12:9; Ezek. 16:44; 18:2; 12:22, 23)
2. A byword (Psa. 69:11 [= 68:12 LXX]; 2 Chron. 7:20; Jer. 24:9; Dt. 28:37)
  3. An allegory (Ezek. 17:2; 20:49 [= 21:5 LXX]; 24:3)
  4. Any poetic discourse composed of poetical imagery, sustained parallelisms, brief pointed sentences. (Nu. 23:7; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23; Mic. 2:4; Hab. 2:6; Isa. 14:4)
  5. Didactic history (Psa. 78:2 [= 77:2 LXX]; see on Mat. 13:34, 35)  
Symbolic or typological events, things or persons. (Heb. 9:9)
  6. A figure of speech, a speaking figuratively (Heb. 11:19)
  7. A germ illustration or enigmatic speech not immediately clear (Cfr. the disciples' attitude: Mt. 15:15; Mk. 7:17)
  8. Of course, the familiar, classic one-point story form made famous by our Lord (although its employment was certainly known before His time, cfr. Hos. 12:10)

These broad uses of *parabolé* are really a part of the historical significance of the word, despite the contemporaneous existence of other Greek words which Jesus could have used to describe His figurative language: *allegoria* (verb: Gal. 4:24), *enigma* (Nu. 12:8; 21:27; Dt. 28:37; Prov. 1:6; Dan. 8:23), *probléma* (Psa. 48:5; 77:2; Dan. 8:23 Theod.; Hab. 2:6); *skoteinòn, lógòn* ("dark saying," Prov. 1:6); *paroimíai* ("proverbs," Prov. 26:7); *diégema* ("story," Dt. 28:37; Ezek. 17:2)

Therefore, in the light of the broad use of the word "parable" (*parabolé*), it should be no surprise if the Savior calls an indisputable allegory a "parable" instead of an "allegory." Consequently, as we seek to interpret this chapter, we will discover that sometimes a given illustration is strictly a parable with one point and no more, whereas another story is really a short allegory with numerous points of comparison. So, rather than accuse Jesus of abusing the word "parable," we revise our definition! The "correct" definition of "parable" is the meaning the author intended to convey when he used the word. So, if Jesus calls an allegory a "parable," we must not use modern rules governing parables only to ruin the true interpretation of His allegory-parables! As in other areas of good Bible interpretation, so also here: the author's definitions and explanations of his language are sufficient and final. Some of Jesus' parables, as He explains them, are clearly allegories.

## PARABLES AND ALLEGORIES COMPARED

A "parable" in the modern sense differs from the "allegory" in several important particulars. The parable, strictly speaking, is an illustration or a story or an event taken from everyday life, known to all, used to clarify or explain something else not understood by all, with which it can be compared. The parable generally portrays one fundamental point of comparison, and all the details serve only to make this point clear, not being intended to represent separate features of the thing the parable is supposed to illustrate. Obviously, then, the purpose of a parable, in this stricter sense, is to explain something under discussion with a view to making it clear to everyone.

The "allegory," strictly speaking, also involves one great underlying idea (like "the nature of the Kingdom of God," "the tragic folly of rejecting God's messengers," etc.). But, contrary to parables in the strict sense of the word, in allegories the various characters, events, actions and other details that interact to move the plot forward to its natural climax, actually signify, or refer to, the separate parts of the things being described by the allegory. Further, the various parts of the allegory have meaning and must be interpreted. Another interesting feature of the allegory that vitally affects our understanding of Matthew 13 and other "parables" of Jesus, is the fact that quite often allegories are intended to mask, or even deliberately hide, the meaning of the comparison, so that only the initiates, the insiders, the intimate members of a given group should recognize what is meant.

Our task, then, will not be easy, since Jesus Himself uses the word "parable" rather loosely. It may well be that, in those instances where the Lord has not furnished the interpretation, we may need to treat His stories as strictly one-point parables, lest we commit another common error in Biblical interpretation of seeing meaning in details that even the Lord Himself knew nothing about. But, regarding those for which He does provide the meaning, He obviously treats them as allegories, so detailed is His explanation of each part of the stories. (Cf. e.g. the Parable of the Sower; the Parable of the Weeds) Yet even here some of the temptingly interesting details of Jesus' original allegory are discarded in His explanation as apparently meaningless or unimportant, a fact that warns against fanciful invention of meaning for insignificant details even in allegories. As the history of exegesis would amply show, the decision just which details in Jesus' parables are to be regarded as significant, and which meaningless, will not be

easy. In fact, in some cases it will be impossible. Our dilemma is dramatized in Jesus' question: "Do you not understand this parable (of the sower)? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13). It may be granted that His questions mean that the truth contained in the Parable of the Sower is fundamental to a secure grasp of everything else Jesus has to say by means of the other parables, i.e., "The reception of the message of the Kingdom depends upon the condition of one's heart and the attention he gives to the message." Still, one cannot avoid the more than probable conclusion that He intended to furnish us with a key to the interpretation of them all. (See Trench, *Notes*, 16.) If so, the key Jesus provides in the examples He gives is frankly allegorical, since He explains practically every detail in the stories of the sower and of the weeds. (See also the triad of parables in Mt. 21:23—22:14 and parallels.)

### SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING JESUS' PARABLES

1. Approach the parables, not with a self-admiring ingenuity that would seek to discover meaning in all the minutest fibers of the narrative, but with the conviction that God's purpose for all Scripture, including the parables, is to make men holy through the truth, not to encourage them to exercise the vaunted ability of dubious value to discover hidden meanings where there were none intended.
2. Determine the one central truth which the parable intends to proclaim.
  - a. How much of the parable did Jesus Himself interpret? He may have pointed this idea out.
  - b. On what occasion is the parable introduced? This may indicate the truth it is intended to illustrate.
  - c. With what explanations is the parable introduced?
  - d. How is the parable applied in its own context?
  - e. Is there a similar parable in the context illustrating the same central point?
  - f. How do the historical and cultural circumstances indicated in the story help to underline the central thought being illustrated?
  - g. Having determined the major point essential to the comparison, all the different parts will appear in their true perspective: either as mere embellishments essential to complete the story as a story,

## IS THE SERMON PARABLES ONE UNIFIED WHOLE?

or else in their true light as essential points upon which the major comparison is based. These latter must be interpreted; the former, no. Any minor points of comparison must be handled with reserve, i.e., with a rigorous hesitation to accept any minor details in the story unless they really function as part of the comparison. The very lack of connection between any details and the principle lesson of the parable is the clearest indication that they were not intended to be interpreted at all. Any interpretation inconsistent with the subject to be illustrated must be rejected.

3. Parables must not be used to furnish the basis for doctrinal argument, because their purpose is primarily to illustrate truth. They do not prove or demonstrate it. The basis of doctrine lies in the clear, unfigurative expositions of truth elsewhere in Scripture. The function of parables is to illustrate these doctrines to intimate disciples of Jesus, so the illustrations themselves are valid only insofar as they perform this function. Doctrine does not lean on parables; parables lean on doctrine. No detail may be pressed which indisputably violates clear moral principles spelled out elsewhere. No interpretation of a parable can be broader than the nature of the thing it is supposed to illustrate: a parable is not intended to say things greater than, or other than, the thing it is trying to describe. The actual extent of meaning must be determined by the author's intent and by the nature of the subject, not only on the basis of the parable considered by itself.
4. The interpretation of parables must be an easy one, a natural one, not violent or forced. This is especially true and possible for moderns with full access to the completed revelation in the broad outlines of God's plans. Since these doctrines have now been revealed in clear, unparabolic language, the parables which were once such tough going for the early disciples should require little special genius to discover their meaning. To this end, it will be found that the analogies will be real, never arbitrary.
5. No one parable tells the whole story. A parable, by its nature, is a figure of speech called *synecdoche*, by which its author indicates the whole of something by mentioning a significant part of it, or vice versa, the general for the particular and vice versa, the definite for the indefinite, etc. This is most certainly the case with Jesus' parables in Mt. 13, since no one parable exhausts the full expression or meaning of the Kingdom of God. Each parable is but a facet of a lovely diamond. Each facet is fully part of the diamond,

but in no sense does it alone express all of the gem's beauty. This should be easy to see, since Jesus is quite obviously saying, "The Kingdom of God is like this and this and this and this." How COULD God's reign be similar to so many diverse things, if but one of them exhausted the full meaning of the whole Kingdom? No interpretation of a given parable, therefore, must be permitted to override or contradict the lessons taught by other parables.

6. Parables almost invariably are true to human experience, if not already oblique allusions to historical incidents. But details, missing from the narration, must not be supplied by the interpreter's imagination, because the parable's author selected just so many details as were pertinent to HIS purpose. To invent details, or add them out of historical research, when the author himself did not consider them necessary to the communication of his ideas, is not only to ruin his original, but become the presumptuous editor-author of a different story without any divine sanction.
7. The correct interpretation of a parable has been discovered if it leaves none of the main features of the story unexplained.
8. A clear understanding of the time-period to which many of the parables refer is necessary for their proper interpretation. Most of them are a description of times between the two comings of Christ. Others have as their objective the illustration of certain features of future eschatological events and the Christian's response to them: preparation for final judgment, the unexpectedness of the time, the exhortation to be faithful, the finality of ultimate separations, etc. Some even depict such short-range eschatological truth as the destruction of Jerusalem and the transfer of the privileges of the Kingdom from Jews to the Gentiles. In this sense, some are prophetic, and as such, would then be treated with the same rules that govern the proper understanding of prophecies, especially seeing their significance in the light of their undoubted fulfillment.



## Section 31

JESUS PREACHES THE GREAT SERMON  
IN PARABLES

(Parallels: Mark 4:1-34; Luke 8:4-18)

## PREVIEWING IN OUTLINE FORM

- I. The Occasion (Mt. 13:1-3a; Mk. 4:1, 2; Lk. 8:4)
- II. The Parable of the Soils (Mt. 13:3b-9; Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8)
- III. The Purpose for Parables (Mt. 13:10-17; Mk. 4:10-12; Lk. 8:9, 10)
- IV. The Explanation of the Soil Parable (Mt. 13:18-23; Mk. 4:13-20; Lk. 8:11-15)
- V. The Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30)
- VI. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32; Mk. 4:30-32)
- VII. The Parable of the Leaven (Mt. 13:33)
- VIII. The Multiplicity of Parables (Mt. 13:34, 35; Mk. 4:33, 34)
- IX. The Explanation of the Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:36-43)
- X. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44)
- XI. The Parable of the Precious Pearl (Mt. 13:45, 46)
- XII. The Parable of the Dragnet (Mt. 13:47-50)
- XIII. The Use of Parables (Mt. 13:51-53)

A word is in order here concerning the method to be followed in the study of this great sermon in parables. There can be no valid interpretation of a parable which misses its author's own meaning, ignores the historical circumstances of the story or the setting in which the teller narrates it, or otherwise fails to see his express intent for telling it.

In this sermon Jesus obviously takes no text, indicates no logical outline or specific sequence of thoughts and draws no clear-cut conclusions, a fact so remarkable that it caused some problems for His closer disciples. It was just not His usual style to teach exclusively using apparently disconnected and unexplained stories. They did not recognize that His discourse is organized according to what in good public speaking would be called "the string-of-beads outline." This outline consists in a series of illustrations strung together in no particular sequence. Even as beads are strung together on a single cord, so each story is a separate unit and pertains to the whole insofar as it illustrates the common theme running through them all. In the case of these parables, the major theme illustrated from various

vantage points is the Kingdom of God.

Since it is the Lord's declared purpose to convey meaning to His disciples, as well as to illustrate how other parables are to be understood (cf. Mk. 4:13), and in order to let Jesus' own exposition guide our thinking, in the notes which follow, each explanation He gave has been grouped with the parable it interprets. As the following interpretative outline indicates, the only parable taken out of order is that of the Dragnet which parallels and complements that of the Weeds with which it will be studied. This, because the Lord's style makes use often of two parallel stories to illustrate and reinforce the same truth from two similar standpoints, as in the case of the Mustard-Seed and Yeast Parables or the Treasure and Pearl Parables. As a partial parallel for the Sower and Soils Parable, the Parable of the Seed Growing By Itself, narrated in Mark 4:26-29, has been added to Matthew's list for completeness.

#### THE FOLLOWING ORDER WILL BE THAT FOLLOWED IN THE COMMENTS:

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| I. The Occasion of the Sermon (13:1-3a)                | I. The opportunity to know truth |
| II. The Message  | II. The truth presented          |
| A. The Problem of Kingdom Proclamation                 | A. Reactions to truth            |
| 1. Parable of the Sower and Soils (Mt. 13:3b-9, 18-23) |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29)           |                                  |
| B. The Problem of Evil in God's Kingdom                | B. The trials of truth           |
| 1. Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43)          |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Dragnet (Mt. 13:47-50)               |                                  |
| C. The Problem of Growth and Success in God's Kingdom  | C. The triumph of truth          |
| 1. Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32)         |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Yeast (Mt. 13:33)                    |                                  |
| D. The Inestimable Value of the Kingdom                | D. The price of truth            |
| 1. Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Mt. 13:44)          |                                  |
| 2. Parable of the Precious Pearl (Mt. 13:45, 46)       |                                  |

- III. Jesus' Methodology in Parabolic Instruction
- III. The psychology behind the proclamation.
- A. The Purpose of Parables (Mt. 13:10-17)
- B. The Multiplicity and Justification of Parables (Mt. 13:34, 35)
- C. The Appreciation For and Use of All Truth (Mt. 13:51-53)

### HOW DID JESUS ORGANIZE HIS SERMON?

Because Matthew purposely re-edited Jesus' message (see his statements at 13:10, 34, 36; cf. Mk. 4:10, 33, 34), it might be thought helpful to attempt a tentative reconstruction of that message as Jesus might have delivered it. The only value therein would be to help the reader better to visualize the original scene. There is no intention whatever here to question Matthew's integrity as a historian or his proper rights as an inspired author. Rather, since the theorists of the *Redaktionsgeschichte*-school would reduce even Matthew's literary connectors into "unhistorical fabrications serving editorial purposes, rather than intending to register objective relationships," only a Christian who trusts the Publican-Apostle implicitly to be telling the truth could begin a serious reconstruction!

Here is the author's reconstruction:

- I. Situation (Mt. 13:1, 2; Mk. 4:1; Lk. 8:4a)
- II. Message proper
  - A. Many parables (Mt. 13:3a; Mk. 4:2)
  - B. Sower Parable (Mt. 13:3b-9; Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8)
  - C. Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26-29)
  - D. Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:24-30)
  - E. Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31, 32; Mk. 4:30-32)
  - F. Leaven (Mt. 13:33)
  - G. Hidden Treasure (given at this point? Mt. 13:44)
  - H. Precious Pearl (given at this point? Mt. 13:45, 46)
  - I. Dragnet (given at this point? Mt. 13:47-50)
  - J. Many similar parables (Mt. 13:34, 35; Mk. 4:33, 34)
  - K. Official end of the seaside message (Mt. 13:36a)
- III. Private Explanations to the Disciples (Mt. 13:36b; Mk. 4:34b)
  - A. Disciples request private explanations of His methodology (Mt. 13:36; cf. Mk. 4:10)
  - B. Jesus explains His method:
    - 1. The reason for parables (Mt. 13:10, 11; Mk. 4:10, 11;

Lk. 8:9, 10)

2. Revelations are for publication (Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16-18a)

3. Responsibility for the proclamation (Mk. 4:23)

4. Rewarding of the perceptive (Mt. 13:12; Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18b)

5. Recollection of a prophecy because of a replay of perverseness (Mt. 13:13-15)

6. Rejoicing in possession and the responsibilities of privilege (Mt. 13:16, 17)

C. Explanation of the Sower Parable (Mt. 13:18-23; Mk. 4:13-20; Lk. 8:11-15) Parable of the Lamp given here? Mk. 4:21ff; Lk. 8:16ff

D. Explanation of the Weeds Parable (Mt. 13:36-43)

E. Conclusion: Parable of the Christian Scribe. (Mt. 13:51-53)

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### I. THE OCCASION

TEXT: 13:1-9, 18-23

(Parallels: Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20; Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15)

1 On that day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side.

2 And there were gathered unto him great multitudes, so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach.

3 And he spake to them many things in parables, saying,

### II. THE MESSAGE

#### A. PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN KINGDOM PROCLAMATION

#### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Behold, the sower went forth to sow, 4 and as he sowed, some *seeds* fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: 5 and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth:

and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: 6 and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked them: 8 and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He that hath ears, let him hear.

.....  
18 Hear then ye the parable of the sower. 19 When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, *then* cometh the evil *one*, and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart. This is he that was sown by the way side. 20 And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it; 21 yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; and when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth. 22 And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word; and the care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. 23 And he that was sown upon the good ground, this is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; who verily beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How does this parable show that more than the objective presentation of truth is necessary in order to convert a person to Jesus?
- b. What does the parable teach about the power and effectiveness of the Word of God?
- c. What does the parable suggest about the limitations of the power of God's Word?
- d. Does this parable prove that a person has to be "honest and good" before he can actually accept the Gospel and grow in it? I thought that it was the Gospel that makes people honest and good, not that they had to be good and honest before they could accept it. Explain.
- e. God promised that His Word would not return to Him void, but would accomplish the purpose for which He had sent it (Isa. 55:10, 11). But is it not true in this parable that many, many people made void God's Word in their own case by letting other things destroy its influence? Also the elders' traditions make void God's Word

(Mt. 15:1-20). How would you go about harmonizing God's declaration (Isa. 55:10, 11) with this seemingly contrary teaching found in the parable of the Sower?

- f. How do you account for the fact that there seems to be a boat handy just when Jesus needs it? Whose boat might it have been? Why would Jesus need it here in this incident; i.e., what tactical use of it did He make?
- g. When Jesus gives an interpretation along with His parables, what are we to do with it? But when He does not explain a parable for us, what are we to do? What were His disciples expected to do with a parable for which He gave no immediate explanation?
- h. When do you think the Apostles began questioning Jesus for further information regarding the meaning of His parables?
- i. Do you think that the people represented in the first three classes described are personally responsible for the condition of their heart at the time of their hearing the message of Christ? Why?
- j. Do you think Jesus is here condemning the various things that fill a person's life, which somehow hinder him from producing a fruitful life for God? What are your reasons for thinking this?
- k. What is the difference in definition between "good" and "honest," as descriptive of the proper sort of heart Jesus is seeking? (Lk. 8:15)
- l. What is so deceitful about wealth?
- m. What is "the care of the world"? Do you think that Jesus means: "the care, or desire, for the world"? Or does He mean "the world's cares," that is, that which the world worries about? Or is there another possibility?
- n. How is it that even those who do accept God's Word in a good, honest heart do not even produce the same results? Why should Jesus have to stress this point, after defining so sharply the difference between the hearts of those who, for whatever reason, do not produce fruit, and those who do? What is so important about even this latter distinction (v. 8) that helps us to understand the basic nature of the best, most faithful followers of Jesus?
- o. To what would you attribute the fruitfulness of the fourth class of people? State in several ways exactly what it means to have a "good and honest heart."
- p. When Jesus describes the Gospel as producing in good hearts sometimes thirty-, sixty- and hundredfold, do you think that He was stating His ideal, i.e., the goal He wished to reach in human lives, or do you think that He was stating a fact, making a true

observation about what He knew would be the result?

- q. How does the short parable narrated in Mark 4:26-29 about the Seed Growing By Itself qualify, or aid in the correct understanding of the Parable of the Sower and Soils, as well as that of the Weeds?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

That same day Jesus walked out of the house, sat beside the sea and began to teach. Such a very large crowd of people from town after town was gathering about Him that He boarded a boat and sat in it on the lake of Galilee. The whole crowd stood on the beach listening as He taught them many lessons in story form. During the course of His instruction He said,

"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. While he was sowing, some grain fell along the path and was walked on by people who passed, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground where there was not much soil. Immediately that grain sprouted, since the soil was not deep. But as it grew, the sun rose and withered it. Since there was no root, it withered away, because it got no moisture. Other grains fell among brambles. These thorns grew up with the good grain and choked it with the result that this too yielded no grain. Other seed fell into rich soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding a crop. Sometimes it produced thirty times what was sown, sometimes sixty times what was sown, sometimes even a hundred."

And as He was saying this, He practically shouted, "If you have ears to hear with, then listen—pay attention!"

.....  
Later, His disciples began questioning Him regarding the meaning of this story. He answered, "You have certainly understood this illustration, haven't you? How would you go about interpreting all the rest of these stories? Listen then to the explanation of the story about the sower. The meaning is as follows: the seed stands for the Word of God. The sower, then, is someone who broadcasts the message. The people along the path when the message is preached are those who, when they hear the news about the Kingdom of God, do not understand it. Satan, the evil slanderer, comes immediately to snatch away the Word implanted in their mind, to prevent their

believing it and being saved by it. This is the meaning of the ground which was sown with seed along the path.

"In a similar way, the rocky ground which had been sown represents those people who, when they hear the message, immediately welcome it joyfully. However, since they have no deep-rooted convictions within them, they believe, but, consequently, last only for a little while. Then, when trouble comes or persecution arises because they followed the Word, they immediately fall away.

"What seed fell among brambles illustrates those people who hear the Gospel, but as they go about their business, the worries of the present age, the deceitful seduction of wealth, the desire for other things, and life's pleasures all contribute to choke out the influence of the Word in their life. Thus, they either prove completely unproductive, or else their character does not mature.

"By what was broadcast on good soil I meant those people who hear the message, understand it, accept it and hold it fast in an honest, good heart. In fact, they patiently produce the character that the Gospel in them must bring forth. They produce in some cases thirty times what they received, sometimes sixty times, and in other cases, even as much as a hundred times!"

## SUMMARY

It was the same day Jesus had held a vigorous discussion with the Pharisees and scribes over the true source of His power when He cast a demon from a blind, dumb demoniac, the same day that Jesus' work had been interfered with by His family and friends, that He went out to the beach where He taught the congregated crowds from a boat. His first story described the limitations that the individual qualities of men's hearts impose upon the effectiveness of God's Word: some reject, stifle, or else accept the influence of God's Word in their individual case in direct proportion to their character and their willingness to let God have His way.



## NOTES

I. THE OCCASION OF THE SERMON:  
THE OPPORTUNITY TO KNOW

13:1 On that day (*En tē heméra ekeīne*) is the expression whereby Matthew establishes a definite link between the Sermon in Parables and the events immediately preceding: the interference of Jesus' relatives, and, probably, also, the psychological motivation for that interference: the accusation levelled by religious leaders that He worked in secret agreement with Satan. (Cf. Mt. 12:46 and parallels; Mk. 3:19-21)

Redaction criticism would see this verse as merely a literary device having absolutely no historical value whatever, because it was invented by the anonymous editor of Matthew's Gospel, intending thereby to create a smooth connection between otherwise disconnected materials. (See also on 13:53.) But as has been noticed in the introduction to this chapter, Matthew gives the deliberate impression that he is recording one, unified discourse presented in the presence of Jesus' disciples with only one major change of locale carefully noted (13:36). It should occasion no surprise that he establish also the time, place and circumstance in which that discourse occurred. On the basis of what theory of authorship of this Gospel are we warranted to reject as unhistorical these circumstantial details, when the Gospel itself was already circulating either in Aramaic or Greek at a time when not only eye-witnesses still lived who could contradict any of these details if mistaken, and when enemies of the faith—both heretics and persecutors—sought justification for their rejection of the orthodox message believed and taught by the early Church contained therein? If we must conclude with these modern critics that the phrase *On that day* or any other connector used by Matthew is unhistorical—that is, that for some reason, the facts if really known are quite different—on what basis may we receive as genuinely historical ANY other supposed "fact" reported by Matthew, as, for example, the resurrection?

The situation *on that day*, then, is charged with high tension by four basic elements which must be understood before the Sermon in Parables can be rightly seen in its proper perspective:

1. Growing opposition from the authorities (Mt. 12:22-45)
2. Worried family and friends of Jesus (Mt. 3:19-21; see especially notes on Mt. 12:46-50)
3. Increasingly greater crowds or curiosity seekers neither disposed to think with Jesus nor ready to accept clear teaching. (See notes on Mt. 13:10-17, 34, 35.)
4. Disciples to prepare, revelations to give them before the crisis of Calvary, deadlines to meet.

**On that day Jesus went out:** Nothing stops Him: no interruptions by well-meaning kinfolks, no hard-faced opposition, no misunderstanding friends can hinder Him from pouring out the revelations He had come to earth to share! If the above-mentioned connections are all solid, then the house is probably His Capernaum home to which He returned from His Galilean tour (Lk. 8:1; Mk. 3:19b) and in which took place the healing of the blind and dumb demoniac and the fierce discussion with the calumnious Pharisees.

**Jesus . . . sat by the sea side** as He had done before (Mk. 2:13). Notice how naturally the situation evolved: having left the house with His close disciples, Jesus found a suitable position along the lakefront where He could be comfortably heard by a small group of listeners. His lesson had no sooner gotten underway when the number of new faces around the listening circle got to be too great for the limited teaching situation. In fact, Mark and Luke assure us that the crowd began to swell surprisingly quickly, not merely with local townspeople from Capernaum out promenading along the beach, but people kept coming together "from town after town" (Mk. 4:1; Lk. 8:4)! This made His words impossible to follow because of the confusion created by the unavoidable whispering, pushing and squirming into a hearing position, as the ones in the back probably complained about not being able to hear.

**13:2 And there were gathered unto him great multitudes, so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach.** It is not enough that Jesus has just battered His way through a forest of Pharisean arguments and come out victorious, even though the scribes themselves remain of the same opinion still. Here are perhaps hundreds of well-wishers and curious folk out for an afternoon walk with no television for their diversion. Instead of going down to the station to watch the trains come in, or gathering at the local football stadium, these Jews of another age stroll down to the

waterfront to muse over the latest pronouncements of the budding rabbi from Nazareth. In general, or at least formally, they are committed to follow God's teaching wherever it might lead, but no doubt many of them have no specific interest in taking Jesus' message personally or even too seriously. This audience is fundamentally friendly to Jesus, but not at all committed to Him as LORD enough to let Him rule. If they link Him with the long-anticipated Messianic Kingdom of God, they probably do so only in terms of their own popular notions about it. If there is to be any ruling done, Jesus will just have to do it their way, or they will not play along with it! (Study Jn. 6:14-66.)

The first step Jesus takes is to get this milling mob under psychological control. It is impossible to teach anyone anything while thoughtless people are trying to make their own personal petitions for help and healing. Jesus' solution, so simple and so effective, was to get into (Peter's?) boat and have him shove off a short distance from the beach. (Cf. Lk. 5:1-3) This gave Him an excellent speaker's platform from which He could easily be heard, and, at the same time, it made the crowds keep their distance unless they wanted to get wet. (Cf. Mk. 3:9, 10)

13:3a **And he spake to them many things in parables.** In the light of this uneasy situation, it would appear nothing short of incredible that Jesus should meet this extraordinary challenge by telling a string of seemingly harmless little stories. *Parables*, as the anglicized Greek word implies, are comparisons between two things, one definitely known which serves as a basis of comparison by which the other, which is set along side it, is to be understood. (*parabolè*, from *paraballein*, "to compare," Arndt-Gingrich, 616; see introduction to chapter 13 for further notes.) The *many things in parables*, as the introductory words of most of the illustrations say, are various aspects of the Kingdom of God, the one subject described through this entire discourse, however, seen from different points of view. Usually, a parable is a short story which, by means of its comparison, illustrates or clarifies a concept. But, as will be seen from our present examples, Jesus' parables represent that concept obscurely, hence require interpretation for anyone not already perfectly familiar with the thing being described. *Parables*, as such, are not new in Jesus, since many such illustrations appear in His teaching before this. (Cf. Mt. 5:13-16; 6:22, 23, 26-30; 7:24-27; 9:15-17; 10:29-31; 11:16-19; 12:25, 26, 29, 43-45)

## CLEAR TEACHING PREVIOUSLY GIVEN

As will be noticed in each pair of parables that follow, Jesus is merely restating in parabolic form information that was implicit in His previous teaching, notably that of the Sermon on the Mount. From this standpoint, He is not really offering completely new revelations for the person who had eyes to see the implications of what the Lord had there suggested.

But who on earth really saw all that? The impression He made on His audience then was one of astonishment at His authority and doctrine. But is it probable that even the most intimate, most alert disciples fully appreciated the heights and depths of that grand discourse? That enormous declaration—even as it stands in its quite probably edited form in Scripture—is massive! And if we are just now growing to understand it after centuries of study by the predecessors upon whose shoulders we stand to get a better look, should we imagine that the multitudes, or even the Twelve, with minds filled with quite other notions about the coming Kingdom, should have been able so quickly to sound its depths and scale its heights or so instantly perceive the truth about the intentions of God for His Kingdom? This is highly doubtful.

And yet, from a historical perspective we can admit that the general outline of the Kingdom was there all the time, clear and right on the surface. With the notes on each pair of parables there has been included also an indication as to how the truth of those parables had already been anticipated in the Sermon on the Mount.

On this basis, then, it is possible to understand why these parables would have actually communicated meaning to some disciples, because, however unconsciously, they had really been over this ground before. These stories would actually communicate more knowledge in the sense that each would extract some principle implicit in the Sermon on the Mount (and in any other previous teaching of which that message is but a classic example), and hold that principle up for closer examination. The result is genuine progress in the revelation about the Kingdom.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER  
IN PREVIOUS TEACHING

If in that great Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that the truly blessed do not depend for their happiness on outward conditions with which contentment in a material kingdom is associated, but rather upon a condition of HEART which causes them to be poor in spirit, mourning, meek, famished for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peaceable, reviled sufferers for Jesus' sake, we are warned at the outset that the Kingdom of God is designed to include and satisfy only those whose hearts are honest and good, unpreoccupied with other concerns. Further, if the Kingdom morality is one not merely of achieving standard Pharisaic goals, outward compliance with religious practices such as fasting, alms-giving and prayer, calculating self-interest, etc., if it is not merely superficial bending to divine revelations, if it is rather a morality of the conscience and a purity of heart that produces real piety, real love for others, then it becomes increasingly clear that the Kingdom itself is going to be found only in those whose hearts are "honest and good." Again, if the fundamental function of the Kingdom's citizens is to be salt to the earth and light to the world, it follows that one must expect an abundance of worldlings needing the proclamation of this Kingdom Gospel, many of whom would remain unconvinced. The continued presence of evil in the world will be noticed under the Parable of the Weeds, but hints of it in the Sermon on the Mount indicate that reactions to the Kingdom's proclamation would be varied, exactly as taught by the Parable of the Sower. Else, how could there be any persecutors (Mt. 5:10-12), or enemies (5:21-26, 38-48), thieves (6:19-21), "dogs and swine" (7:6), or false prophets (7:15ff)? And even more clearly, if in the Last Day even charismatic disciples of Jesus must face condemnation for evil works, then not even the former habit of calling Jesus "Lord, Lord" can be substituted for doing the will of the Father (7:21-23). This fact warns that not every disciple who begins the Christian life will finish acceptably. Even in the description of false prophets, the emphasis is on the kind of heart that produces good or bad fruits as the case may be. (See on 7:17-20.) Finally, the genuine freedom enjoyed by each individual to determine how or whether the Word of God will influence his belief and conduct is implicit in the totally unmanipulated decision which of the two ways open to man he will choose (7:13f).

## II. THE MESSAGE (13:3b-50)

A. THE PROBLEM INVOLVED IN PROCLAIMING  
THE KINGDOM: VARIED REACTIONS TO TRUTH

## 1. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND SOILS

## a. THE COLD INDIFFERENCE OF A CLOSED MIND

13:3b The picture is that of a farmer walking through his field with a grain-sack over one shoulder. As he walks he broadcasts seed-grain right and left. This free throwing, naturally, allows grain to fall wherever it will, although most of it would probably fall onto the good ground. Nevertheless, because no paved farm-to-market roads criss-crossed the country laying out the land in neat checker-board squares, people beat paths through the fields (Cf. Mt. 12:1). On this hard, beaten path on which nothing would take root or grow, the seed lay exposed to the feet of passersby (Lk. 8:5). The essential characteristic of this kind of soil is the fact that it remains precisely the same after the sowing as it was before: as if it had never known the sowing. In fact, not a seed penetrated its asphalt-hard surface. Rather, hungry birds quickly snatched them up.

13:18 **Hear then ye the parable of the sower.** It is important to remember here that Mark 4:10, 13 definitely places this explanation following the dismissal of the crowds, a fact which effectively keeps this information private. Matthew's inclusion of this interpretation at this point in his narrative, as suggested in the Introduction, is not intended to intimate that it was told at this point, but solely to aid the reader.

At this point in the narrative, before Jesus explains the parable, He draws attention to its typical character: "Do you not understand this parable (of the sower)? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13) The evident purpose of Jesus' question is to stimulate the disciples to begin-developing their ability to interpret parables or any other instruction that, from their standpoint, was not clear either because of the form in which it was given, or because their own preconceptions blocked their grasp of its concept. But what did He mean?

1. Regarding the form: does He mean to introduce a rule by which to interpret other parables? If so, the point should not be missed

that Jesus' own illustration of His method of interpretation is allegorical, even though some uninterpreted parables seem to have only one point of comparison. (See introduction to Chapter Thirteen.)

2. Regarding the content: is He saying that a grasp of the Parable of the Sower is absolutely fundamental to an adequate comprehension of the content, or message, of the other parables? That is, before one can see that evil will remain in the world until judgment (cfr. Parable of the Tares and of the Dragnet), even after the beginning of God's Kingdom in the Church, he must see that the proclamation of God's Kingdom will coerce no one to enter it. This absolute freedom to accept or refuse the Word of God will, of course, mean a very small beginning because of the limited, local proclamation of that message, and because its influence can spread only gradually throughout the world by means of its power to persuade men to submit to God's rule (Parable of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast). Likewise, to see why some accept the Word of the Kingdom and why many do not is to be prepared to understand how God's Kingdom could be a sudden, unexpected, joyous discovery worth any sacrifices to obtain it (Parable of the Hidden Treasure). Again, the appreciation of the excelling value of the Kingdom is only explicable if lesser values in life are allowed to remain, among which the individual remains absolutely free to choose (Precious Pearl). According to this view, then, the Parable of the Sower explains why Jesus chose to proclaim the Kingdom as He did: God intends to leave absolutely inviolate the human freedom to choose. This foundational fact stands in the background of all the stories which follow.

**Hear then ye the parable of the sower.** Even as the Lord draws a striking contrast between the unreceptive crowds and the willing disciples by the use of emphatic pronouns (see on 13:16, 17), so also here He underscores that difference: "**Here YE!**" The blessing He pronounced upon the disciples for their genuine experience of God's revelation (13:16) is proportionate to the extent that they truly understand what is going on. This is why He not only explains the story to them, so it would certainly become revelation, but He also calls attention to the fact by ordering: "YOU, then, listen to the meaning of the parable!"

Jesus entitles His story *the parable of the sower*, as if the sower

were to be the main interest, but His explanation of the illustration lays great stress on the kinds of terrain in which the Word is planted, while the sower himself plays no significant role—especially in the explanation. It would be truer to say that the sower actually disappears, while primary emphasis is placed on the soils. In fact, whereas each separate part of the story begins with mention of the seed, the very distinctions in types of soil draws immediate attention to the cause for the various types of ground's yielding as many kinds of harvest from the identically good seed faithfully sown by the same sower. None the less, with good justification Jesus entitles His story "the parable of the sower," because, by so doing, He draws attention to what would otherwise escape notice, because of the great attention given to the kinds of soils. In the Parable of the Seed Growing By Itself (Mk. 4:26-29) He will give special attention to the power of the seed to accomplish its work. In that of the Weeds He will place more emphasis on the sower, identifying him there as "the Son of man." But here, surprisingly, the sower is deliberately left unidentified except to style him generally as one who sows the Word of God (Mk. 4:14; Lk. 8:11). With this kind of introduction the Lord helps us to see that the problems involved in proclaiming the message of the Kingdom, the Word of God, are those to be faced by ANY proclaimer of that message. Whether it is Jesus Himself who proclaims the Kingdom, or whether it is His ambassadors who preach the Word (cf. 2 Co. 5:18-20; Mt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16), the hindrances that impede it, as well as the causes that facilitate it, must be understood.

13:19 **When any one heareth the word of the kingdom**, he stands in the unique, glorious position of one who can know the plans of God. Thus, he is thoroughly responsible for what he does with the information given. "The seed is the word of God" (Lk. 8:11, cf. 1 Pet. 1:22-25; Jas. 1:18, 21). So, anyone who admits the premise that Jesus' message is none other than the proclamation of God's Kingdom would be in a position to understand it, because, if it were not clear to him, he could trust Jesus to explain what was not clear. So the expression, **any one hears the word . . . and understands it not**, does not refer so much to intellectual capacity, as it speaks of a moral attitude which is the key to understanding the first basic response to the message. Such an individual, upon hearing the message, immediately loses any real grasp on it, because he did not really understand it at all. But since that message is the identical Word that produces the finest results in someone else, the fault cannot be in a



message intellectually beyond the capacity of the former. Why should this take place? How could any man be so absolutely hard that any message about the problems of the spirit, about concern over sin or about hope of redemption would be absolutely unintelligible and without meaning? As Trench (*Parables*, 30) has it, here is a man who has "exposed his heart as a common road to every evil influence of the world, till it has become hard as a pavement." Dulled conscience, jaded sentiments, perverse will, prejudiced intellect—all contribute to his inability to comprehend. (Cf. Heb. 3:13, "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"; Eph. 4:17-19) This mind could also be closed by prejudice, unwillingness to be taught, pride or fear of new truth.

But not the least of the causes of his loss are the external influences that go to work immediately upon the individual while he is still listening to the Word: **then cometh the evil one and snatcheth away** . . . From such a person it is an easy snatch, because he left the Word lying around on the surface of his life where anyone or anything could remove it. He made it no part of his thinking. Since Jesus spoke of several birds devouring the grain, one would have expected Him to interpret them as many impersonal temptations. Instead, the birds are **the evil one, Satan** (Mk. 4:15), **the devil** (Lk. 8:12). Jesus is not embarrassed by modern theories that would eliminate Satan as a personal, evil adversary. (See on 4:3.) Likewise, Paul feels the human nakedness of the unarmed individual, exposed to the attacks of the evil one. (Eph. 6:10-18 where note how he, too, speaks of the various methods, *methodeias*, of the devil, the principalities, the powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Nevertheless, for Paul, there is still but one unspeakably malicious and personal enemy who actively pursues the seduction of men and women to lead them away from a sincere devotion to Christ. Cf. 2 Co. 11:3; 2 Th. 2:10-12) The Lord makes it obvious from this first parable that no view of the Messianic Kingdom can be adequate that makes no account of a real, personal devil dedicated to hindering its progress at every step. This fact warns all starry-eyed dreamers, who expect the proclamation of the Kingdom to be crowned with instant success, that even the free, malevolent activity of God's enemy will be tolerated until the final victory (Cf. 13:28, 39).

Luke's addition to the parable, the Word **was trodden underfoot** (Lk. 8:5), though not interpreted by the Lord, might suggest that, in

the same way that the seed cast on the path lay exposed to be trod upon by any who crossed the field that way, so the Word, too, was no sooner heard than it got literally trampled in the stampede of other thoughts crowding the life of this person, regardless of the origin of these thoughts. In this case, the Word, considered as a new thought, never had a chance. While the man in Luke 12:13ff could well be an illustration of the thorny soil, his callousness to spiritual reality makes him a good example of this one too. In fact, while Jesus is pouring His heart out to get men's mind off of their earthly concerns long enough to let God have His way in everything, this individual can think of nothing else but the injustice of his brother and his own part of their family inheritance! Herod Antipas wavered back and forth from an interested listener of John the Baptist to his plotting murderer (Cf. Mt. 14:5 and Mk. 6:20). The Word of God, no matter who preaches it, just can never penetrate the surface of a mind paved over with indifference to truth, dulled by complacency and protected by prejudice. Not even Jesus Christ can get through to a man like that!

#### b. THE SUPERFICIAL ENTHUSIASM THAT DOES NOT COUNT THE COST

13:5 The picture here is of shallow topsoil covering a slab of rock, because if it were soil mixed with rocks, the seed would have found little difficulty finding a crack between the stones to reach down into good humus, were that the case. The point of the apparently rich soil covering the layer of rock is its deceptive superficiality, a fact that leads naturally into the interpretation.

13:20 Some easy, surface culture softens some people, making them seem open-hearted and good prospects for conversion. In fact, upon hearing the message, they **receive it immediately with joy**. There is real joy in knowing that we have been forgiven, real rapture in the assurance that God has adopted us. Many genuinely admire Christ, truly appreciate the beauty of holiness and sound the depths of clear emotions, but mistake all this for faith, for attachment to Jesus, for depth of godliness and for patient maturity. **They receive the word** readily, because it is objectively good and desirable (Heb. 6:5). There seems to be a poignant contrast underlying Jesus' double use of "straightway": "He . . . straightway with joy receives it . . . straightway he stumbles,"

of this type of individual who begins to make splendid progress but is hindered (Cf. Gal. 5:7). Perhaps he accepted the Gospel without weighing its consequences for the rest of his life. (Cf. the scribe in Mt. 8:19 and notes; I Th. 5:21). Easily converted by the arguments of the moment, he was just as easily disposed to change under other tensions or on the basis of other arguments (Cf. Jn. 5:35; Mk. 6:20; Lk. 4:22, 29). The shallow-minded person with no strength of character, no long-range goals, a creature of the hour, has few convictions that can override momentary difficulties or outlast short-lived whims. (Contrast 2 Cor. 4:1—6:10; esp. 3:4, 12; 4:7, 13, 16; 5:6, 11). During periods of great revival, many easily get on the bandwagon, but apostacize when their "Christianity" is put to any real tests (Cf. Heb. 3:12). The fault lies not with the seed, but entirely with the soil, not with the Word, but with the lack of depth in this impulsive person who can "go for" the Gospel or Jesus or the Church, like he would "go for" any other fad, and then reject it as quickly, because something else has caught his fancy. It was to this kind of mentality that Jesus had to address His stern challenge of the high cost of discipleship, in order to get people to consider the cost before plunging into the life of a disciple and then failing to finish (Lk. 14:25-33).

**Yet he has no root in himself:** does this expression mean to say that (1) he has in himself, i.e., in his life, no roots sunk down into, and taking nourishment and stability from, other things outside himself? or (2) that he has no roots sunk down deep in his own psychological make-up. Are the *roots* to be thought of as subjective, objective or both? When we examine a man's subjective constitution, we find the traditions that form his conscience and the sentiments that fire his emotions. Even if these are an integral part of the man that makes him what he is, their cause of stimulus is outside of him in the teaching he has received from his parents and society, and in his reactions to it and them. So, even here, we have the combination: a subjective reaction to an objective reality, and the ground in which his *roots* would have been planted. But, Jesus declares, "He has no roots," no well-trained conscience that can keep his duty clear in the face of doubts and contrary desires, no disciplined will to hold him steady under anti-Christian persecution, no practice at governing his emotions and desires, and no intellect used to facing truth and reality wherever and however it comes. (Contrast Heb. 10:32-35; 2 Cor. 4:17, 18; Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:7; Mt. 7:25.) He lacks,

in short, the very things that would have made him tenacious under fire. Result? *He endures for a while* (*prōskairōs estin*). The time-limit is not indicated, leaving each disciple to ask himself: "At what point am I?" Faithful until death is the demand (Rev. 2:10).

**And when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word** . . . a person under pressure must decide whether his cause is worth the trouble to die for or not. Jesus knows that too many would wait until they are put under pressure to consider this, since their initial decision was not properly weighed. If our decision to follow Christ is well taken, we need not die a thousand deaths with the arrival of each single tormenter or temptation to quit (Cf. Lk. 8:13). What would it take to tempt you to deny the Lord? Many who might actually rise to the challenges of a heroic martyrdom in the arena or suffer in the flames at the stake, forget the treacherous peril of sneers, scoffing and laughter, and to stoop to cursing and denial of their Lord. Ironically, serious opposition can produce precisely the opposite reaction: push some men back into a corner with their back to the wall and they will hold all the more tenaciously to the position for which they are being thus maltreated (Cf. 2 Sam. 17:8; Jer. 26:12-15; 1 Kgs. 22:1-28). But the difference lies in each individual's "gut-level" attitude toward his chosen position. That is, does his spirit really dominate his flesh, and does the Lord really govern him? At any rate, it is the same trouble, pain and persecution, the same lack of clothes and food, the same plundering of property, the same threats of death, for one Christian as for the other (Cf. Heb. 10:32ff; Rom. 8:31-39). So the fault lies, once again, not in the inquisitory fires, but in the quality of the material tested thereby (Cf. 2 Co. 4:7-12, 16—5:10; 6:4-10; 7:3, 5; 8:2; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Jas. 1:2-4. See Special Study "Temptation," Vol. I, pp. 143-152.). None the less, the trial or persecution must be *because of the Word*, not because of one's own mistaken opinions or limited views of that message. (Acts 14:22; 2 Th. 1:5; see notes on Mt. 5:11.)

The only saving of this superficial enthusiast from this shallow rootlessness is to give this new convert some roots. Where is the new Christian who does not want Jesus to abide in him, who does not desire to bear fruit to the Lord's honor? Let the rich strength of the words of Jesus become part of his thinking, the source of his power, the guidance for his prayers and the stimulus to his obedience, and his initial joy need never fade! (Jn. 15:1-11; Eph. 3:14-19; Col. 2:6, 7.) Let him learn quickly that he has been predestined to be conformed

to the image of the Son of God who was persecuted for righteousness' sake and ended up on a cross (Ro. 8:29)!

### c. THE PREOCCUPIED INDIVIDUAL: TOO BUSY, DOUBLE-MINDED

13:7 What will grow thorns will also grow wheat! Here is soil with real potential, but already occupied: it could produce a great harvest, but is growing a jungle. **Upon the thorns** (or, *among thorns*, as Mark and Luke have it) zooms in on the real problem: the areas into which this portion of the seed fell were already occupied, already committed. Is there a suggestion here also that the productive power of the ground for a given year is limited, so that the ground itself, like the human heart, can support only a certain concentration of strength-consuming growth beyond which point comes exhaustion and failure?

13:22 Is this man a Christian? It is significant that the only apostolic use of a similar figure mentioning well-watered, cultivated land producing *thorns* as eventually worthless, near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned, is intended to describe Christian people "who have once been enlightened, have had a taste of the heavenly gift, have received the Holy Spirit, have experienced the goodness of God's word and the spiritual resources of the age to come" (Heb. 5:11—6:12; 10:32-39; 12:12-15). There is no denying that the thorny heart is that of a Christian, once a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ, but now in danger of falling away for many reasons before arriving at maturity. Although Jesus does not state outright that the man with the *preoccupied* heart had actually accepted the Word, as in the case of the superficial convert, this is a fair assumption in light of these factors:

1. The crescendo of reactions to the message rising from total indifference up to genuine faith among which the thorny heart is put after the shallow heart which had actually received the Word with joy, would lead us to see this individual as a Christian.
2. The nature of the ground represented here, while crowded with other stronger growths, can also receive the seed and permit it to start growing.
3. Luke's expression: "but as they go on their way" (*poreuòmenoi*, 8:14) indicates that the choking out of the good fruit of God's Word

in their lives would have occurred sometime after they had heard it but before they normally would have arrived at maturity. It takes time to suffocate the Word, if it is going to be done by cares, pleasure, wealth, etc. So this happens gradually as these go through life, but before they reach the goal.

4. Even *the thorns* needed time to *grow up with* the seeds (Lk. 8:7).

In short, here is an individual unable to concentrate his entire life on God, i.e., he cannot consecrate (concentrate) it to make it wholly (holy) His (Cf. 1 Th. 5:23; 4:3). His good intentions to make an honest, all-out, positive response to Jesus and begin the life of faith are frustrated, since divided loyalties usurp his highest loyalty and so strangle his spiritual life. He is a careless dabbler in many, not immoral things, in fact, easily justifiable, reasonably good things. But his inattention to priorities permits these other preoccupations to ease out of its first place his one great preoccupation: the service of God. The little boy who prayed in a Christian service camp: "And, Lord, thank you for those boys and girls who concentrated their lives today," accidentally said more truth on the subject of holiness than most preachers can say on purpose! Here again, Jesus drives home the point: "Only the pure in heart will see God." (See notes on Mt. 5:8.)

### PALTRY PANACEAS AND PERENNIAL PREOCCUPATIONS THAT PREJUDICE PRODUCTION

What are these previous commitments that impede this man's spiritual growth? As will be noticed from the hindrances themselves, these various preoccupations may all be found in the same individual in varying degrees in some unbeatable combination, or, too, one or more single preoccupations will be more accented in a given person, bringing about his downfall. (See the Special Study on Temptations, Vol. I, pp. 143-152, for more notes on this conflict of desires.)

1. **Cares of the world** (*he mérimna tou aiônos*, or, as Mark has it, *hai merimnai*), because of the problem of the subjective versus the objective genitive, is handily ambiguous here: (1) "The worry connected with the times, those into which one's life is cast" (Lenski, *Matthew*, 521); (2) "the cares which the world worries about." Jesus had already warned against the insidious paganism

involved (Mt. 6:19-34). Martha was an easy target for this seduction (Lk. 10:38-42). We, like her, get worried and bothered about so many relatively necessary things and commonly neglect the one thing really imperative. The toil and fatigue of being always on the job, always plodding, gives no leisure for concerns of the spirit. Our head buzzes with our minute-to-minute problems and our schedule is full up. Within themselves, each single care is no sin, and may even be justified in Scripture (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:8; Eph. 4:28; Mt. 15:4, 5; 2 Co. 12:14; 2 Th. 3:6-13). The idolatry begins, however, when the individual seeks first the solution to these cares and then relegates the Kingdom-quest to whatever time, interest and strength is left. (Contrast Mt. 6:33.)

Lest anyone feel himself above these cares, let him count how many great things for God he intends to do before he dies, but whose daily business of living has such a grip on him that he is left simply too tired to think about these goals. Is our life so crowded that we never quite have time to get around to them? This is why the Lord dedicated so much soul-searching preaching to this single human concern: the Christian and the cares of this world. While there may be a definite ethnic undertone to the Parable of the Great Banquet and the Lame Excuses (Lk. 14:15-24; Cf. Mt. 22:1-10), the excuses given by those originally invited reveal their real preoccupation and what they really wanted out of life.

2. **Delight in riches**, or "the deceptive seduction that comes from wealth," or "the false glamour of wealth." The reason for these varied translations lies in the word *apâte*, rendered by Rocci (196): "1. deception, fraud, betrayal; 2. trick, artifice; 3. diversion, pastime; and enjoyed deception, said of theatrical spectators." Arndt-Gingrich (80) mention: "1. deception, deceitfulness; seduction; deceit; 2. pleasure, pleasantness that involves one in sin." NT texts using this word are: Mt. 13:22; Mk. 4:19; Eph. 4:22; Col. 2:8; 2 Th. 2:10; Heb. 3:13; 2 Pet. 2:13; the verb *apâtao* occurs in Eph. 5:6; 1 Ti. 2:14; Jas. 1:26, where it can mean "deceive, cheat, mislead, 2 mid. enjoy oneself, live pleasurably." The more talent a man has, the more the world demands his service and the more money he can make, the more he can be deceived into believing that this world's goods are the real wealth (Cf. 1 Ti. 6:6-10). Whether we possess wealth or merely long for it, it embroils us with promises to satisfy which it cannot keep.

Remember wealth's seduction of the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-30). Demas fell for this trap, too (2 Ti. 4:10). Judas Iscariot had his hand in the cash register, too (Jn. 12:6). Just as surely as Jesus knew there would be some "smart boys" who would attempt to serve God and Mammon (Mt. 6:24), so here too He sounds the warning: either wheat or thorns will be the produce of one heart, but not both!

Let not the poor suppose that they are somehow exempt from this temptation, merely because they have so little as never to be free from their daily cares! They too may envy the advantages that wealth provides their richer neighbors, and, consequently, embroil themselves in the same greedy grasping for just a little bit more. Even the well-fixed gentry may presume their cares to be over, only to find it hard for them to enter into God's Kingdom (Mt. 19:16-26).

The deception lies in the hope that one's nervous quest of wealth need not destroy his faith. Should not he use his talent for making money? While he reasons this way, the bonds of slavery to his sources of wealth harden into steel. Death or judgment catches this man still dreaming that at any minute he can free himself from his financial ties. It all begins with an eagerness to acquire it, develops through a proud confidence in what wealth can do, matures in the resolve to hold and increase the gains. He perfects a flexible "honesty" and that hard-nosed inhumanity called "business is business." Ironically, Jesus was most exasperated with people who were so bent on acquiring money that they remained blind to the true wealth. They do not see that all worldly riches are borrowed goods given into man's administration, and, sooner or later, must be returned to their rightful Owner for a final accounting. The sage Preacher of *Ecclesiastes* saw wealth with the disguise removed, and he cried, "Vanity!" This is a realistic picture of a life spent without God and Christ.

3. **The desire for other things** (Mk. 4:19 *hai peri tà liopà epithumiai*). As noted in the Special Study on Temptations (Vol. I, pp. 147ff), the word "desires" (*epithumia*) may or may not have an evil connotation, a fact extremely important here. Is Jesus defining "covetousness"? *Pleonexia*, usually rendered "covetousness," as its etymology reveals, means "have-more-ishness," hence "greediness, insatiableness, avarice, covetousness." (Arndt-Gingrich, 673) This is that selfish ambition that drives for wealth, position, status,



recognition, certainly, but it is more. Paul succeeded in sorting out for himself the one essential ingredient in life, and dropped everything else, however desirable it might once have been. (Study Phil. 3:13 in context.) He felt so keenly the danger in "desiring just a little bit more" that he called "covetousness" by its right name: IDOLATRY (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5). Perhaps the printed liturgy for this religion is a full-illustrated sale catalogue of the products of American industry, its sacrifices are made on the easy-payment plan. Many get so bogged down in the hard-labor burden of keeping up the easy payments, that the husband is forced to hold down two jobs, and the wife must seek extra work away from the home, all in the name of "the desire for other things."

4. **The pleasures of life** (Lk. 8:14) Is this another name for "the desire for other things"? Is it not rather that unadulterated hedonism frankly unabashed by its own luxuriating in "the good things of life?"

While it may seem that each of these preoccupations is quite distinct from each other—does it not ring strange to hear of "pleasures," the luxuries of the affluent, mentioned as *thorns* in the same context with the daily, crushing struggle of the poor man to live?—yet there are several unifying characteristics of everyone in this class that justify Jesus' including these divergent tendencies in one group. Some, for instance, see a logical progression in this series of *thorns*: ANXIETY about things essential to one's existence leads to activity that will produce WEALTH, which, in turn, will make possible enough comforts to create a taste for JUST A BIT MORE until one's absorbing interest turns into unashamed living for PLEASURE. Whether this ascending (descending?) progression is intended by Jesus or not, wherever a man finds himself absorbed or obsessed at any of these levels, he is in trouble (Lk. 21:34-36).

Another unifying characteristic of this class is the double-mindedness of everyone in it. It is evident from Jesus' emphasis that to have any harvest at all, much less a bountiful one, the choice must be faced: either thorns or no harvest at all, or only good seed and a harvest with no thorns. These are those individuals whose interests vacillate between God and anything else, and, at this point, it really does not matter WHAT else. These doubt and hesitate about their conflicts of interest. (Cf. Jas. 4:8; 1:8 *dipsuchos*; "irresolute, vacillating, uncertain") They are neither totally confident that God can

be their all in all, nor that earth's cares and pleasures can satisfy. So they wander incessantly back and forth between these two poles, struggling to harmonize the irreconcilable demands of the flesh and those of the Spirit (Cf. Gal. 5:16-26), rather than reconcile themselves to choose. How they need Elijahs to challenge them to a decision: "How long are you going to waver between the two sides? If the Lord be God, follow Him. But if \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank) be a god, follow him then!" Whether the real dependance of everyone in this class reveals itself in religious doubts or not, they are in reality idolaters who seek the supply of all that satisfies life's needs in something else, anything else, other than the living God. They may trust God, but with inward reservations and divided loyalties (Cf. Jas. 1:5-8). John, also heard this message, indicated the "this-worldliness" of these *thorns*: "Do not set your heart on this world or anything in it. Anyone who loves the world cannot love the Father at the same time. In fact, the whole world system with its primitive desires, its enticements, and its pride in one's possessions, does not derive from the Father, but from the world itself. Further, this world and its passions is already on the way out, whereas the man who does what God desires, will last forever" (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

Here are some tests that help reveal whether these *thorns* are crowding out the Word in us:

1. How much of my income is budgeted for (1) Upkeep, (2) Recreation, (3) Savings and investments, (4) the Lord's work?
2. Can I consciously recall the content of the last Bible study or sermon I heard? What was the text studied? How was it developed? How was it applied? What was my personal reaction to it?
3. What proportion of my time may be actually said to be dedicated to learning what God wants me to know and do?
4. How easy is it for other things to interfere with my commitment to serve the Lord in the specific ways He has indicated?
5. Add also the questions listed at 6:21 (Vol. I, p. 375).

#### d. THE GOOD, HONEST PERSON

13:8 Since ancient writers speak of harvests even more abundant than these more modest yields indicated here by Christ, nothing should be affirmed in the application about the rarity of the highest

degrees of spirituality (Cf. Gen. 26:12). Trench (*Notes*, 32) cites Herodotus as saying that two hundredfold was a common return in the plain of Babylon, and sometimes three hundredfold occurred (Cf. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, Vol. I, 116f). Here is ground relatively free from previous growths, broken up, and ready to receive the seed-grain.

13:23 Is single-mindedness, or whole-heartedness, in Jesus' mind here? In contrast to all the foregoing, this person puts God's Kingdom first, last and always, because his heart is neither impervious, nor previously committed, nor superficial. Consider his composite qualities taken together, since it is not possible to argue that any one of these qualities alone distinguishes these individuals, since all are essential to a successful harvest of righteousness:

1. **He hears the Word** (Mt. 13:23; Cf. Ro. 10:14, 15)
2. **He understands it**, in contrast to the indifferent (Mt. 13:23). Plummer (*Luke*, 222) thinks that *katéchousin* (Lk. 8:15), *paradéchontai* (Mk. 4:20), and *sunieîs* (Mt. 13:23) may all be equivalents of the same Aramaic verb, meaning "to take in." However, it is well to note the important differences of shading in the Greek verbs actually employed by our Gospel authors. Here, therefore, *sunieîs* speaks simply of comprehension of what is said. (Contrast Mt. 13:13-15, 19; cf. 13:51; 15:10; 16:12; 17:13; Lk. 24:45; Eph. 5:17)
3. **He accepts it**. (Mk. 4:20; cf. Jas. 1:21) This is a separate step beyond comprehension, since many reject the message BECAUSE they comprehend it and what it will cost them should they accept it (Cf. Acts 16:21; 22:18).
4. **He holds it fast**. (Lk. 8:15; Cf. 1 Co. 11:2; 15:2; 1 Th. 5:21; Heb. 3:6, 14; 10:23) He knows that unless he does, he can drift away from it (Heb. 2:1-4).
5. **In an honest and good heart**. (Lk. 8:15) It may be justly surprising to learn that a Gospel geared to make men good should produce fruit only in hearts that are pictured as already "good" before receiving the message. Nevertheless, even before examining the meaning of the terms, one should expect that, in the foregoing observation, the word "good" is used in two different ways. That is, Jesus' intended target for the Gospel is to make men perfect like God, not relatively good. (See on Mt. 5:48.) So, even as soil may be described as "good" for the purpose for which it is sown, so we may speak of a person as a "good prospect" for the Gospel,

although we are affirming nothing about the absolute goodness of his character or about what the Gospel will eventually produce in him. So it is that an unregenerated mind may be termed "good ground" for the Gospel, since it is specifically addressed to just such a mind. When a man has a sensitive conscience that accepts no easy justifications and an intellect that loves truth no matter the cost, he is *honest and good*. These are folks whose minds are not already filled with false notions about God and goodness, and so are ready to receive anything Jesus wants to tell them, or else they hold their prejudices lightly and so can be relieved of them. They view their vested interests as only a stewardship from God, and are happy to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and their pleasure is always to find pleasure in what pleases God.

**Honest and good** (*kalòs kai agathòs*), it is true are two separate adjectives, but, when taken together, they may become a fixed phrase, sometimes written *kalòs kàgathòs*, and are not intended to be broken up or considered as single descriptives. From the classical Greek point of view, Rocci (961, also 4) sees this combination as meaning: "respectable, honest; complete in every sense; excellent; virtuous and cultured; beautiful and precious; . . . excellent in every way."

(However, Arndt-Gingrich, 401 and 3, see these two as separate qualities. Nevertheless, even English has a similar idiom in which "good and . . ." followed by an adjective is but the reinforcement of the normal value of that adjective, e.g., "good and ready," "good and tired" "good and angry." In these cases we affirm nothing about the relative goodness of the person so described, because we intend only to emphasize the second adjective, as in the combination: "When I become good and tired, I cannot think well." Nothing is affirmed here for the Greek expression on the basis of the English idiom, except to point out the possibility of the Greek combination of two adjectives united by "and" used to express one concept.)

Trench (*Notes*, 32) sees this description "honest and good" as referring to

. . . a receptivity for the truth . . . One (division of men) was of the false-hearted, who called good evil, and evil good, self-excusers and self-justifiers, such as were the Scribes and

Pharisees for the most part. The other class were sinners too, but yet acknowledging their sins, and having no wish to alter the everlasting relations between right and wrong. Such were the Matthews and the Zacchaeuses. Nathaniel would be yet a more perfect specimen—a man of simple, earnest, truthful nature, who had been faithful to the light which he had—who had not resisted God's preparation for imparting to him His best gift . . .

6. **He produces fruit.** (Cf. Jn. 15:1-16; Jas. 1:22-27) Note that it is *fruit*, not proven sterility and indifference; *fruit*, not an abundance of promises and withered leaves; *fruit*, not immature or incomplete production however far advanced it might be; but ripe, harvestable *fruit* that proved the ground to be good. Further, *fruit* is the proper, natural product of the seed. The Gospel seed will produce only Gospel fruit in the sense that, when we think, speak and act in harmony with the Word, and because of our desire to obey the Word, we are bearing fruit. We bear fruit when we do as the Lord teaches us. (Study Jn. 14:15, 21, 23; 15:6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 17.) Our actions and new thought patterns, reoriented in conformity with the Word received in our heart and life, are nothing short of the activity of the very Spirit of God at work to produce His fruit in us! (See 1 Pet. 1:22, 23, 25; Jas. 1:18, 21; 2 Co. 3:17, 18; Gal. 5:5, 13-24; Ro. 8:9-11; Phil. 2:12, 13.)

**Fruit . . . some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.** There is no indication in the text whether Jesus approves or disapproves of these differences in results. Argument for each could be made as follows:

- a. If He approves of the varied harvest, then Jesus is taking into account individual differences; even good hearts do not all produce alike. He does not expect the same level of performance from all His different disciples, because they are precisely that—DIFFERENT. (Cf. Ro. 12:3-8; Mt. 25:14-30; 2 Co. 8:11, 12.) But He does expect them to produce to their own individual capacity. (Col. 1:28; 2 Pet. 1:3, 4; 1 Co. 4:2; Mt. 25:15; 2 Co. 8:3, 5, 8, 12; 9:5-7). Their very difference justifies no false comparisons or easy justifications for inadequate production (Cf. Gal. 6:1-10; 2 Co. 10:12, 18).
- b. If He disapproves, these differences reveal themselves as part of the larger problem as to why the Word receives different treatment

in the heart of different hearers. In this case, one must not be satisfied to bear only thirtyfold or sixty, in the same way that one must not allow himself to remain infested with worldly pre-occupations or pleasures of life. To change the figure, as the Lord's vine, we can be pruned to bear much more fruit than we actually do (Jn. 15:1-5, 8; cf. also Lk. 13:6-9). Any diversity in our own consecration or in our understanding of the Word will result in a harvest of righteousness dissimilar to that of others. Consider Jas. 3:18 in its context 3:13-18 addressed to Christians who must make their own that true, heavenly wisdom that is "pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity." Paul encourages the rich "to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous" (1 Ti. 6:17ff). But since all such production must necessarily be relative to one's opportunities, his inclination to respond positively to each situation, his understanding of God's will in each case, etc., his reaction will obviously differ. The net result is a series of reactions which comprise the life of each individual, which, when measured comparatively with that of others, will appear to vary from a *hundredfold* to *sixty* to *thirty*.

While it may be that the Lord is happy to recognize individual differences among His disciples, can He be satisfied with less-than-perfect concentration on, and obedience to, His Word? Since it is the Word which is sown (Lk. 8:11), it is the Word which grows to maturity. Paul, besides rejoicing that "the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth," prayed also that the Colossians be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:3-14). While the Word itself may be a fixed quantity, our grasp of it and obedience to it certainly is not (Cf. Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; 4:11-16; Phil. 1:9-11).

e. CONCLUSION TO THIS PARABLE  
ON HUMAN FREEDOM

13:9 **He that hath ears, let him hear.** (See notes on Mt. 11:15; 13:43; Cf. Rev. 1:7, 11, 17, 26, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.) But ears are standard equipment! This observation turns us aside to consider the fact that, although everyone normally is furnished with a pair of ears, he may not actually be listening with interest and understanding to Jesus. Consequently, his ability to grasp the kind of Kingdom of God that Jesus is revealing depends greatly upon the concentration of his heart, upon his attitude, upon what he wants in life, because all these determine greatly whether he will be convinced by the truth when he hears it. This aphorism with which He concludes the simple narration about the Sower, Seed and Soils should prevent people's supposing that this story has no deeper meaning. It warns them to look beneath the surface, if they would not be merely mystified by it. It is significant that, according to Mk. 4:3, Jesus introduced this parable with the verb *akoûete*:

1. If translated as an indicative question, Jesus is stirring up the sleepy-minded: "Are you listening?"
2. If translated as an imperative, Jesus orders: "Pay attention!" Either way, He helps men to see that the real point of His story is to show how vitally each individual's concentration affects how the Word is received and retained (Cf. Mk. 4:24, 25; Lk. 8:18).

This simple, oft-repeated invitation is so very urgent, because so much depends upon its proper understanding. DETERMINISTIC PREDESTINATION IS JUST NOT TRUE, because it sees God as sealing the inexorable fate of the damned or the unchangeable bliss of the saved, irrespective of their individual choices. Jesus cannot make such an unlimited invitation, unless men—all men—are genuinely free to hear His message and be changed by it, and so be saved. This "whosoever-type" exhortation, further, means nothing, unless men, after listening to Him, can freely choose not to accept it, and so be damned. So, God's grace is really free to all and proceeds from unbounded goodness, but He will not violate human liberty in order to force His grace upon man. Without further cultivation the terrain remains what it was. There is a sense in which God cultivates the soil in the attempt to help it to produce (Cf. Ro. 2:4; Lk. 13:6-9). However, this is not a cultivation that manipulates the free

will of the person determined not to respond. The goodness of God aims to reach the sentiments of the person, but does not touch his will at all. Man always retains the keys to his own free will and remains lord of his own destiny. Not even the loving effort of fellow Christians to help him bear fruit can force him to choose something he does not want (Cf. Heb. 6:4-6). This concept becomes even clearer when we remember the conditions that made each of the four hearts what they are:

1. The first heart did not understand the Word, but he was perfectly free to ask for further explanations from Jesus.
2. The superficial hearer believed for a while, therefore he could have believed a while longer, growing ever stronger in the faith, even to the point where he could withstand the scandal of persecutions and temptations to quit.
3. The preoccupied person, suffocated by worldly cares, by the deception of wealth, by the ambition for other things and by the pleasures of life, was perfectly free to die to the slavery to all this, suffer the consequences, but, in so doing, enjoy the life that is real.
4. Whereas the good heart depicts a generally honest person, this good character notwithstanding, he could let himself be drawn into the same deceptions that capture and destroy the other (Heb. 2:1-3a; 3:12, 13; 10:32-39; 12:15, 16).

So the will of each individual remains absolute lord of his own choice. Trench (*Notes*, 33) puts it as follows:

The disciples might have been in danger of supposing that these four conditions of heart were permanently fixed. This warning . . . obviates the possibility of such a mistake, for it tells us that according as we hear and receive the word, so will its success be—that even for those who have brought themselves into an evil condition, recovery is still, through the grace of God, possible. For, whilst it is true that there is such a thing as laying waste the very soil, yet, on the other hand, the hard soil may again become soft—the shallow soil deep—the soil beset with thorns clear.

The marvel of this unfeigned, deep respect that God has for human freedom is His unhesitating willingness to take the risk involved in letting His divine Truth be rejected because of ignorance, misunderstanding, temptations, weakness of character that leaves the individual



with no convictions capable of conquering temporary difficulties, persecutions, trials, etc., and because of that selfishness which expresses itself in the usual cares of the world, delight in riches, greed and pleasure! But God thinks that this risk is well worth taking, since He longs for men who freely choose to be His sons, not robots who could do no other.

MATERIALISTIC DETERMINISM IS JUST NOT TRUE EITHER. If Jesus' warning means to reveal anything important about man, it shouts in this unphilosophic way a final answer for all philosophers to hear: man is no machine, no part of a greater universal Machine comprising the universe as we know it. Man is not conditioned to walk lock-step with mechanical processes that force him to be what he is, for which conduct he is fundamentally not responsible, not culpable.

Therefore, let no man excuse himself, pleading irresponsibility for disobedience on the ground that he is helpless against the inclinations of his own deeply-ingrained characteristics. If he will but listen to Jesus, the Lord can help him to change all that through that radical transformation whereby he harmonizes every part of his being according to the new, living reality before Him in Jesus. He can really be born again! (Jn. 3:3-5; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:22, 23). Weak men can be made strong! What is a Savior for, if He be unable to free the enslaved, hearten the hopeless and turn the shallow-hearted into dedicated disciples who are deeply rooted and firmly established in the Lord (Cf. 2 Co. 1:21; 1 Pt. 5:10).

**He that hath ears, let him hear!** Lest we be proud because of our privileged position, and in order that we might better appreciate the mental blocks in the minds of Jesus' hearers, blocks that hindered their comprehension of messages that seem now so simple to us, let us begin to recognize some of our own! With all due respect to all unfortunate people on earth, how would you react to Jesus were He to live in your town, if you discovered that He were physically ugly? Do we not usually imagine the Lord as the very picture of our ideal of manly beauty? How would you react to Him, were you to find that He could not qualify for membership in the American cult of handsome "jet-set" young men? Think about Isa. 52:13—53:3 before answering. Here is where some so-called "faith" reveals itself for the personality cult it really is. If his loveliness were altogether spiritual glory, would you have any difficulty following Him?

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS MULTIPLE-IMPACT PARABLE?

1. Is it that Jesus intended gently to remove from His hearers' thinking the erroneous concept of a materialistic kingdom that batters its way to conquest by force of arms? Does He wish to imply that God's Kingdom does not intend to win its victories in this way? Does He want us to understand that the success of His program will depend upon the painfully slow process of planting truth in people's hearts, patiently waiting until it grows and bears fruit? If so, this story speaks directly to those disciples troubled about clouds on Jesus' horizon, because this outline of His program includes the clouds and spells out His ultimate plan for victory.
2. Or is it His design to apprise the disciples of the difficulties to be expected by any proclaimer of the Word, in the sense that they must be prepared to face these four kinds of response? If so, it must not be assumed that He thinks that 75% of their work will ultimately fail or be lost. After all, the good ground is represented as consisting of three different qualities, as opposed to the three qualities of soil that failed to produce good fruit. So, His lesson is this: the Gospel herald, since he cannot anticipate the judgment of God, must not try to calculate when to be cautious or try to choose terrain so cautiously that he evangelizes some people and rejects others as unfit. There can be no "preselected prospect lists" for his evangelism, for how could he possibly foresee, at the time of his first attempts to evangelize them, which people would be fruitful and which not? Let him be as generous in broadcasting as was Jesus the Chief Sower Himself! This requires a strategy of "open evangelism" only. No farmer expects every single seed to produce a bumper crop, but this does not keep him from sowing widely, confident that a harvest will come. (Study 1 Cor. 9:19-23; Ro. 1:13-16.) Jesus simply pictured several types of hearers without indicating the relative percentages involved in each group. If the Lord of the harvest did no more than this, who are we to identify the persons involved in each group and refuse to evangelize those in the first three groups?
3. Or is His desire to drive each single hearer to examine the character of his own heart? Even now, before judgment, Jesus would have us see the final fate of the Word in us, so that we can examine how we even now respond to it. According to Jesus, then, the chief

business of the listener is not to speculate about the varying causes behind the momentous differences in hearers, nor decide the proportionate results of Gospel proclamation, nor worry how much of it is ultimately unfruitful, nor wonder whether more abundant spiritual growth is more common than less abundant growth. Rather, each one is to answer the one burning question: "What kind of a person are you? Are you producing anything at all? Are you for Jesus Christ, or in your attempt at an unaligned neutrality, are you against Him?" The question: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" has only one answer: "What is that to you? Go all out to be among the very best!" (Cf. Lk. 13:23-30; Jn. 21:20-23.)

4. A brilliant psychological effect of Matthew's placement of the disciples' questioning Jesus about His method immediately after the Parable of the Sower is the underlining of a truth many unbelievers often miss: whether a person will be convinced by the truth or not, often depends, not so much on the weight of the evidence, as upon his mind-set, his philosophy, his desires, his traditions, etc. People just imagine the human brain as a delicate scale that will register conviction according to the weight and sufficiency of the evidence, thus leaving the individual somehow irresponsible for his beliefs. Nevertheless, by His repeated warnings—"Listen! . . . He that has ears, let him hear! . . . Take heed how you hear"—Jesus holds each listener personally answerable for his response to truth. (Ironically, this same position is taken by the unbelievers themselves when they too hold a man responsible for his beliefs, by criticizing a Christian for remaining one, when "surely he would have seen the falsity of Christianity, were his mind not clouded by his desire for security, etc.")

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. On what "day" did Jesus teach this sermon in parables? Study the closer chronological connections found in the parallel passages to gather the various facts that occurred that day.
2. Out of what "house" did Jesus probably walk to go down to the seashore to teach? On what other occasions is this house mentioned?
3. Explain the fact that Jesus "sat" in the boat to teach the people. Could He not have stood quietly in the boat to deliver the same

message? Why sit?

4. Is Jesus' use of parables in this incident an entirely new method of teaching for Jesus? Why do His disciples ask Him about the method?
5. What is a "parable" as Jesus uses that word in this story? How does a "parable," as defined today, differ from an allegory?
6. In what does the interpretation of this parable consist? How are we to decide what the point is? What is the surest way of learning the meaning of this, or any, parable?
7. Identify in this parable the following:
 

a. The sower	e. The scorching sun
b. The seed	f. The rocky places
c. The way side	g. The thorns
d. The birds	h. The good ground
8. Explain the purpose for the expression: "He that has ears, let him hear," as a proper conclusion to the parable itself and as a key to the understanding of its meaning.
9. Explain how "persecution arises because of the word." What "word"? How "because of" the word?
10. Summarize the total message of this single parable without specific reference to the details.
11. What other parable(s) have more or less the same point of emphasis or same information about God's Kingdom as revealed in the Parable of the Sower?

## 2. THE PARABLE OF THE GRAIN THAT GROWS BY ITSELF (Mk. 4:26-29)

Several comments are in order regarding our insertion of this exclusively Marcan parable into this commentary on Matthew's version of the Great Sermon in Parables. Immediately three major objections present themselves.

First, and most obvious, is the fact that Mark does not relate this parable in any contextual way to the other stories having similar symbols, i.e., soil, seed(s), sower, harvest, etc., since he inserts the Parable of the Lamp and its explanation between the Parable of the Sower and this story of the Seed Growing By Itself. This fact notwithstanding, it appears that Mark, like Matthew, does not aim to

indicate a strictly chronological continuity between the various parts of his version of this sermon, a supposition based on the staccato style of Mark's introductory words with which he prefaces each speech of Jesus: "And he said . . ." (*kaì élegen*). The expression is so general as to leave his final result as almost, if not absolutely, devoid of strict chronological connection. (Cf. Mk. 4:2 where the very looseness of his arrangement is clearly introduced. Note especially in Greek: 4:10, 11, 13, 21, 24, 26, 30.) This observation would permit us to consider Mark's parable in a freer (looser) context to ascertain its meaning.

A second objection to consideration of the parable at this point is the fact that Jesus did not interpret this story, hence furnished no clue to its relationship to the rest of the sermon, unless, of course, it be thought to continue or develop a thought mentioned in the Parable of the Lamp immediately preceding it. Consequently, any interpolation of Mark's parable into Matthew's arrangement for the purpose of discovering its meaning is purely arbitrary, hence any interpretation based upon any such systematization must be held lightly if not with outright suspicion. And yet, despite the force of these sound hermeneutical principles, another rule of interpretation must be considered: the very literary affinities this parable shares with both that of the Sower and that of the Tares, evident in the use of many of the same symbols (however with different shadings and emphases), should give us pause before categorically denying any relationship whatever. In fact, two interesting patterns in the Sermon suggest themselves to the reader of all three Synoptics:

1. Jesus apparently told two stories to reinforce each point, even if certain details of each member of the couplet give the major point a slightly different twist. (See the revised outline at the beginning of this chapter.) However, Matthew's version of this discourse includes no direct companion to the Parable of the Sower. Is it possible that Mark's Parable of the Growing Seed IS its mate?
2. Matthew himself, while usually keeping these couplets together, as in the case of the Mustard Seed and Yeast Parables, or in that of the Hid Treasure and Precious Pearl Parables, does, in fact, separate the Parable of the Weeds from that of the Dragnet, even though these stories illustrate fundamentally the same point despite some individuality of details. So, if Matthew can separate stories of similar import, why cannot Mark?

These considerations, of course, leave open the possibility that the very similarity of symbols could be a clue to parallel ideas involved in all three illustrations taken from the field, since, as we have seen, order in the transcription of the stories is no serious objection to their consideration together or the supposition of their similarity of teaching.

A third objection to considering this parable in connection with that of the Sower arises from an exclusive interpretation that sees only Jesus as the Sower in all three field parables. Whereas He is the Sower par excellence, and is even specifically so identified in the Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:37), the precise identity of the Sower in both the Parable of the Sower and in that of the Growing Seed is left completely out of consideration. Since there is no compelling reason to believe the Parable of the Tares to have been told first chronologically, with the result that its identification of the Sower as Jesus should be thought to be normative for the others, and since the Synoptic authors are agreed that the Parable of the Sower with its anonymous "sower" probably came first, it is better to regard the positive identification of the sower in the Parable of the Weeds as a special feature of that story alone, and not necessarily to be read back into the field parables preceding it. Therefore, the appropriateness of the Parable of the Growing Seed as a parallel to that of the Sower is not at all hindered by the anonymity of its chief protagonist, the farmer who broadcasts the seed. Rather, his very anonymity argues that he is not to be so strictly identified with Jesus. So, as was noted at 13:18, although the point of the story may touch Jesus' work, and the "sower" intended **COULD** symbolize Him in general, nevertheless it may not refer to Him so exclusively. Although some details of the story might apply to Him, it does not follow that all details must, especially since certain characteristics, affirmed of the farmer in the Growing Seed Parable, are unworthy of our Lord (Mk. 4:27). Not all that is affirmed of the farmer in the story may be said of Jesus, because, considered as a symbol, the farmer may actually represent anyone who, like Jesus, broadcasts the Gospel.

As will be noted later, this parable develops Jesus' thoughts regarding the problems involved in proclaiming the truth of God's Kingdom, a fact which (if we have correctly understood its meaning) renders it a proper parallel to that of the Sower, and so to be inserted at this point.

TEXT: Mark 4:26-29

26 And he said, The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, 27 and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout, he knows not how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why should we consider this parable in context with that of the Sower?
- b. What further information does this story add to the total revelation of the Kingdom of God presented in this sermon by Jesus?
- c. If Jesus did not furnish the key to the interpretation of this parable, how must we go about arriving at its meaning?
- d. Why mention the passage of time in this parable, i.e., the farmer's sleeping and rising night and day, as well as the time required for the development of the harvest? What does this indicate about the parable's main point?
- e. How far should each detail in this illustration be pressed?

## PARAPHRASE

At another point in His great sermon in parables Jesus gave another illustration: "The great Messianic Kingdom may be illustrated by a farmer who broadcasts seed in his field. Then he goes on about his regular business, sleeping well every night and rising to work each day. The seed itself sprouts quite independently of the farmer's ken and concern, because the earth produces automatically according to its own law and order: first, the blade, then the stalk with the green head, and finally the fully mature headed-out grain. Only at the time of the dead-ripe harvest does the farmer once more intervene by beginning instantly the reaping."

## SUMMARY

The Kingdom of God and the truth of its proclamation are already perfectly suited to accomplish their appointed tasks in the human heart, without recourse to artificial, humanly-devised means to make them function. Nevertheless, their own proper development requires time so that the desired results be realized according to the norms and schedule for its completion.

## NOTES

## A. THE PRINCIPLE FACTS of the parable:

1. The story intends to illustrate *the Kingdom of God*, but to what aspect of it does Jesus refer?
  - a. to the Messianic Reign of the Christ?
  - b. to the government of God in the individual disciple?
  - c. to the Kingdom of God realized in the Church?
  - d. to God's government of the universe?
  - e. to the Kingdom perfected at the close of the present age?
  - f. to all these concepts collectively?

It may be that Jesus is including most of these concepts of the Kingdom, since Jewish expectation, with its cosmic eschatology surrounding the Messiah's coming, would tend to mingle these various expressions into one overall concept of God's Kingdom. Further, as will be seen later, the main emphasis of this parable may be rightly applied to each of these concepts.

## 2. The farmer:

- a. *that scatters seed upon the ground*, a reminder of the Parable of the Sower;
- b. that sleeps tranquilly (*sleeps by night*), because he is confident that he has done all that is humanly possible to provide suitable growing conditions for the seed he has sown, and because he is confident in the vitality of the seed itself.
- c. that *rises by day* to go calmly about his daily business during the time when he must necessarily await the natural development of the harvest.
- d. that *knows not how the seed should sprout and grow*. Making the seed grow is none of his immediate concern, because he could not interfere with the normal laws of its life if he wanted



to. The farmer may know a great deal about the value of preparing the ground before sowing, about fertilizers, about proper rain and sun, as well as about the removal of weeds and other harmful growth in competition for the strength of the soil. These are not the elements of the seed's germination and growth about which he is ignorant, for his farm organization can do much to prepare for and follow up his own sowing and set up the conditions favorable for a good harvest. But all his organization and any anxiety about the harvest cannot make the plants grow. This comes from the life within the seed itself.

3. *The seed:*

a. that is sown upon the ground:

b. that sprouts and grows automatically (*the earth produces of itself*). It is *the earth of itself*, not the farmer, that produces in its own good time and according to the laws of development inherent in the soil, rains, sun and seed, totally independently of all human efforts to force the seed to grow or bring it to maturity for the final harvest. Farmers the world over can control many factors by cultivating the soil, by sowing each crop in its proper season, etc., but if the earth did not spontaneously produce of itself when sown, all would be useless. Sometimes unforeseen factors enter in to ruin the crop: new plant diseases, insect plagues, unusual weather conditions, etc., and farmers have fought these enemies of their crops for millenia. Why? Because the basic assumption behind all their efforts is that, if they are successful in controlling the controllable, *the earth will produce of itself*, because the seed and the soil are made for each other. No special adaptation or manipulation is required, since good seed faithfully sown in reasonably good soil will produce the desired harvest.

c. that matures according to its own natural laws and schedule of development:

(1) *first the blade*

(2) *then the ear*, or head of grain (*stàchus*)

(3) *then the full grain in the ear.*

4. The harvest:

a. that must be begun *at once*, because the time of *the harvest is come*.

b. that must begin only *when the grain is ripe*, not when human impatience dictates.

#### B. SOME LESSONS SUGGESTED BY THIS STORY:

1. Whereas it would seem, on the basis of the teaching in the Parable of the Sower and Soils, that the effectiveness of the Word of God is contingent upon the quality of the soil/heart in which it is planted, leading to the natural however erroneous, conclusion that human effort is required to force the seed/Word to grow and produce, this Parable of the Growing Seed corrects that impression. It teaches that, as in the natural world such effort is as unnecessary as it is impossible, so in the Kingdom of God, all artificial attempts at manipulation of spiritual growth must give way to humility, patience and gratitude.
2. Gonzalez-Ruiz (*Marco*, 121) reminds that

. . . the kingdom of God is a divine enterprise. While accepting human collaboration, it must always remain above every human attempt to force the progress of its operation . . . The parable, with its confident awaiting the arrival of the harvest, is directed against all attitudes that would force the coming of the Kingdom or even construct it outright, by national revolution, like the Zealots would have it, or by obedience to an absolute legal discipline, like the Pharisees demanded, or by precise calculations on the time of the end, as the apocalyptists dreamed it. The Evangelist opposes all this with an openness to the future that awaits what God Himself will do.

In fact, to Him alone belong the initiative and spiritual direction of the Kingdom. Western Christians are notorious for their confidence in human organization and what it can do to bring about greater spirituality, the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth, and other worthwhile spiritual goals. Organization can help to sustain pre-existent life, but HOW LITTLE LIFE organization can produce! Trench (*Notes*, 101) correctly sees that "Our Lord's object . . . is pointedly to exclude the continuous agency of the sower, i.e., of the same kind as he exercises at the first." Human effort, however well intentional or organized, just cannot force or manipulate spiritual growth into the likeness of God.

3. He who proclaims the message of the Kingdom, and, as a

consequence, produces a bridgehead for the Kingdom in the individual Christian, and, collectively, in the Christian congregations, must not expect to see immediate results of his work, shortly after completing it. In fact, as is the case with every worthwhile enterprise, time is needed to let things mature, and the more important it is, the more time is needed, so also is the case with the Kingdom of God. Jesus is announcing that even the Word of God requires time to extend the influence of God's good government in men's hearts.

4. He who proclaims the Gospel of the Kingdom must have confidence in the message he announces, because this Word is capable of producing the desired results without ulterior "updating" or other manipulation by the disciples to make it more effective. How striking is the contrast between our exaggerated confidence in human methods, human philosophies, human organizations, etc., and Jesus' confidence in the power of His Word in the human heart! This is easily judged by His own procedure: He too came to earth to bring spiritual life to light through the Gospel (2 Ti. 1:10). Everything that Jesus accomplished Himself or achieved through His supernaturally-endowed Apostles to establish His Truth in the world is all part of one stupendous sowing. Then, He too left the seed to grow spontaneously by itself. He will not break into the present world order until that glorious miracle of His second coming, His resurrection of all the dead to judgment and His bringing the present age to a halt before His throne. BUT IN THE MEAN-TIME Jesus is not personally present in the world encouraging the growth of the Gospel in the human heart. True, His Spirit is the unseen power at work helping the Word to produce its effect in men's hearts, but His Spirit leaves men entirely masters of their own will. (See notes on 13:9.) Jesus is now literally gone from the earthly scene, having firmly planted His Word and His Church in the world. Although the Church is always faced with possible extermination by persecutions and apostasy, yet Jesus has never visibly or personally returned to earth to extricate her from her torments. His confidence in the power of His Word to accomplish the work for which He set it forth has dictated a "hands off" policy. (Cf. Paul's confidence in the Word of God: Acts 20:32; Ro. 1:16.) For almost two millenia now, Jesus' confidence in the vitality of His Word and its power in the

human heart has let Him go on unhurried and unworried about other business (Cf. Jn. 14:2, 3; 1 Jn. 2:1, 2; Heb. 1:2, 3; 2 Pet. 3:3-15a). Then, when the earth harvest is ripe, He will make His second and final appearance during this epoch of earth's history to complete the marvelous task inaugurated at His first advent. Can we too, like Jesus, resist the temptation to modify or manipulate or otherwise mutilate our message, hoping for better, speedier results?

5. The Kingdom of God and its Gospel and the human heart are already adapted perfectly to one another. Consequently, no modification of either can be considered essential to make the Word of God more effective in converting the heart, or to make it possible for the heart to receive it more easily.
  - a. No changes in the Gospel can be justified on the basis of a supposed need to "update the message to make it relevant," as if its Author had not already perfectly adapted it to the needs of men of any century, any nation, any culture, any class!
  - b. No revamping of the inborn simplicity of God's Kingdom can be defended, that would organize new ecclesiastical structures to manipulate spiritual growth or accelerate the maturation of the plan of God, as if the divine means indicated in the Word itself for the realization of that plan should be thought to be inadequate!
  - c. Nor does man himself have to be specially adapted to the Gospel or somehow readied for the Kingdom of God through man-made schemes for better health, higher educational advantages or more general welfare, before the Gospel can operate in his heart or before he can respond positively to it, as if the King's message were not already addressed to Man in any social condition!

What a tragedy that the Church herself has never perfectly learned that, in the period intervening between sowing and reaping, the crop must be let alone, without insisting on speedy maturation or hasty harvesting of immature fruit! What is objected to here is none of the God-given means for edification and encouragement of spiritual growth in the individual and in the Church, but rather all those artificial, humanly devised means that express a Boanergean desire for fire from heaven and a Zealot's violent impatience with God's means and schedule

for bringing in the Kingdom.

6. God's procedure for establishing and developing His Kingdom proceeds by stages according to fixed, orderly laws of spiritual development until the time chosen by God for judging the final results. This fact prohibits *a priori* any hasty, negative judgments about the present reality or incomplete condition of God's Kingdom on earth. Any short-sightedness on the part of Christ's followers could lead only to disappointment, doubt and unbelief, because anyone who looks at the present world condition and presumes this state of affairs to be the finished product, must pronounce it a hopeless chaos and God's Kingdom a failure! (Remember the impatience of John the Baptist? Mt. 11:3 or worse still, the scoffing question: "What has happened to his promised coming?" (2 Pet. 3:4). Instead of leaping to this unfounded conclusion, men must understand that the faith of Jesus Christ, both in the individual follower and in the Church in the world, develops according to those orderly principles that govern the progress of truth in the human mind from one stage of maturity to another, and from one person to another.
7. The only haste manifest in the parable is seen when *the harvest harvest is come: at once he puts in the sickle (euthùs apostéllei to drépanon)*. This urgency stands out in contrast to the slow passage of time for the farmer between his sowing and the harvest, that time in which the grain matured, that time in which the farmer was helpless to hurry the crop's development. So, the Church too cannot anticipate the judgments of God. It is only when the last "fulness of time" will have arrived, that things will be brought rapidly to their natural conclusion (Rev. 10:6).
8. Any impatience toward the means by which God has chosen to develop His rule on earth is completely out of place, as also every expression of self-reliant zeal that would abbreviate God's schedules by inventing and imposing on the Church and world artificial structures and means, rather than be content with those designed and desired by God.

#### C. NEW ATTITUDES INDICATED:

1. A PATIENCE that awaits the maturing of God's program according to the laws of life planned in His design (Cf. Jas. 5:7-11). John Brown (PHC, XXIII, 149) urges:

A man may be converted in a moment of time; but after he has turned right round, the development of that life must needs take many long years of discipline before it reaches the height for which God intended it. Salvation means not merely delivering a man from sin, from every evil thing, but building him up to all nobleness; not merely the putting aside of what is weak and sinful, but the attainment of all that is noble and true; and is always the work of time. You can make a man a present of some material things in a moment, but you cannot give him patience . . . purity . . . humility, in a moment of time. Faith gets grip and strength through stress of suffering; wisdom is the child of experience . . . We can never do without any of the intervening stages—never expedite the processes of God either in nature or in grace.

We can no more pray, "Thy Kingdom come" and expect God to answer instantly by giving us a fully mature Kingdom, because to do so would violate man's will and his freedom to choose the Kingdom, than we can pray, "Give me patience and give it to me now!" for the same reason.

2. A HUMILITY that admits its own inability to produce spiritual life, because this is neither its function nor responsibility. We may plant and water, but "God makes the plants grow" (1 Cor. 3:7). This humility is content that the Word should grow and bear fruit however embarrassing be its ignorance of the process by which God's Word will eventually accomplish in the world that purpose for which He sent it forth (Isa. 55:10, 11). After all, our ignorance of the psychological operations of His Word in people is nothing new, nor is our incomprehension of the final fulfilment of God's plans (Cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12; Mt. 24:36-51).
3. A GRATITUDE that we may go cheerfully about our task without the burden of an undefined, unlimited responsibility, since we know that the ultimate success of men's conversion and the development of God's Kingdom is not under our control. We may be grateful that "the power is of God and not of ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:7). After having faithfully declared the whole counsel of God and done everything in our power to evangelize the world and provide suitable growing conditions for spiritual

maturity, we can depend on God, thankful that the final victory is in His hands.

4. A SELF-DISCIPLINE in the face of temptation to demand immediate results, instant growth and measurable progress in terms of dollars and cents, numbers, institutional power and financial holdings, to the probable spiritual damage of the "little ones" in our care. Here is a self-discipline that refuses to criticize God because He seems to delay the fulfillment of His promise, a self-discipline that knows that "He is patient toward you, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the Day of the Lord will come . . ." (2 Pet. 3:9, 10).
5. A LOYALTY and a CONSTANCY on the part of the disciples in proclaiming faithfully and vigorously the Gospel as the ONLY MEANS to foster the many necessary social revolutions for the enduring happiness of man, confident in the wisdom of God that chose to use this very means. Rather than promote the Kingdom by Maccabean methods and views that can do it nothing but violence and embarrass its King, rather than endeavor to speed up the arrival of the Kingdom by organizing imposing ecclesiastical superstructures that manipulate the Church, rather than attempt social betterment by means that bypass faithful Gospel proclamation, rather than substitute political freedom for a biblically-defined liberation from guilt of personal sin, the Church of Jesus Christ is to be constant in preaching the Word of her divine Lord, confident that His Word, given time, will bring about the results HE desires, because it is His Kingdom, not hers, that she desires to promote.

### "HOW UNMESSIANIC!"

The cooler heads in Palestine certainly did not share the Maccabean fervor for "revolution now!," especially those elements most interested in Hellenizing (= paganizing) the population. Education and culture had long been moving toward cultural syncretism even before the time of Christ. But with the exciting preaching of John the Baptist that heralded the near arrival of the Kingdom of God, there was revived in Israel the almost-forgotten hopes for national greatness in a Jewish Kingdom

of God. Excited masses turned to Jesus of Nazareth hoping that, sooner or later, they might seize Him to make Him their King. Every day Jesus talked and men listened for some word, some clue that would indicate "zero-hour" for which they had so long dreamed. Here, as elsewhere in this great sermon (see on 13:30-33), Jesus opts, however, for gradualism and a patient utilization of God's means until He should have completed His program to bring in the long-awaited Kingdom. Not only would the hard-core Zealots and card-carrying Assassins have been disappointed by this parable of Jesus, but also all those pious, less openly political sympathizers with those nationalists, would have been left baffled, asking, "What kind of a Kingdom of God does He think to represent anyway?"

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What phase or phases of the Kingdom of God are represented by this parable?
2. What factors indicate whether this parable is to be understood as an allegory or as a one-point illustration?
3. For what mistaken attitudes among Jesus' original hearers is this parable an antidote and corrective?
4. Demonstrate the logical relationship between this parable and others delivered the same day by Jesus.
5. Identify the main point of this illustration of God's Kingdom.

### B. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE TRIALS OF TRUTH

#### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

TEXT: 13:24-30, 36-43

24 Another parable set he before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. 26 But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. 27 And the servants



of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? 28 And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? 29 But he saith, Nay; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. 30 Let them both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.

.....

36 Then he left the multitudes, and went into the house; and his disciples came unto him, saying, Explain unto us the parable of the tares of the field. 37 And he answered and said, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; 38 and the field is the world; and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; 39 and the enemy that sowed them is the devil; and the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are angels. 40 As therefore the tares are gathered up and burned with fire; so shall it be in the end of the world. 41 The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, 42 and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. 43 Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He that hath ears, let him hear.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you see any relationship between this parable and the age-old human problem of evil? That is, how could God be perfectly good and not want to do something about the evil in the world? How could He be omnipotent and yet not move a hand to exterminate that which His righteous character must recognize and condemn as wicked? If you see a connection in this parable, what is it? If not, explain why you think there is none.
- b. Do you think Jesus is describing the problem of evil in the Church, or in the world, or in both, or in neither? Why do you decide as you do?
- c. After what Jesus says about the difficulty of discerning the best from the worst of men, how can you still believe in a church

- discipline that excludes church members who persist in their sinning despite all the efforts of their fellow Christians to bring them to repentance? How do you harmonize these two concepts?
- d. When Jesus used the expression, "The end of the world," (v. 40), His reference was an allusion to the conclusion of the Jewish world, i.e., to the decline and final fall of Judaism as a religion and Israel as a nation. Do you think this is a fair statement of His meaning? If not, how would you correct it? If so, how would you demonstrate it?
- e. In verse 41, Jesus promises that He will personally send His angels "to gather out of His Kingdom all things that cause stumbling and them that do iniquity." Now, some believe that once a person has become a member of God's Kingdom as a child of God, he cannot possibly be lost thereafter by sinning. Does this passage say anything on this question? If not, why not? If so, what does this text reveal about the possibility of removal of members from God's Kingdom on account of their sin?
- f. What do you think about the following statement: Jesus came to give us just as much a revelation about Satan as He came to give a revelation about God? Affirm or deny and tell why.
- g. Do you think it is very important to spend much time studying about the devil? Some would say that to be happy in this world and safe for eternity, it is enough to know all we can about God and that no other problem is essentially important. What is your opinion? Should we waste time studying about the Evil One, God's enemy or not? Why?
- h. How does one become a "son of the Kingdom"?
- i. How does one become a "son of the evil one"? Is there a similarity in process between the development as a Christian and that as an unbeliever? Think this one over carefully, because it may be trickier than it looks!

### PARAPHRASE

Here is another parable that Jesus told the people: "The Kingdom of God may be compared to a farmer who sowed select seed in his field. But while everyone was asleep, an enemy of his came and maliciously broadcast seeds of bearded darnel over the ground already sown in wheat. Then he left.

"Later, when the plants sprouted and began to head out, then the darnel appeared as well. So the owner's field hands came to him with the question, 'Sir, did you not sow quality seed in your ground? Where did all these darnel weeds come from?'

"His answer was: 'Someone has done this out of pure malice!'

"The man's field hands asked another question: 'Then do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?'

"'No,' he replied, 'because in pulling up the darnel you might root up good wheat along with it. Just leave them as they are, growing together until harvest. Then at harvest I will tell the ones working in the harvest to gather all the darnel first, tying it in bundles to be burned. Then they can gather and store the good wheat into my granary.' "

Later, when Jesus had dismissed the crowds and gone indoors again, the disciples approached Him with the request: "Would you explain the story about the weeds of the field to us?"

This was His answer: "I, the Son of man, am the farmer who sows excellent, quality seed. My field is the whole world. The good seed here represents the people whose hearts are ruled by God. The darnel weeds are those people who belong to Satan. The enemy who scatters them throughout my world is the Devil himself! The harvest represents the end of the world. The ones who will do the harvesting are the angels. Just as in the story where the weeds were collected and burned, this is the way it will happen at the end of time. I, the Son of man, will send my angels to gather out of my Kingdom everything that causes sin and all the evil-doers. These will be thrown into the blazing furnace of hell. That will be a place where men will wail and grind their teeth in frustrated anger. Then it will be obvious who the righteous really are, for it will be just as clear and obvious as the sun who is really in the kingdom of their Father, God. So, if you have the ability to hear, then listen!"

### SUMMARY

God is not to be blamed for the problem of evil in His Kingdom in the world. Even as He began His creation with good people, so it is also with His new creation. His Kingdom, or rule, has always reflected this fact. The existence of the wicked in the world in no way denies the reality of God's control, nor in the final denouement

will they escape the justice of their fate. The extreme difficulty of deciding just who are the truly righteous during this earthly journey renders such judgments patently impossible for those who are themselves involved in the problem of evil. However, God Himself is fully capable of distinguishing the only apparently good from those who actually please Him, and at the conclusion of all earth-life will be responsible for making that separation now so difficult for us. Then, and then alone, will it become perfectly clear who, all along, were the true sons of God.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLE (13:24)

13:24 **Another parable set he before them.** This generalized indefinite introduction to a story is to be expected in Matthew, since he has reworked the order of this sermon by inserting the explanation of the Sower parable out of order to place the interpretation near the story itself for sake of the reader. (See notes on 13:18 and the Introduction.) Technically speaking, therefore, the telling of the Weeds Parable actually precedes the explanation of the Sower Parable.

What viewpoint of **the Kingdom of heaven** is represented in this parable?

1. The Church exclusively? No, because Jesus says that God's Rule, or Kingdom, is like the whole picture of two farmers competing for the same soil, each by sowing his own seed in the field. Now, if *the good seed* represents those who submit to the rule of Jesus Christ, i.e., His Church, then the Kingdom itself cannot be two separate parts of the parable at the same time. The Kingdom includes the Church, but not vice versa, since the Kingdom here is the larger concept. Trench (*Notes*, 194, note 2), desiring to apply this parable more exclusively to the Church, quotes Calvin with approval:

Although Christ adds that the field is the world, yet it is not doubtful that He wished to apply this name to the Church in particular, concerning which He had begun His discourse . . . He transferred by *synecdoche* to the world what fitted a part only.

Then Trench adds:

It required no especial training to acquaint the disciples that in the *world* there would ever be a mixture of good and bad, though they must have been so little prepared to expect the same in the Church, that it was very needful to warn them beforehand, both that they might not be stumbled, and that they might know how to conduct themselves.

But the good Archbishop is not looking at the question from the vantage point of the disciples' Jewish concept. What did **THEY** believe the Messianic Kingdom was to accomplish *in the world*? That is, did they expect the Messiah to usher in an unprecedented era of perfect righteousness, a paradise of holy persons whose King would instantly destroy all the wicked? If so, the startling revelations made by this parable would require that they re-evaluate all their previous thinking about the Kingdom.

2. The future reign of God after the conclusion of the present age is automatically ruled out as the exclusive meaning by the fact that the parable ends on this note, whereas it represents God's authority over the world as already having had full sway for the long interval from before the establishment of His Church in the world until the final victory at the end. Even if Jesus says, "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father," it is evident (1) that they had been in that kingdom ever since their submission to the King and this is but the moment of their glorious revealing, and (2) that God had not relinquished His right to rule nor surrendered the government of earth to anyone in the interim.
3. This parable, rather, pictures the government of God in its totality. The particular background of this story is the eschatological waiting of the people of God for the realization of the Paradise of God. The Jews would have linked this directly with the first appearance of the Messiah and establishment of the Kingdom on earth (Cf. Psalms of Solomon 17:23ff, 29). Naturally, the failure of the nationalistic triumph to materialize as a visible result of Jesus' mission would not only raise serious questions about Him, but would lead to an understandable disappointment with Him. This is the kind of tension that motivates the uneasy question of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2-6) and that of the Apostles (Acts 1:6).

Jesus would have men see that His new society of the redeemed is but one significant expression of God's Kingdom. The very fact that

God can afford to wait until that Day to destroy evil is surprising proof that His Government is supreme. The final, permanent crushing of the Enemy and those whom he deceived, is another evidence of God's invincible rule. The radiant dignity to which the saints will then be elevated is a crowning evidence that the Almighty reigns! And this carefully constructed allegory splashes all these tremendous truth before His hearers in one coherent picture.

But this is NOT new material. The truth taught about the kingdom in this parable had already been suggested by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in clear, unparabolic language.

1. Why worry, for instance, about persecution from evil men (Mt. 5:10-12), or about strife (Mt. 5:21-26) or about personal vengeance against attackers (5:38-42), or even about loving one's enemies (5:43ff), if the Kingdom of God is going to eliminate all these problems from its inception?
2. Would not the great Messianic King remove all hypocrisy by the purifying power of His presence? (Cf. Mt. 6:1-18)
3. Why then all this concern for personal purity as if the citizens of the Kingdom could somehow become contaminated by divided loyalties and worry? (Mt. 6:19-34)
4. Further, if the Kingdom is only for the pure and holy anyway, why concern oneself with "dogs and swine"? (Mt. 7:6)
5. Most significant of all is the preoccupation with false ways and false prophets, as if IN THE KINGDOM YET one could actually be duped into following them to his destruction! (Mt. 7:13-23)

Incredible? Yes, but all that is rendered explicit in the Parable of the Tares was already implicit in the clear language of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the reason Jesus now repeats these ideas in the parabolic form: the prejudices of His hearers would not permit them to detect what He was driving at even when He talked plain about these very concepts. This simple story flashes before them God's entire answer to the problems of sin and its accompanying evils in the world. The Church, of course, is not incidental, because she is the very crop for which the world's true Owner yearned to see the fruition.

## INTRODUCTION TO ITS EXPLANATION (13:36)

13:36 **Then he left the multitudes, and went into the house:** did he *leave* them or *dismiss* them? The Greek verb means either. Interestingly, Jesus probably did both to go *into the house*. (His own house? Cf. note on 13:1)

**His disciples came to him, saying, Explain . . .** This is the most important verse in the entire chapter and the only reaction acceptable to Jesus Christ! They proved themselves genuine *disciples* by coming to HIM and laying before HIM their ignorance and confusion. This is the verse that draws the distinction between the sheep and the goats, the truly wise and the fools, the good and the evil. There is no evil like unbelief in Jesus in Nazareth, and there is no good like that absolute trust in Him that will bring a person spontaneously to Him so that He might teach him. (Cf. Jn. 8:24; 3:36; Psalms 25:8, 9; James 1:5-8; see Notes on Mt. 13:10-17.)

## THE SAVIOR'S SOWING (13:24, 37, 38)

13:24 **A man . . . sowed good seed in his fields . . . 37 . . . He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man:** keep that straight! The problem of evil in the world, and particularly in the institutional Church, often blinds men to the fact that only "good giving and every perfect gift comes down from above, from the Father," whereas temptations, lust, sin and death come from human desires willing to be enticed by Satan (James 1:13-18; 3:6, 13-18; 4:1-10). In starting His Church as one tangible expression of His Kingdom on earth, Jesus made no mistakes. The Lord knows His own (Cf. Numbers 16:1-5; Ezekiel 8:1—9:11; 2 Timothy 2:19; John 10:14). On that Day the justice of His strategy will be vindicated. In the meantime, the field is *His field*, His *world*, and any evil in it is the result of *an enemy's* work, not His (13:28)!

13:38a **The field is the world,** not merely the Church, although this is composed of people who live in the world. He is not only affirming the world-wide character of His reign as opposed to narrow nationalism, but also that the world itself is the soil within which the life growing-cycle of the two divergent kinds of people is brought to maturity. So, as long as the world stands, the mighty Kingdom of God has a sphere of action that is coextensive with all humanity. In

unveiling this Kingdom Jesus taught His Jewish hearers to look not merely upon Palestine as the boundary of His dominion and the limit of His concern. Rather, He came to enlarge their horizons to include the utmost limits of mankind as the supreme target of His love and sphere of His good government.

13:38b **The good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom.** The expression "sons of," rather than refer here to ancestry, is rather a Hebraism expressive of a more general relationship. Sometimes the connection is membership in a guild, class or sect (Cf. 2 Kgs. 6:1; 4:38; Mt. 12:27 see note). Or else the expression indicates some characteristic quality of the persons so described. *The sons of the Kingdom*, then, are Jesus' followers, because these disciples share the goals of the Kingdom (Cf. Notes on 5:45 and 8:12). They are the true Church, hence not a hypocrite among them. Wheat plants are just the wheat seed in a changed form: that new life-character in a Christian is actually the product of the truth he has accepted. God plants truth in a man, buries it in his heart, fires his imagination with, and energizes his will with it until that man literally becomes the truth incarnate (Cf. 2 Co. 3:18; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:14-21; Col. 1:27, 28; Jn. 17:14-19; 2 Pt. 1:3, 4; 1 Pt. 1:22, 23; Jas. 1:18, 21; 1 Ti. 4:6). They are *good seed*, not perfectly matured plants ready for harvest; *good seed* with all the potentiality for producing the right results desired by the Lord of the harvest. *Good seed* is Jesus' evaluation of His Church: woe to the man who disagrees with Him!

#### SATAN'S SINISTER SOWING (13:25, 26, 39)

13:25 **But while men slept, his enemy came . . .** This taking of rest need not refer to any lack of attention or care on the part of those responsible for the field, nor is the sleeping blamed. Rather, sleep is not only proper because earned by honest labor, but may easily signify the farmer's undisturbed confidence that good seed has been sown, as in the parable of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:27). Nevertheless, it was this time that Satan turned to his own advantage.

**His enemy . . . sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away**  
 26 **But when the blade sprang up and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also.** From these details it is obvious that the servants only discovered their presence in the field when the weeds had already begun to mature, hence not earlier. In fact, it was only when the



wheat had *brought forth fruit* that *then appeared the tares also*. On this basis the *Davis Dictionary of the Bible* (759) argues for the *Lolium* as the culprit:

The bearded darnel (*Lolium temulentum*) is a poisonous grass, almost undistinguishable from wheat while the two are only in blade, but which can be separated without difficulty when they come into ear . . .

It was the *fruit* that gave it away (Cf. Mt. 7:15-20). Though the fruits furnish the saints a practical clue, or test, whereby they may guard themselves from the influences of the wicked, they are not permitted to destroy them, because only at the judgment will all fruit be fully matured, rendering possible a true final decision. So, before that Day, who but God can recognize the genuine wheat from the obnoxious darnel? (In fact, some may even be charismatics. Mt. 7:21-23) Merely because God does not seem to be doing anything about rooting out the wicked now must not be interpreted by anyone as if He were doing absolutely nothing about the evil. He is biding His time until harvest when the final reckoning will reveal the drastic difference between the sham believers, the hypocrites, the role players, the shamelessly evil ones, and the genuine sons of God.

The use of the darnel weed was aptly chosen by the Lord because of its striking similarity to wheat, since the shoots of both are so alike it is next to impossible to decide which is which. The value of this resemblance for the story lies in its vivid representation of a real problem: there would be many non-Christians in the world whose honesty, integrity, generosity and other good traits often surpass the average morality of many Christians who really do believe Jesus and try to serve Him, but whose ethics are no match for those high-minded unbelievers. Or, there might be two men of equal moral worth, one a disciple of Jesus; the other, no. Many would be tempted to leap to the conclusion that faith in Jesus and justification on the basis of that faith makes little essential difference, since, they would say, "Surely God wants *good* people, not just believers whose life and morals are unspectacular for their similarity to non-believers." In fact, the whole concept of justification by faith which puts a man "in Christ" and renders him juridically perfect before God, is so unbelievable that God would have had to say it before any of us would have ever believed it possible. Man's idea of justice would

just not let him dream it up, because it involves condemning himself regardless of how good he is. Since people "in Christ" must live out their lifetime among the more-or-less good people in their community, anyone who would decide about the effectiveness of Jesus' mission to earth would be inclined to pronounce it a failure, since no noticeable difference distinguishes the one from the other. But what a difference judgment will reveal between the two!

13:38c **The tares are the sons of the evil one.** Although very few of them would openly own Satan as their lord and actively seek to promote the interests of his domain, yet in doing exactly what they want to do, they carry out his wishes (Cf. Jn. 8:44; Eph. 2:2f). This real, fundamental commitment explains the need to play the hypocrite, felt by those sons of the Devil who want to be part of the Church. While mimicking the externals of the Christian society, they cannot go all the way to fruits of righteousness, because they are already committed to themselves, which, in effect, means commitment to Satan's desires. (See Ezek. 33:30-33 in this context!) Just as *the sons of the Kingdom* are the logical, moral product of the truth that transforms them, so also *the sons of the evil one* are the product of the false, the inadequate, the sham, the deceptive, that they too have taken into their being in exchange for truth (Ro. 1:21-32; 2 Th. 2:9-12; Eph. 2:1-3; Phil. 3:19; Col. 2:8, 18; 1 Ti. 4:1, 2; 6:20, 21; 2 Ti. 2:16, 17; 4:3, 4; 3:7).

13:39a **The enemy that sowed them is the devil.** Contrary to the correct understanding of this parable, Christians are tempted to see "the enemy" as anything or anyone else! Before a successful battle can be waged, one ought at least to know who his enemies are. All of our seemingly great difficulties with people are but minor skirmishes in comparison with the bloody war with Satan himself. Nevertheless, although millions march at his orders, his ranks can be infiltrated, even as he tries to infiltrate the Kingdom of God, and some of his tools can be converted into disciples of the Kingdom (Cf. 2 Ti. 2:24-26). However, were *the sons of the evil one* to be treated as one would their father and chief, were they uprooted and burned before the time, their conversion could never take place. Our warfare, our struggle for the control of men's minds, therefore, must not mistake men for Satan, for *the enemy is the devil* (Cf. 2 Co. 10:3-6; Eph. 6:10-19)! Not even the Romans, nor the Pharisees!

This simple declaration marks the chasmic distance between Satan and Jesus Christ! No accusations of secret collusion with that sinister

demon can be sustained (Cf. 12:24; 9:34). In fact, in His most secret revelations to His intimates, the Lord bares the harsh reality of that moral struggle for world domination in which the lines are sharply drawn (Heb. 2:14, 15; 1 Jn. 3:8).

These literal words of our Lord ("The enemy is the devil.") expose as fundamental unbelief the embarrassment of people who blush at the mention of the devil. Satan is as real for Jesus as is God His Father. But, some would urge, "While I accept Jesus' words as true, should they not be understood figuratively?" No, because the words of this text are not part of a figure, picture or parable, but, rather, the literal interpretation of a parable. Jesus, who sees as clearly the invisible realm of the spirits as He does the visible world of time and sense, declares as eternal truth: *the enemy is the devil!*

#### THE SERVANTS' SURPRISE (13:27, 28)

**13:27 And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares?** Although Jesus did not interpret this verse nor the following one, it is the basic problem back of this parable to which the story is the answer. The causes of the shock in these servants are two: their confidence in their lord's wisdom in sowing good seed in his field, and their own discovery of the continued presence of noxious weeds that threatened to compromise his harvest.

**13:28 And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?** The farmer's true response not only does not solve the problem for them; it, rather, increases their anxiety to right this disturbing situation immediately.

These anxious questions would not long remain unuttered after men should have seen how Jesus intended to establish His Messianic Kingdom. Such questions, in fact, would be wrung out of the tortured emotions of embattled saints: "Lord, did you not establish your new humanity comprised of your own people who submit to your rule in the world? Why, then, are there yet so many people who obviously not only do not accept your rule, but openly belong to the ranks of Satan? Lord, if your Church is what you say it is, if we are to be as victorious as you promise, if we are to bring every tribe, nation, people and tongue to your honor, riches, praise and thanksgiving

at your feet; what are all these OBDURATE, UNCOVERED AND UN-CONVERTIBLE SINNERS doing here, still left seemingly at peace in the world? Why, Lord, are they left to pursue their own degenerate and degrading course? If you, Lord Jesus, are really the King of the world, as we believe, how is it that the 'world still lies in the power of the wicked one'?"

Who are *the servants* whose righteous zeal thus manifests itself in personal interest in the proper management and future success of their Lord's property? Interestingly, Jesus leaves us no direct clue to their identity.

1. The Church? But in this parable, the Church is already symbolized by the good seed, not *the servants of the householder*. Nevertheless, the disciples of Christ have as much need for the information given these *servants* as anyone else, even if not specifically addressed to them.
2. Angels? Since the reapers in this figure are angels, it would not be at all surprising to see also these *servants* as angels who raise the problem of the continued presence of evil in the world even after the Son of God had completed His redemptive work. However, while these servants could well be the angels, yet thoughtful men too have always been tormented by this same question of justice,

It may well be that Jesus left their identification deliberately indistinct, in order to permit none—men or angels—to make false accusations or ignorant final verdicts. But if the exact identity of these concerned servants of God is intentionally left out of the picture, the attitude expressed is strikingly typical of John the Baptist. (See notes on 11:1-6.) His heavy, thundering demands for repentance and his blazing threats of unquenchable fire practically cancelled out for John the possibility that a loving Messiah should patiently and mercifully seek the salvation of the vilest of the wicked. Nor had Jesus been sufficiently prompt in satisfying John's own understanding of Jesus' mission.

Barker (*As Matthew Saw the Master*, 60f) visualizes Jesus' immediate situation as an uneasiness about the kind of people He was attracting. He had given a blanket invitation to the human race to come to Him, and some who came had notorious reputations. Some were with Him for the wrong reasons, expecting rewards and honors. And what about the borderliners, the wobbly, superficial followers? Surely, the disciples may have been thinking, they should sort out

those who were insincere. Critical and intolerant, some mumbled to Jesus about the bag of mixed followers, around Him. Why not weed out the undesirables?

Matthew knew better than most what it was to be an "undesirable." A dubious risk with a disgraceful past, Matthew had no letters of recommendation to get him into Jesus' Kingdom. If there had been any sorting out of followers, Matthew knew that he would have been classified as "unreliable," or "offensive."

How desperately pertinent is this parable to the immediate perplexity of the Twelve themselves! How appropriate for their peace of mind! They must not only witness the desertion of Jesus by fickle, uncomprehending mobs of well-wishers (Jn. 6:66), but also face the certainty that even one of their own number would be Satan's tool (Jn. 6:70)!

God's servants are always tempted to ignore this teaching by allowing themselves to become overly alarmed by the great, powerful causes or movements of sinners united together. Consequently, abandoning the ministry to which Jesus had set them working, they set about to eradicate the evils in the world by combatting the great evil movements themselves. By contrast, the Apostles finally understood their Lord and refused to get involved in fighting totalitarian government and godless ideologies of their day, for they believed that preaching the Gospel of Christ would produce more necessary, grass-roots changes in humanity and, consequently, in its philosophies and systems, than could begin to be touched by tremendous reactionary campaigns.

#### THE SERVANTS' SHORT-SIGHTED SOLUTION SCRAPPED (13:29, 30a)

13:29 Their seemingly natural, more obvious solution is surprisingly, but wisely, rejected. Not only would the roots of the plants have become intertwined in the earth, so that the uprooting of the unwanted weeds would necessarily ruin the good stalks yet unready for harvest, but the very similarity between the good and bad plants would require powers to distinguish them that the servants did not possess.

13:30 **Let them both grow together until the harvest.** The striking likeness of bearded darnel to wheat is gone by harvest, making it

possible to distinguish the plants without difficulty.

It is this definitive, standing order of the Lord of the harvest that exhibits the true relationships: these persons, overeager to "help along" the punitive justice of God must recognize their true position as Jesus assigns it to them in this parable. They are *servants*, nothing more. It is not theirs to dictate policy to the Lord, no matter how staggered they are by the enormity of the evil in the world, no matter how provoked to demand immediate justice. (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11 and God's reaction even to those martyred for Christ.) For anyone ready to rush radical remedies to the scene, Jesus reminds that judgment still belongs to the Almighty who can well afford to wait. Even if His judgment is inexorable, His patience can take its time. If Jesus had sometimes to rebuke the all-too-human desire to call down fire from heaven upon those deemed to be enemies of Christ (Cf. Lk. 9:51-56) or reprove the attempts to hinder the efforts of anyone not a part of Jesus' personal following (Lk. 9:49, 50), here, however, He guarantees the final, impartial extirpation of the really wicked. This guarantee, however, is based on the righteous and mercifully patient justice of God, not upon the hasty elimination of all the "doubtful" on the part of "the pure." We need to feel the arrogance it would involve to propose to begin God's sentencing by using human evaluations and methods. We must learn to distrust the smug conviction of our personal purity and worth that considers itself qualified to root out all the impure and damn them to an eternal fire.

**Let them both grow together!** What an excellent combination of patient wisdom and far-reaching grace! We would have ordered an immediate quarantine of all the wicked, called fire down from heaven, burnt up all the unworthy and set up a pure, true Church. But how like God to be serenely patient! Nevertheless, His very forbearance irritates us, because somehow we just cannot see that we too would have to go, were He to give the green light to such punitive measures, because not a one of us is pure wheat, except by His patient grace. His wise mercy halts the self-extermination of the Church in its present condition of imperfection and immaturity. In one clear word He forbids all kinds of Inquisitions, Crusades and Holy Wars. If it be contrary to God's longsuffering kindness for angels to rush among an unwitting humanity with drawn sword, how much more is it wicked for the Church, God's means to save the world, to don the robes of secular power and turn her sword against heretics and execute them herself? How many Zealots, Assassins and sympathizers

in Jesus stomped impatiently for some clue from Jesus, some key phrase that would signal the zero hour to begin the messianic holy war against all enemies of the "New Israel"! And yet, He quotes with approval the words of the world's Owner: "*Let them both grow together . . .*"! He simply will not permit anyone to take over for God and begin to execute precipitate justice by slicing men out of the Kingdom. Jesus is justly optimistic about the converting power of His own gospel, because He knows what so many forget: The Gospel is God's power to save anyone who believes it. Tares can become wheat! (See notes on the Growing Seed Parable, Mk. 4:26-29.)

Here again is the Lord's option for gradualism, as opposed to instant revolution and apocalyptic judgment, a doctrine reiterated in the stories of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven and that of the Growing Seed. Although the Jewish apocalypticist wrongly imagined the fulfillment of God's plans, he was not altogether wrong to calm the impatience of the godly man, chafing for perfect justice in the world:

Your haste may not exceed that of the Most High; for you are hastening for your own self, but the Exalted One (is acting) on behalf of many. (IV Ezra 4:34)

*Let them both grow together* cannot apply to church discipline.

1. Because "the field is the world," not merely, nor only, the Church. The Church is planted in the world, and so does not include all that is affirmed of the world. The basic distinction drawn in this parable is that between those who share God's mentality and the Devil's own. Though they must all grow along together in the present age, the separation will be made later. But in the case of church discipline, the basic distinction is between the wicked and righteous within the Church itself, and the separation must be made immediately on earth.
2. Because *the reapers* here are *the angels*, not church members indignant about the sins of a fellow Christian.
3. Because no interpretation of this parable can be correct that contradicts the Lord's clear instructions on church discipline (Mt. 18:15-18; 1 Co. 5; 2 Co. 2:1-11; esp. 9; Tit. 3:10; 2 Th. 3:6, 14; 2 Jn. 9-11; Ro. 16:17, 18). The Church is condemned that tolerates iniquity within (Rev. 2, 3). Those individuals who demonstrate by their attitudes and actions that they are *tares* at heart, those *sons of the evil one*, however much they protest their orthodoxy or innocence,

if the facts justify their being disciplined by the congregation and if they repent not, are to be severed from the fellowship of other Christians.

4. Because Jesus is not answering the specific question about dealing with sin in the Church. The burning question on the lips of the servants is: "Why is all the evil in the world allowed to continue? Shall we begin final judgment and damnation right now?" Decisions to be handled by the Church in carrying out church discipline are not of this order at all. This is because her judgments do not carry the weight of final judgment and eternal damnation. She is merely restoring to the world those of her number who refuse by their well-known character to be what the Church is really supposed to be. Naturally, the sequel to this situation will be the eternal damnation of the ex-church member IF HE DOES NOT REPENT, but that consequence will be God's decision, not the Church's. Church discipline is so designed as to seek this very reconversion to Christ, and, if successful in its working the desired effect in the sinning member, re-embraces him in reconciliation. Even if not instantly successful in his restoration, church discipline always leaves the door open until his death, so that he can repent and return if he will. From these considerations, it is demonstrated that, in no way does this parable forbid Church members to make the necessary judgments to discipline a recalcitrant fellow Christian (See fuller notes at 18:15-18.)

#### SUBSEQUENT SETTLEMENT BY SCRUPULOUS SEPARATION OF SINNERS (13:30b, 39-42)

13:30 Note the perfect foresight and calm mastery of this situation on the part of the householder, despite the tension felt because of the apparently menaced outcome of the harvest.

13:39b **The harvest is the end of the world** (Cf. 13:49; 24:3; 29:10; Heb. 9:26, 27). What an astounding revelation, either from the standpoint of Jewish eschatology or from that of modern philosophical determinism. The former sees the coming of the Messiah as the immediate, cataclysmic solution to all problems, the precipitate punishment of all wicked, and hard on the heels of judgment, the arrival of the Jewish paradise. But, as the Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven teach; so here too, Jesus pictures the perfection



of the Kingdom through an extended time-period of internal and external development after which a cataclysmic event will finally bring everything to a sudden, abrupt halt and hale every man before God's court for judgment. (Is the Lord here reacting directly to that strand of Jewish apocalyptic that sees a necessity for the eradication of evil before something better can take its place? Cf. IV Ezra 4:22-34)

Further, in contrast to that philosophical pessimism that sees history as going nowhere, endlessly repeating itself in cycles, Jesus diagrams a scheme of history that rolls right up to its last hour and comes to a decisive conclusion. For the wild-eyed optimists who see man's travail as an upward-moving, endless spiral curving ever higher toward infinity, Jesus' incisive definition spells the same defeat.

The reapers are angels (Cf. Mt. 25:31; 16:27; Lk. 12:8, 9). Those who had been no more than spirits in the service of God commissioned to help those who are to inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14) and who have longed to look into God's plan for human redemption (1 Pt. 1:12) will consummate the last act of their service for this epoch by becoming, with regard to the vile and the unbelieving, the ministers of God's justice.

**13:41 The Son of man shall send forth his angels.** Compare the grand similarities of language and figures between Jesus' interpretative prophecy here and that ancient prophetic judgment described in Ezekiel 9! Who does Jesus think He is, since He applies such majestic language to Himself in such a way that none could miss His underlying authority? Even without any reference to echoes from Ezekiel, this impression stands solidly on its own imagery. Here is Jesus in all His divine power and majesty in full charge of the final judgment, directing *His angels*, to purify *His Kingdom*, which is, of course, the Kingdom of God.

**They shall gather out of his kingdom** what had, to that moment, actually been in that Kingdom as it existed in the world. This obvious truism points to the fact that the presence of evil in the world and hypocrites in the Church were no surprise in Jesus. He not only knew about them all the time, but had already made adequate plans for this disposal. They could not, for all their rebellion, escape from God's Kingdom, God's control. Despite temporary appearances to the contrary, God had always been Sovereign. Despite their insubordination, they had had to live in His world with His reality. They could not even escape this! Now they shall be gathered *out of His Kingdom*.

So let not the disciple trouble himself either with the difficulty of telling the genuine from the false Christians or with the task of eliminating them, because the responsibility for this final judgment is not his. This is the Lord's right (Jn. 5:22, 27) and He has never surrendered this task to any human officers, or servants. But gather them out He will! (Cf. Mt. 15:13, 14; Jn. 15:1-8; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31)

**All things that cause stumbling:** see Mt. 18:1-35 for fuller notes.

**Them that do iniquity:** may not represent a separate class, since the Lord may be speaking according to a popular Hebraistic idiom (parallelism) to repeat an idea. Rather than divide the offenders into neat groups, He actually throws them both into the same category. If any distinction is intended, He sees as damned both those who are the cause, or temptation, to sin and those who yield to the allurements, in which case none escape. No more can he who is merely the source of temptation excuse himself as being extraneous to the sins of others than can another be excused who permits himself to be beguiled into acting as if there were no laws (*anomian poiountes*). They are both *sons of the evil one*, and so must be segregated forever.

13:42 **And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** This image, squarely set as it is within the literal interpretation of the parable, must be taken seriously without hedging or watering down its force, even if human experience has never encountered a *furnace of fire* that punishes forever. (See notes on 3:12 where John the Baptist used a similar image to convey a picture of the horrible thoroughness of God's condemnation. See also 18:8, 9; 25:41, 46; Jn. 15:6; 2 Th. 1:7, 8; 2 Pet. 3:7, 10, 12; Jude 7; Rev. 20:15; 21:8.) Whatever the reality intended, it is a horrible destiny, if the language employed to picture it contemplates such a gruesome punishment! (Cf. Jer. 29:22; Dan. 3:6) *Weeping and gnashing of teeth* is an expression characteristic of bitter regret and impotent rage. (See on 8:12.) There are still only two classes of people in the world, however mixed the lines seem to be. There is no middle, no third group; just *wheat* or *tares*. Righteousness is still righteousness, even if no one anywhere seems to be practicing it, and sin is still sin and will be punished, even if it seems that everyone everywhere is doing it (Cf. 1 Jn. 2:28—3:10; Rev. 21:1-8, 27; 22:14, 15).

THE SATISFACTION, SECURITY AND STUNNING  
SPLENDOR OF THE SAVED

13:43 Here, finally, is the climax toward which Jesus had been building: **THEN, and only then, shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.** Trench (*Notes*, 195) citing Calvin, rejoices that

It is a very great comfort that the sons of God, who now are either lying covered with squalor, or are hidden and unesteemed, or are even buried under reproaches, shall then, as in a clear sky and with every cloud dissipated, at once shine out brightly.

At judgment they will be as obviously recognizable as God's children as the midday sun is obvious in the summer sky (Cf. Judges 5:31; Dan. 12:2, 3; Ro. 8:19). Since the scene of this great presentation, in which the true character of the righteous will be so gloriously displayed, is set *in their Father's kingdom*, we have further proof that, when Jesus uses the expression "Kingdom of God," the Church is but a part of this great concept. Here, rather, *the righteous* are all of God's elect of all ages who acknowledg' God's rule (Cf. on 8:11), including the Church of Jesus Christ, but *the kingdom* itself is greater than all these who are now thus glorified therein. *The kingdom* here, then, is God's universal rule (Cf. 1 Pt. 5:10; 2 Pt. 1:3-11).

**Then shall the righteous shine.** How and why?

1. Physically, their lowly earthly body will be changed to be like His glorious body (Phil. 3:20; 1 Co. 15:43).
2. Juridically, their justification will be complete, because they "Believed God and it was imputed to them for righteousness" (Ro. 4:3ff; Gal. 5:5). Though morally imperfect on earth, a fact which made others' prior final judgments undependable, however after God's judgment it will be absolutely clear to angels, demons and men why God saved **THESE** of all people (Cf. Ro. 3:21-26).
3. Morally, they will shine because the very thing that makes them *righteous* is the fact that they had already accepted into their very being the Word of that God who Himself is Light and dwells in light unapproachable. In their fellowship with Him and in their imitation of Him as His children, they grew to be like Him (Eph. 5:1; 1 Jn. 1:3-7; 1 Ti. 6:16). We shall be like Him (1 Jn. 3:1-3)!

We shall *shine as the sun*: is this some figure of speech? Read the following attractive brochure on our future and decide for yourself! (Ro. 2:7, 10; 5:2; 8:18, 21; 1 Co. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Co. 3:18; 4:17; Eph. 1:18; 5:27; Col. 3:4; 1 Th. 2:12; 2 Th. 1:10, 12; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pt. 4:14; 5:1, 4, 10; 2 Pt. 1:3) This is why we will be glorified in Him and He in us, because what we shall be will have been His work in us and our positive response to it for His sake.

**The kingdom of their Father** is the same as what Jesus had but a moment before called *His Kingdom* (13:41). The government of God belongs, therefore, to both the Father and the Son, a fact that prepares the mind to accept the concept of the Trinity, even if he cannot understand it. Also, the fact that *the Kingdom is of their Father* declares them all to be heirs of the Kingdom and royal princes (Cf. Jas. 2:5; Rev. 21:7; Ro. 8:15-17).

**He that hath ears, let him hear.** (See notes on 13:9.) Despite all that has been said about the sons of the evil one and the permanency and horror of their fate, yet all could actually hear with understanding and change their relationship to God. Notwithstanding the fact that this parable is not immediately concerned with the doctrine that even Christians that produce no fruit will also be destroyed (Cf. Jn. 15:2; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31), nevertheless, this warning, appended to the explanation given privately to Jesus' closest disciples, is particularly ominous. None can plead inability to hear and understand, since He hereby makes each one responsible to listen, understand, accept or pay the consequences.

### APOLOGETIC VALUE OF THIS PARABLE

At first glance, it would seem that if, according to this parable, evil is never to be absent from the world, the unbeliever would have a strong argument for rejecting Christianity, because of its self-confessed inability to conquer all evil here and now. Paradoxically, however, if evil is never to be absent from the world during the present reign of the Messiah, this parable has tremendous psychological power to deal with our anxiety caused by the problem of evil and to persuade men to believe the Gospel's truth:

1. There is psychological wonder that the amount of good done is as great as it is, considering the obstacles the Kingdom must

overcome using the means within its power. To put it another way: look what God is able to do, working under the deliberately chosen handicap of leaving evil in the world! Further, when men consider that God freely elected to use only the influence of His Word to overcome sin and all its ramifications and consequences, rather than organize great armies of police to enforce His will and execute the evildoers, they must marvel. If He can do that much with His hands tied behind Him, what a great God He must be! How worthy of our praise and worship! Our God can beat Satan while letting Satan do his worst.

2. The Church affirms that men are morally free to accept or reject her message, and if this is true, then one must be prepared to expect to find at least some people left in the world who do not accept it. Even if the existence of these evil men is dreadfully uncomfortable for the godly people and makes it appear that God is powerless to do anything about them, their very existence proves the true freedom of the human will. Here, then, is real proof of the correctness of God's procedure, because this parable demonstrates just how much opportunity there is for the full development of freely chosen righteousness by its being put to real tests in an evil world where all options are live! If God were suddenly to remove all temptations and evil from the world, there could be no freely taken choice to love and obey Him, since there would be no real alternatives to do otherwise. So the very presence of unchecked evil in the world and even the very imperfection of the Church, when looked at from THIS angle, prove the truth of its message!
3. Faith is real, because even though this parable paints in some detail the great victory over evil won by the Son of God, most of us will not live to see it. So, from a purely human point of view, since that victory is not a "sure thing," anyone who stakes his life on its occurring, really does so because he trusts the word of Christ.
4. As in the lesson of the Growing Seed Parable, so also here, any precipitate verdicts critical of the present state of the Kingdom of God are just bad misjudgments. Too many facts are left out of account when men look only at the chaos and injustice in the world without seeing what God is doing about it by means of His Gospel. This Parable clarifies His total program.

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What are "tares"? What particular difficulty do they present to the inexperienced eye that observes them? What characteristic makes them especially appropriate for use as a symbol in this story?
2. What great philosophical problem does Jesus pose here under the form of a parable? How does He answer the problem?
3. What difference is there between the answers that the philosophers have given to the problem, and the answer Jesus gives?
4. State the declarations in this text that give evidence of the unique nature of Jesus as revealer of God's will.
5. What is the one principle point of this parable? State it, if possible in one well-sharpened proposition.
6. With what other parable(s) does this story show a distinct relationship as to the meaning intended?
7. What may be deduced about the Evil One from the description Jesus provides in this text? What is known about him from other passages?
8. Give Jesus' interpretation of the following points in the parable:
  - a. The Sower
  - b. The good seed
  - c. The field
  - d. The tares
  - e. The enemy
  - f. The harvest
  - g. The reapers
  - h. The fire
9. What are the "things that cause stumbling"?
10. Where are they to be found?
11. Who are those "that do iniquity"? Where are they found?
12. Harmonize the seeming contradiction between the fact that Jesus here presents the punishment of the wicked as a blazing furnace of fire, whereas elsewhere He speaks of an outer darkness. All the fire we have ever seen gives off light in the darkness, and all the darkness we have ever experienced is the absence of light. Which of Jesus' expressions is the correct representation of the facts: the fire or the darkness? What does the apparent contradiction teach us about Jesus' way of speaking about things of which we have not yet had any experience?
13. What other Scriptures speak of the punishment of the wicked?
14. What other passages speak of the future happiness of the righteous?
15. What other Scriptures describe who are the "sons of the Kingdom"?

Does Jesus always use this expression with the same identical meaning, referring always to the same people?

16. Explain "gnashing of teeth."
17. In what sense will "the righteous shine forth as the sun"?
18. Why does Jesus not refer to those in His Kingdom as "sons of the Kingdom," who do iniquity and whom the angels will eventually expel, if unfaithful Christians were really the ones intended?
19. Who are "the sons of the Kingdom"? How, according to Jesus, does one get to be one?
20. Show the relation (or lack of it) between this parable and the doctrine of church discipline.
21. To what aspect of the Kingdom of God does this parable address itself? List the possible concepts of the kingdom involved and defend or deny each one.

## B. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE TRIALS OF TRUTH

### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

TEXT: 13:47-50

47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: 48 which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. 49 So shall it be in the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What is God planning to do about all the hypocrites in the Church?
- b. For whom was this parable originally planned? What would this fact have to do with its interpretation?
- c. Is there any similarity between this parable and that of the Weeds? If so, what features are similar? If not, what differences exclude their consideration as parallel stories speaking to the same problem?

- d. Since Jesus gave a partial interpretation without defining precisely "the kingdom of heaven," what phase of the Kingdom was foremost in His mind, and how would you go about deciding that?
- e. Where do you think Jesus got this story? By direct inspiration from God or out of His personal, human encounter with real life in the midst of the daily business of living? Where was Jesus when He told this story?

### PARAPHRASE

"From another point of view," Jesus went on, "God's Kingdom is similar to a fisherman's dragnet which, when lowered into the sea, brings in a haul of all kinds of fish. When it is full, the fishermen haul it ashore. There they sit down to sort the good fish into containers and throw the unusable away. This is how it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and divide the wicked from the righteous. Then they will throw the wicked into hell, where they will know sorrow and impotent anger."

### SUMMARY

The grand scope of the Kingdom of God takes in the whole world, a fact, of course, that means the inclusion of many wicked people. Nevertheless, the final judgment will definitively separate these from God's people.

### NOTES

While covering essentially the same ground as the Parable of the Weeds, slight differences of emphasis are traceable. While the latter story sets forth the present mixture of good and evil and the necessity of allowing this mixture to stand until judgment, the Dragnet story acknowledges the mixture, but gives more emphasis to the ultimate separation. Coming, as Matthew lists it, 'almost on the heels of Jesus' interpretation of the Weeds Parable, this illustration is its perfect complement and parallel.

13:47 The word for *net* (*sagène*) pictures an enormous, crescent-



shaped seine (from the same Greek word) utilized much like a huge fence lowered into the water between two boats. With floats fastened to the top of the fence and weights at the bottom so the lower part would trail over the lakefloor, these large dragnets were then slowly towed toward shore, entrapping any fish in its path. Once near the shore the fishermen could then haul this heavy, fish-laden fence close enough to drag it out of the water. At this point they could easily divide the unusable rejects from the good fish.

But to what aspect of *the Kingdom* does the *net* refer?

1. The Gospel and its effect in the world? The visible Church? Lenski (*Matthew*, 547, 549) so pictures it:

This net is the gospel. The sea is the world, and "of every kind" means some (partitive *ek*) of every kind, race, type, social and intellectual grade of men. Being the gospel, the net belongs to God or Christ and, of course, is handled by all who promulgate the gospel, i.e., the church. But the parable omits mention of these, as not belonging in the picture at this time. To bring them in, nevertheless, spoils the whole comparison for all the members and pastors of the church are also the fish caught in the net . . . the whole of it is one great sweep of the net through the waters of the sea. The picture is not that of repeated casting . . . The parable deals with all those who are caught by the great gospel net. All kinds and conditions of men are swept into its meshes, but these are of two classes. Here on earth both are mixed together in the outward body of the church . . . They all confess and profess faith, but not all are *vere credentes* and thus pronounced "righteous" by the divine JUDGE . . . Church discipline cannot eliminate them, for we cannot judge men's hearts.

Trench (*Notes*, 51) takes a similar view.

However, Lenski's admission that to mention the evangelizing Church as part of the parable, in that she manages the Gospel-net, "spoils the comparison," is really fatal to this too-exclusive interpretation. In fact, it ignores Jesus' own explanation that the fishermen who separate the fish represent the angels, who, it may be supposed, superintend the entire operation. (See below on *angels*, 13:49.)

Also his interpretation of *ek* as exclusively partitive in the sense of "some of every kind," as if Jesus did not mean "ALL of every

kind," too arbitrarily sets aside the significant class of uses of *ek* denoting the origin, family, race, city, people, etc., from which someone or something comes, hence, the kind to which he belongs. The idea of each fish's belonging to a kind, here, completely overshadows the idea of its separation from the group of his own kind. The attentive reader will notice that the translators have rightly added, not "(some) of every kind," but "(fish) of every kind."

2. He refers, rather, to the Rule of God over the world. The net, in this case, is not the visible Church in the world nor the mixed catch its true and false members. The net is the invincible power of the Kingdom of God itself. The sea is the world in which the net begins almost invisibly to exert its influence. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, but ever more certainly the Rule of God closes in on humanity bringing men ever closer to judgment. This interpretation has the advantage of including the former, in the sense that the Church and its Gospel are subsumed under the prejudgment activities of that portion of humanity under God's dominion that, in the end, will be declared "righteous." It is, in fact, the Church's proclamation of the Gospel that makes good men good, and prepared for that happy conclusion prepared for them. Nevertheless, this is but one aspect of God's Kingdom, and must not be made to overshadow what God is doing to tighten His grip on the greater majority of mankind which rejects His benign rule and so will be rejected. (Cf. Mt. 7:13, 14)

It is a fact that while the *net* is yet *in the sea*, the quality of character of its catch is yet unknown, since the fish are still free to swim around in its ever smaller radius. What they are is hidden from view until the haul is brought out onto the bank. Is this, too, part of Jesus' thought? If so, it is perfectly parallel with the striking similarity between the wheat and the tares in the companion parable. In fact, it is not until judgment that the formerly invisible distinctions in men come to light. So long as men are left together until judgment, for the present, at least, it often appears to make little difference whether a man sees the truth and goes all out to possess it. The big fish gobble the small fry, the rich get richer and the poor get trampled. It becomes an especially strong temptation to play the fool and say that truth and righteousness do not matter. (Study Psalm 73: Asaph felt this keenly.) But after the time together, the great separation will reveal what had so often been hidden before, i.e., the chasmic difference in the final destiny of men who saw, understood and made

the rule of God their own, and that of those who did not,

13:48 **They sat down and gathered the good into vessels.** This refers to nothing other than what, in other descriptive expressions, is termed "the granary" for the wheat (Mt. 13:30; 3:12), the "many dwelling places" (Jn. 14:2), "the bosom of Abraham" (Lk. 16:22), "eternal habitations" (Lk. 16:9), "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10), "a homeland; a better, heavenly country; a city" (Heb. 11:14-16).

13:49, 50 This is practically a repetition of 13:39-42 on which see notes.

**The angels shall come forth.** How could Jesus have affirmed the express activities of angels, if such beings did not exist? The skeptics who see in His teaching nothing more than accommodation to the traditional superstitions then current among the Jews will have to give this same down-grading to a wide range of situations in which He affirms their certain existence and activity. (Cf. Mt. 16:26; 18:10; 22:30; 24:31, 36; 25:31, 41; 26:53) Their reality stands (or falls) on the same basis as anything else about whose existence we cannot know otherwise than because He tells us. These heavenly ministers of God will proceed to do what His earthly ministers dare not begin: they carry out the actual work of *severing the wicked from among the righteous*. (Cf. 13:30) The great, fundamental concept of God's Kingdom pictured in this illustration is the final and full realization of its holiness. The Kingdom may be temporarily forced to tolerate the existence of the moral uncleanness and vileness forced upon it by its self-chosen commitment to use every means available to bring about the conversion to Christ of unclean, vile men. But this temporary, longsuffering toleration must never be mistaken for the final goal or confused for secret compromise with evil, for the threatened separation **WILL** come.

This parable, like that about the tares, is Jesus' simple, unphilosophical revelation about God's ultimate answer to the problem of pain and evil in the world. Since the fundamental assumption is that the world is God's domain, this illustration deals with all evil in the Kingdom: God is neither powerless nor unconcerned about these seemingly insurmountable problems. In fact, Jesus is here shouting for all to hear that God's mercy and longsuffering gives sinners thousands of opportunities to know the truth and change before the net gets to shore. But it is also abundantly clear that God shall have the last word. The Lord **SHALL** judge His people, bringing

all the present confusion to an end by separating the precious from the worthless and vile. (Cf. Psa. 1:5; Heb. 10:30; Mt. 25:32; 13:39ff)

**Furnace of fire** is a picture of horrible suffering, arising perhaps from some terrible historical realities like Nebuchadnezzar's "burning fiery furnace" (Dan. 3:6) developed into a figure of Gehenna contrasted with Paradise in later Judaism. (Cf. IV Ezra 7:36) See Notes on 13:42; 3:12; 8:12.

### AN INTERESTING COINCIDENCE?

The prophet Habakkuk, inspired to prophesy the horror-provoking Babylonian invasion of Israel, and shocked by the ruthlessness and violence of those pagans rolling over the people of God, felt driven to protest. In his complaint against this apparent injustice his prayer took the form of a comparison:

Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?  
We shall not die.

O Lord, thou hast ordained them as a judgment;  
and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement.

Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil  
and canst not look on wrong,

Why dost thou look on faithless men,  
and art silent when the wicked swallows up  
the man more righteous than he?

For thou makest men like the fish of the sea,  
like crawling things that have no ruler.

He (the Chaldean) brings all of them up with a hook,  
he drags them out with his net,

He gathers them in his seine;  
so he rejoices and exults.

Therefore he sacrifices to his net  
and burns incense to his seine;  
for by them he lives in luxury,  
and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net,  
and mercilessly slaying nations for ever? (Habakkuk 1:12-17)

To the prophet the Kingdom of God was being twisted all out of shape. The victory of evil over good was too real, screwing men's

faith down to the very limits of endurance. Nevertheless, God's response to his perplexity demanded that he live by his faith. (Hab. 2:4)

Foreseeing that godly men would ever be perplexed by the apparent weakness and failure of the Kingdom of God, as they judge its progress in a chaotic world before the appointed time for judgment, did Jesus just take Habakkuk's illustration of the net and turn it right side out? The real net is not in the hands of evil men or godless empires endlessly gobbling up defenseless people, good and bad alike. The true seine is in the hands of the living God whose government slowly, solemnly draws all men closer into His control, some to their everlasting destruction, others to the eternal life of God itself. And Jesus' Parable of the Dragnet, like God's answer to Habakkuk, while revealing the final victory of Jehovah, demands that the believer bow in humble submission to His rule, even if he does not understand it all nor can see the outcome on the horizon.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what way is the Parable of the Dragnet similar to the Parable of the Tares? List the various points of resemblance.
2. Summarize in one sharply pointed sentence the teaching of this story.
3. Describe the net used by Jesus to create this illustration and then indicate the way it is used in fishing.
4. Explain how this parable illustrates the Kingdom of God.

## C. THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH AND SUCCESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM: THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH

### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

TEXT: 13:31, 32

(Parallel: Mk. 4:30-32; cf. Lk. 13:18, 19)

31 Another parable set he before them, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why do you suppose that it was so very important for Jesus to reveal to His disciples, even in this veiled way, that His Messianic Kingdom would have a small, insignificant beginning? What was there in their background that would have made this special information necessary?
- b. To what extent, if at all, may we regard these parables as prophecies about the features to be expected in Christ's (then) coming Kingdom? If they are to be considered as prophecies, then what does this make Jesus? If they are not so to be considered, in which case Jesus is just telling it like it is, then what does that make Jesus?
- c. How does this story about the mustard seed contribute to the general impression of the government of God revealed elsewhere in the near context of the great sermon in parables, and in the larger framework of Scripture? In other words, how does this parable's message harmonize with, or incorporate, ideas expressed in other parables and elsewhere in the New Testament?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Jesus set before them another story: "To what is God's rule comparable? What story would describe it? God's Kingdom is similar to a grain of mustard seed which a farmer took and sowed in his field. The mustard seed is, relatively speaking, the smallest of all the tree seeds on earth. Nevertheless, when it is sown and has grown up, it becomes the largest of all shrubs. It puts forth large branches and becomes a tree, so that birds can come and make nests in the shade of its branches."

### SUMMARY

The concrete, visible beginnings of God's Kingdom on earth will be small, but His rule will show extensive growth until its impact in the world is significantly felt.

## NOTES

13:31, 32 **A grain of mustard seed . . . becometh a tree . . .** *ISBE* (2101, article "Mustard") notes

Several varieties of mustard (Arab. *kharda*) have notably small seed, and under favorable conditions grow in a few months into very tall herbs—10 to 12 ft. The rapid growth of an annual herb to such a height must always be a striking fact. *Sinapis nigra*, the black mustard, which is cultivated, *Sinapis alba*, or white mustard, and *Sinapis arvensis*, or the charlock (All of N.O. *Cruciferae*), would any one of them, suit the requirements of the parable; birds readily alight upon their branches to eat the seed (Mt. 13:32, etc.), not, be it noted, to build their nests, which is nowhere implied . . .

However, the expression, the birds of the heaven come and lodge in *the branches thereof* may rightly be rendered *make nests*, since *kataskenoûn* means "to live in or settle in a place; of birds, to nest in the branches." (Cf. Rocci, 1004; Arndt-Gingrich, 419) Plummer (*Matthew*, 194) reminds that " 'tree' (*déndron*) does not necessarily mean a timber-tree. We speak of a rose-tree and a gooseberry-tree."

Had Jesus furnished an interpreter's key to this parable, it might have sounded something like this: "The field is the world, the man who sowed the seed is the Son of man, the grain of mustard seed is the rule of God in men's hearts. Even with an unpretentious debut, it will expand throughout the world until many nations, peoples and tongues will find peace in its realm."

If, then, the mustard plant actually becomes a *tree*, the Lord does not have to extend the literal qualities of the mustard bush beyond its botanical limits in order to make a tremendous impression upon His Jewish audience. The description of something insignificant when planted, but begins "bringing forth boughs and becoming a noble tree under the shade of which will dwell all kinds of beasts and in whose shade birds of every sort will nest," is familiar prophetic language to those Jewish hearers. (Cf. Ezek. 17:22-24 in its context; 31:6, 12 in the parable of the cedar; Dan. 4:10-27) Is it possible that this choice of language is deliberately and appropriately utilized by the Lord to call direct attention to something for minds alert to such apocalyptic jargon? What would these words have communicated to readers familiar with Ezekiel and Daniel? In those prophets such

language describes the grandeur of empires magnificent enough to provide people with refuge, defense and the satisfaction of their needs. The alert listener to Jesus could not but recognize a prediction that His Kingdom, despite its inauspicious beginning, would progress by gradual growth to become an empire so vast and so powerful that it could protect all its subjects and satisfy the desires of their souls.

How desperately needed was this information at that historical moment! The thought that the Kingdom could begin small and arrive at greatness only through gradual growth is always a view totally unacceptable to people "itching to get where the action is." Had a sounding of public opinion been taken to determine popular sentiment regarding the Kingdom and Jesus, the results would have probably left many a serious disciple shaking his head. At this stage of the game the powerblock of Jerusalem and especially the Pharisees were beginning to line up a stiff, growing opposition. The "important backers" began to raise eyebrows at the trends becoming more and more visible in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Realistic observers could sense that Jesus had no intention of setting up a military kingdom with a fully developed power structure which would usher in a paradise of prosperity for all. And it was this very reluctance of His that would deeply trouble those who had high hopes of making a fortune in that Kingdom. A statistical review of Jesus' "hard," countable successes would confirm the unspoken suspicion that He was making no progress at all. Worse still, His message menaced judgment for all that was held dear by the various representatives of standard Judaism: the rabbinical traditions, the temple graft, nationalism, material prosperity, ostentation and class and race superiority. Rather than organize the elite and court the heads of organized labor and government, rather than rally the masses in anti-Establishment crusades, His major efforts were directed at regenerating the folks on the fringe, the ordinary, the down-and-outers, the renegades,—in short, the nobodies. Humanly speaking, this was no way to organize a mighty messianic machine for bringing in the Kingdom with its flurry of trumpets, its flash of heraldry and the stirring roll of drums. (Cf. Lk. 17:20, 21 in context) The absurdity of Jesus' being able to accomplish very much with the temperamental, ordinary, problematic people in His immediate coterie of associates, must have been staggering to the Jewish public!

The disciples themselves too, throughout their associations with Jesus, had unceasing trouble with this kind of thinking. (Study



Mt. 19:24-28; 20:20-28; see notes on 11:2-6; Acts 1:6.) Other disciples, after the feeding of the 5000, tried to take the Lord by force to make Him their kind of king, but He refused. (Jn. 6:15) The next day, when He bared the spiritual character of His mission, people abandoned Him *en masse*. (Jn. 6:22-66)

Nevertheless, as indicated elsewhere in His teaching, Jesus had been intimating His intentions to found just this sort of Kingdom, i.e., one that constitutionally strikes at the heart of material ambitions, nationalistic conquest, pampered pride and superficial religiousness. (Cf. the Sermon on the Mount as a vigorous polemic against these views.) Further, if the fundamental message of the Parable of the Sower is that God intends to use only the influence of His Word to transform men who remain absolutely free to accept or reject it, then does it require any particular astuteness to foresee that any Kingdom of God that follows such policies **MUST BEGIN SMALL, IF AT ALL?** And yet Jesus' divine foresight is evident in His unshaken confidence that His Kingdom, however discouragingly insignificant its beginnings, would grow to become a powerful, world-wide empire.

We do not esteem Jesus' words at their proper worth unless we see just how far from being hyperbolic they were. If it seemed an exaggeration that He should speak of the mustard seed as *the smallest of all seeds on earth*, when compared with the realities they symbolized they are almost an understatement!

1. Christ's Kingdom began in a very obscure way without any reasonable prospect of success, without any hope of greatness. Its King did not appear in public until His thirtieth year and then taught only two or three years occasionally in the capital, but more often in the provincial villages.
2. The Kingdom began among the Jews, a subject people chafing under the yoke of foreign lords. It began as the smallest sect among this people in a despised province of the Roman Empire. Its leader contradicted the cherished notions of His own people and, consequently, was rejected by them. He made only a few real followers among the poor and ignorant. He had no political power in His own homeland and no hope from abroad. The founder of this Kingdom was shamefully executed by His own people. Even after the day of Pentecost, the Kingdom seemed to its enemies a struggling movement crying for elimination through persecution and death. **THIS** is the beginning of the universal Reign of

God on earth? (Cf. 1 Co. 1:27-29)

And yet it grew and became a force to be dealt with in the world. (Cf. Ro. 16:25, 26; Col. 1:6, 23) Do you believe Paul, or is his rhetoric a bit hyperbolic for you? (1 Th. 1:6-10; Ac. 28:22; 17:6) And it is still growing!

For further notes on the impact and significance of this revelation, see after the Parable of the Leaven, its companion.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. How does one harmonize the fact that many seeds are actually smaller than the mustard seed, with Jesus' declaration that "it is the smallest of all seeds"?
2. What illustrative stories in the Old Testament furnish the imagery for Jesus' parable here? What was the major point of those stories? Did Jesus say that these are His source? If so, how? If not, what factor connects the story of Jesus with those OT pictures?
3. Describe the Palestinean mustard plant showing how it fits Jesus' use of it as a fitting symbol of His Kingdom.
4. Had Jesus presented this truth before? If so, how or where?

### C. THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH AND SUCCESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM: THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH

#### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE YEAST

TEXT: 13:33 (cf. Lk. 13:20, 21)

33 Another parable spake he unto them: The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Some people believe that yeast in the Bible is always a symbol of the far-reaching, pervasive influence of evil. Do you agree? If so,

on what basis? If not, why not? In what way, then, is the Kingdom of God itself like yeast?

- b. If the Kingdom of God is to progress by the most vigorous public evangelization that gives the Gospel the widest hearing possible, how can Jesus say that the Kingdom expands secretly and quietly and by intensive growth like yeast works in dough?
- c. What is there in this parable that had already been suggested in Jesus' other messages, like, for example, the Sermon on the Mount?

### PARAPHRASE

He told them another story: "God's Kingdom is like yeast that a woman worked into three measures of flour, till the dough was entirely leavened."

### SUMMARY

The Rule of God in the world will grow quietly, without great fanfare, but its progress will not be hindered until its intensive, transforming power influences all of life.

### NOTES

Had Jesus furnished an interpretative key to this parable it might have perhaps run as follows: "The three measures of meal represents humanity. The woman that kneaded the dough stands for the Son of man. The yeast is the dynamic, transforming influence of the Word of God by which the Kingdom of God penetrates and transforms mankind." The *three measures of flour* should not be thought especially mysterious, because that may have been merely the right amount for the usual recipe for homemade bread. (See Gen. 18:6; Judg. 6:19 where 3 seahs = 1 ephah.) The idea that a woman should be used to represent Jesus is no problem, since in Luke 15 He used a man seeking a lost sheep and a woman sweeping the house for her lost coin to symbolize God's search and rejoicing over repentant sinners, without concerning Himself whether people would be confused about whether God be male or female. So, if bread-making in

the home is usually the work of a woman, and if Jesus wants to use yeast as His main symbol, it would have been more surprising to His audience were He to have inserted "man," instead of a woman. What is really startling is to hear the Lord compare the glorious Messianic Kingdom to YEAST, of all things! After all, as Edersheim comments in another connection (*Life*, II, 70, note 2),

The figurative meaning of leaven, as that which morally corrupts, was familiar to the Jews. Thus the word . . . (*Seor*) is used in the sense of 'moral leaven' hindering the good in Ber. 17a while the verb . . . (*chamets*) 'to become leavened,' is used to indicate moral deterioration in Rosh ha Sh. 3b, 4a.

This same negative feeling about yeast as a figure of speech for something corrupt and corrupting is back of the proverbial saying twice quoted by Paul (1 Co. 5:6-8 and Gal. 5:9) as well as that reflected in Mt. 16:6, 12. However, *yeast* in this parable has nothing whatsoever to do with an evil, corrupting influence, however often it be so employed elsewhere.

### SYMBOLS ARE JUST NOT UNIVERSAL.

Readers need to beware of supposing "yeast" to be a universal symbol of corruption, because Bible writers can change the "standard" symbology if they want to! The fact that Jesus Christ is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5) does not mean Peter is mistaken to call Satan "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pt. 5:8). Although Jesus is "the Lamb of God" (Rev. 5:6-12), this does not hinder His charging Peter with the care to "feed my lambs" (Jn. 21:15). "Birds" can be (1) nations at rest within an empire, Ezek. 31:6, 17; or (2) Satan, Mt. 13:19; Mk. 4:15. "Serpent" can represent (1) Satan, 2 Co. 11:3; Rev. 20:2; or (2) the only means of salvation and symbolic of Christ, Jn. 3:14; or (3) a symbol of Christian wisdom, Mt. 10:16. "Vine" can represent (1) Jesus Himself, Jn. 15:1ff; or (2) Israel, Mk. 12:1; Isa. 5:1-7; Ezek. 19:10-14. "Mountain" can suggest (1) great world empires, Dan. 2:35, 45, or (2) any apparently insurmountable obstacle, Mt. 17:20. "Shadow" can be (1) a symbol of blessing, Isa. 32:2; or (2) "protection," Isa. 49:2; Psa. 91:1; or (3) a short-lived existence, Psa. 102:11; or (4) a lack of spiritual enlightenment, Isa. 9:2; Mt. 4:16; Lk. 1:79. The

point is, of course, to let a given Bible writer or speaker use a symbol in any way that suits his subject, regardless of whether anyone else, or even he himself, ever used it that way before. Let Jesus tell His own story without anyone's dictating to Him what symbols He may utilize!

While everyone else sees in yeast a symbol of corrupting influence, Jesus, with the eye of a keen observer, can also see in that live ferment a picture of transforming power for good and for God. What a contrast! That drowsing Jewish audience, quite naturally expecting leaven to be used as a symbol of defilement and corruption, must have been brought wide-awake and to the edge of their seats to hear Jesus compare something so vibrantly glorious as the Kingdom of God with something so sinister, dark, ominous and evil as yeast! But literal yeast itself is innocent. Its permeating, transforming, ever growing character had just always furnished a handy cliché for the influence of evil among men. But Jesus turns that metaphor to His advantage by pointing out that what had served so well to illustrate the way evil increases in humanity, serves just as well to depict the growth of His own Kingdom! By so doing, He not merely rescued yeast from the stereotyped role usually assigned to it as a symbol. He flashed before His audience a picture of a Kingdom that is vibrantly alive, effectively at work, vitally influencing everything around it, and gloriously conquering until every area of human life feels its effect, even though its entire work is not readily discernible.

**Hidden in the mass.** Trench (*Notes*, 44) remembers that

In the early history of Christianity the leaven was effectually hidden. This is shown by the entire ignorance which heathen writers betray of all that was going forward a little below the surface of society, even up to the very moment (with slight exceptions) when the triumph of Christianity was at hand.

**Hidden in the mass till it was all leavened** suggests two applications:

1. The influence of God's will in human affairs through the Kingdom of Christ is the first reference. Jesus could foresee the Church's vitality and energy, her enthusiasm in evangelizing humanity and her zeal for edifying. What a transforming power He intended to unleash to disturb and unsettle the basis of despotic government, and to right the standards of ethics in human relations! (Cf. Jn. 11:45-53; Ac. 4:16, 17; 5:24, 28; 17:6; 28:22) He could see the wide-sweeping social revolutions fermenting at the grass-roots

- level in men made over in the image of God's Son. (Cf. 2 Co. 10:3-6) **All . . . leavened:** what a goal: all of human life—its work and play, its philosophy and religion, its politics and commerce, its science and arts—all is to feel the pervasive, persuasive pressure of a robust, convincing Christianity that neither compromises its influence by closing itself in monastic seclusion to avoid contamination nor leaves its Christian morality behind when it enters society. *Till it was all leavened* is the prophetic past tense that speaks of as past a future event so sure to take place that even before it happens, it is declared to be a fact! Jesus guarantees us here nothing short of the final triumph of God's Kingdom and of His people. (Cf. 2 Co. 2:14; Ro. 16:19, 26; Col. 1:6, 23; Rev. 11:15; Dan. 7:14, 27)
2. The influence of God's will in the life of each individual Christian who accepts that rule. If the Kingdom of Christ is to do all that is predicated of it, then it follows that every single Christian must be a person in whom the Kingdom is a reality. The rule of God expressed through His Word when buried in a man's heart is living and powerful and persistent in bringing that entire man to obey it, transforming him completely until he becomes at last a totally new man in Christ Jesus. (Cf. 2 Co. 3:17, 18; 5:17; 1 Co. 6:9-11; what a change!)

### THE RELATION OF THESE TWO PARABLES TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Yeast reveal little that is absolutely news to any disciples steadily "tuned-in" to Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount He had pictured the ethics of the Kingdom of God as motivated by selfless love and grounded in a single-minded devotion to God as a gracious Heavenly Father, an ethic which expresses itself in a generous helpfulness to even the ungrateful (Mt. 5:39-48), in a forgiving spirit (6:12, 14, 15), in a clemency in judgment (7:1-5) despite a proper reserve towards people with no appreciation for the holy or the priceless. That kind of Kingdom, launched in a world of dedicated egotists, cannot but progress slowly, granted, of course, that its chief Proponent could succeed in convincing even a few people that ideals of this sort will really function, convinced enough, that is, to give them a try and help Him launch

the idea. For, unless Jesus is willing to abandon His ideals long enough to get His program underway, such a spiritual Reign could never even get off the ground. And, if it should turn out that He really inaugurate such a movement, without some artificial priming, it must necessarily have not only an embarrassingly small debut, but also undergo a painfully slow progress in the world. Any shrewd humanist who seriously weighed Jesus' words could have expected these two parables sooner or later. What he could not have expected was Jesus' bringing these dreams to reality in exactly the way He planned.

Nor had Jesus been silent about the eventual greatness and success of His Kingdom. While His emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount is decidedly on the personal implications of God's Rule, still He does not ignore the world-wide impact Christians are to make as "salt of the EARTH . . . light of the WORLD." (5:13-16) The Kingdom is the subject of prayers that it come and that God's will be done on EARTH with the same joyful seriousness it is being done in heaven. And who could be satisfied with partial success or half-way obedience to God? Those who share Jesus' views and His love must pray that the Kingdom of God cover the entire globe and affect every creature.

So these stories about yeast and mustard seed are stupendous illustrations of a spiritual kingdom that "comes not with observation, but is within you." (Cf. Lk. 17:20, 21; Ro. 14:17)

### THE APOLOGETIC FORCE OF THESE PARABLES

There is embedded in these stories a persuasive apologetic power to convince skeptics, that Jesus cannot be explained in terms of the popular messianism of His people, since it would be difficult to imagine a concept of the Kingdom of the Messiah less nationalistically Jewish than that presented here. Conspicuous for its absence is any allusion to a privileged place for national Israel in the Kingdom. These seemingly harmless little tales are on a collision course with the aims of people who desired to rush on past the judgment to introduce the Messianic Paradise. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* lines 285-294; 652-808; *Enoch* 62:11) The meaning of these unexplained stories remained unintelligible enigmas to these Jewish hearers. Therefore, Jesus did not weave them out of theological materials lying around Him. His

revelations are made out of divine stuff.

Here again we are confronted with one of the motifs of the Gospel: the Messianic reserve, in the sense that the Kingdom will not be proclaimed in any triumphalistic sense by tyrannic force of arms, but with absolute respect for human freedom, without all of the apocalyptic artillery that many of Jesus' nationalistic contemporaries dreamed would be absolutely essential. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* 652ff) Further, the scandalous, continued presence of sin in the world and Jesus' failure to call down heavenly fire to destroy the more obvious sinners could not help but raise many eyebrows. However, since God's judgment is not to be anticipated, men must not even conclude that the Kingdom's regenerating power be somehow not functioning to transform society as it changes the men who compose it. Rather, they must even now submit themselves to the will of the King and recognize the evidences of the invisible activity of the Kingdom which is not man's work alone, but God's, and dedicate themselves to its vigorous proclamation. They must take the long view.

These parables still shock and remain unbelieved by modern churchmen who promote great political schemes, even to the point of smuggling machine-guns to bring "peace" through peoples' movements for liberation. They would install air-conditioners and piped-in music in hell, while hoping to make it possible for more people to enjoy the questionable benefits of a conscienceless materialistic kingdom of God here on earth. (Cf. *Sib. Orac.* 657!) They just cannot conceive of a Kingdom that can operate effectively on the basis of a message patiently taught to wobbly, often undependable people, tenderly and lovingly cultivated but whose foibles and mistakes, more often than not, embarrass, rather than glorify, their Lord. Such ecclesiastical organizational procedure has little time for "bruised reeds" and "smoldering wicks" (see notes on 12:20) nor stoops to "preach good tidings to the poor" from any truly Biblical perspective. (See notes on 11:5) But do we ourselves believe with Jesus that the Kingdom of God will progress only to the extent that we care about "the lambs" (Jn. 21:15-19), "the little child . . . who believes in me" (Mt. 18:1-14), the "babes" (Mt. 11:25)? If so, we may well wish to table our grandiose schemes to bring in the Kingdom, and join Jesus in the slow, often disappointing, but ultimately fruitful, business of evangelization of the unbelievers and edification of the saints. (Cf. 1 Th. 3:10)

Jesus is to be believed precisely because He is not the revolutionary



wanted by the doctrinaire apostles of modern social change who would use Him as their banner for political or social subversion of the status quo. On the contrary, these parables picture a Christ who can settle for gradualism, a not unimportant heresy to those who demolish and burn in the name of instant change. While He preached a gospel capable of producing gradually the personal and social changes necessary to deal with every iniquity weighing upon the shoulders of a suffering humanity, He deliberately did NOT mount a protest against the current regime nor harrangue the crowds about the living conditions of the underprivileged. The revolution, rather, to which He dedicated Himself and to which He calls us, challenges every Christian to preach this Gospel of the Kingdom and live in conformity with it, as if that alone would bring in the Kingdom.

These parables reveal the future, inevitable triumph of the Kingdom! They speak not only of a God who triumphs over the wicked in the end. They describe also a Church that, during the progress of its history, will enjoy a glorious growth and a penetrating force throughout the world. Therefore, any hasty, superficial judgments about any given stage of the Kingdom's progress are out of place, on the part of both believers and unbelievers alike. We must not be discouraged by the temporary retreats, the heartbreaks, the battles lost, nor must we be impatient if it seems that the Gospel is not bringing immediate results. Even if it seems that God's people are not yet holy enough or numerous enough or the Kingdom not powerful enough, we may not make snap judgments about it, because we have not yet come to the end of the present age, and God's Kingdom has some more growing to do.

These parables reveal the spirit behind the Kingdom of God as a missionary spirit. Yeast cannot function unless it is living in vital contact with that which it must influence. Therefore, the monastic spirit is essentially antichristian. No true Christian can avoid human society for fear that he might be contaminated by it, because his mission, as was His Lord's, is to touch human life at every point so that every facet might come under the influence and penetrating gaze of Christian morality and ideals. Rather than take up a defensive position within which to protect what remains of our pretended humanity, our final orders are to attack! (Mt. 28:18-20)

## FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is the one basic point shared commonly by the Parable of the Mustard Seed and that of the Yeast?
2. In what way are these two parables different in emphasis?
3. State in one clear sentence the literal message Jesus was communicating in this story.
4. What is learned about Jesus from the fact that He taught *THESE* truths instead of their more popular opposite concepts?
5. Is there anything significant about the fact that it was a woman who put the yeast in the dough? Or that it was precisely three (and no more) measures of flour in which she put the yeast? If so, what is the hidden meaning? If not, what does one do with this information?
6. Had Jesus taught this same truth before? If so, where or how?

**D. THE INESTIMABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM:  
THE PRICE OF TRUTH**

**1. THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE**

TEXT: 13:44

44 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. The long-awaited Kingdom of the Messiah was the object of the prayers and aspirations of the Jewish nation, and yet, by means of this parable and its companion, Jesus would convince His hearers to seize their opportunity to make the Kingdom their own, as if there would be some danger that they would not. How would you explain this?
- b. Jesus describes the Kingdom of God, i.e., the Kingdom proclaimed in His message and seen from His view of it, as worth all the

sacrifices we could ever be called upon to make. What should we think about Him, if He is wrong? What must we determine to do, if He has deceived us? How could we ever know, before it is too late, whether or not He has, in fact, done this? If you object to these questions, what gives you confidence to think them to be improper?

- c. Do you suppose that the man acted in perfect honesty to hide the treasure and buy the field that contained it without informing its owners about his discovery? Should Jesus use stories about people with such dubious ethics as models for our imitation? Or, is that what He did? How would you go about unraveling this mystery?
- d. What is there about the Philippian jailor that makes him an excellent example of this fortunate finder? (See Acts 16:23-34.)

### PARAPHRASE

"The Kingdom of God is similar to a treasure someone had buried in a field, which another man found and reburied. This latter, for the joy of his discovery, went and sold all he possessed in order to buy that piece of land."

### SUMMARY

The Kingdom will not be forced upon anyone now. When a man stumbles onto its inestimable preciousness and recognizes its value, he wisely surrenders all else unquestioningly and unhesitatingly to make it his own. Our service to God is worth all it costs.

### NOTES

**The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure:** this is the main point of this parable. All else may be nothing but scenery necessary to make this one point, which is perfectly parallel to that of its companion story, The Parable of the Precious Pearl. In both stories three points make this lesson clear:

1. There is first the discovery of the inestimable value of God's divine government.
2. There is the consequent desire to make it one's own.
3. There is, last, the necessity to give everything else one possesses to acquire it.

How much else is proper to interpret is debatable, as is evident from the contradictory results achieved by conscientious, believing interpreters. The following points seem to find echoes in the reality for which they are but the illustrations:

1. **A treasure hidden in the field.** In a land racked by centuries of war and harrassed by banditry, often the safest deposit for one's treasure is the earth. But what one man hid, by sheer coincidence another can find. (Long-forgotten arms caches hidden by partisans during the Second World War are still turning up in Italy more than thirty years after their hiding.)

Whatever *the field* may signify, God's Kingdom is there present, but hidden from common view. This concealment reaffirms with the Sower Parable that the message of the Kingdom, because it encounters widely varying receptiveness among its hearers, would produce varying results ranging from total failure to qualified success, leaving an uneven, spotty control of the Kingdom over the world. Neat, black-white distinctions between good and evil people are impossible, because of the presence of evil in the world, as explained in the Weeds Parable. This fact leaves the King's control over the world apparently in doubt and His Kingdom practically indistinguishable from other world systems until the judgment. So, here too in the story of the hidden treasure, He describes a state of the world where happy surprise over the unexpected discovery of the Kingdom of God is really possible.

Did Jesus mean to communicate meaning through the detail where the man purchased the field in order to have the treasure? The field itself took on supreme value for him because of the treasure it contained, as if before the discovery the field was relatively valueless to him.

- a. Some with Trench (*Notes*, 46) see *the field*, as picturing

. . . the outer visible Church, as distinguished from the inward spiritual. He who recognizes the Church not as a

human institute, but a divine, who has learned that God is in the midst of it, sees now that it is something beyond all earthly societies with which he has confounded it; and henceforth it is precious in his sight, even to its outermost skirts, for the sake of its inward glory, which is now revealed to his eyes. And as the man cannot have the treasure and leave the field, so he cannot have Christ except in his Church; he cannot have Christ in his heart, and at the same time separate his fortunes from those of Christ's struggling, suffering Church. The treasure and the field go together.

- b. Others, with Lenski, (*Matthew*, 542), think of *the field* as the Scriptures which had seemed so common and ordinary to the reader. But, suddenly, he comes alive, because he has just discovered the vital truth of the Kingdom and Jesus Christ, the Bible's grand subject. Whereas before, the Bible had been treated as if it had belonged to others, now he must make its true treasure his very own personal possession.
- c. Is it not simpler to see *the field* as parallel to the various pearl markets among which the merchant found the one pearl of inestimable value? (Cf. on 13:46) If so, we see that this *field* was not the previous possession of the fortunate finder, because his possessions and interests lay elsewhere. Nevertheless, while present in *THIS field* for whatever reason (was he plowing it or just walking through it?) he stumbled onto its treasure. Could it be that by *the field* He means to suggest the intellectual field of specifically religious ideas which a person does not necessarily make his own unless he sees some compelling reason to do so? Until this discovery, his material interests and cares could effectively block any concern for "buying" anyone's religious ideas. But when he gets a glimpse of Jesus Christ and the live possibility to realize at least in his own life the Kingship, beauty and order of God, he no longer chokes on religious ideas, but accepts them readily in order to possess Him who is the highest treasure. (Cf. Mt. 11:25; 2 Co. 4:3-6; Col. 2:3, 4; Lu. 19:42)
- 2. **which a man found and hid; and in his joy he goeth . . .** His unexpected discovery brings him joy, but also to the crisis of decision. No matter what made the discovery possible, he finds

himself face to face with Truth and must decide whether to seize it or lose it by default. The morality of his covering up his discovery has been doubted by some who leave Jesus' use of this story in question, despite their attempts to defend Him. They argue that the treasure belonged technically to the present owner of the field, so that the principle of personal integrity would have required the finder to inform him of the treasure. Then, they correctly insist that Jesus did not justify the man's conduct nor hold his (im)morality up for imitation. They rightly see the point of the story as the man's earnestness in obtaining the treasure. But they assume too much and thus leave the Lord open to criticism:

- a. Is the present owner of the field any more the true owner of the treasure than the happy finder? Edersheim (*Life*, I, 595f) shows that then-current Jewish law vindicated the finder as the proper owner.
- b. The treasure's original owner may as easily be presumed dead and forgotten long before the finder arrives on the scene, rather than think of him as the current owner of the field. It is not necessary, of course, to assume that the field had ANY owner. To whom belong, for instance, the treasures found on the Mediterranean Sea's floor beyond the territorial limits of any nation, treasures that once represented the wealth of Rome or Greece? And if it be presumed that the happy finder had stumbled onto a fortune in Babylonian gold coins no longer in circulation but whose intrinsic value represented a fortune reminted, all in a field whose original owner left no heirs, and if it be imagined that his nation had no laws specifically protecting its own ownership of such antiquities, then it would be possible for the man easily to pay to his township the field's value, thus clearing his title to the treasure. (Did abandoned lands revert automatically to government disposition at the death or in the absence of their heirless owners? Cf. 2 Sam. 9:9f; 1 Kg. 21:16; 2 Kg. 8:3-6) At any rate, the captivities would have effectively interrupted, if not altogether ended, the normal execution, especially in the case of some families wiped out, of the ancient patrimonial inheritance laws whereby such lands would pass to one's next of kin, thus keeping them and any improvements thereon within the ancient tribal families. (Cf. Lev. 25:25-34; 26:31, 32, 34ff; 43ff;

- 1 Chron. 36:21; Isa. 1:7; 6:11, 12) Because of these disorders it would be perfectly imaginable for the field to have no known private owners to whom the treasure would supposedly belong. It is unfair to judge the man's morality on the basis of modern legislation or obligations that do not represent his actual ethical responsibility in his own time-period and legal situation.
- c. The brevity of Jesus' story does not permit those who doubt the man's morality to prove that he did not in fact inform the present owners of the field's treasure. They might have let the treasure go to the new buyer, because of indifference or some other unstated technicality. (Cf. Boaz' purchase of Ruth ahead of his kinsman who had prior rights. Ruth 4:5)
  - d. His reburying the treasure is no indication of immorality, but of prudence lest he lose it by theft during his absence, and of haste lest someone else buy the field ahead of him while he dallied. He honestly cleared his own title to the property before moving the treasure. In fact, his rehidng the treasure (*ékruptsen*) is merely the act of putting the treasure back exactly as he found it: hidden (*kekrumméno*, from the same verb *kripto*).
3. **In his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.** Possession costs everything, but cost is no object, since *his joy* motivates him to part with whatever was dear and closest to him in order to make the field his own. **All that he hath** is the price, but how much is that if we would purchase the Kingdom? All that a person thinks important or of value: place and possessions, fame, wealth, one's former religious system, family, philosophies, etc. Any ambition, however dear, any habit or way of life that obstructs our possession of the Kingdom must go. Whatever sins a man quits for Jesus' sake are part of his price. (Cf. Mt. 10:37-39; 16:24; 19:29; Mk. 9:43ff) Often our dearest possessions are but garbage in contrast to the supreme joy of having the Father and the Son! (1 Jn. 1:3; 2:23; 5:11, 12) Listen to Paul describe His great find! (Phil. 3:1-17) Or Philip and Nathanael (Jn. 1:43-51)

By means of this illustration Jesus pleads with people not to be ashamed of the price they pay for the Kingdom of God in comparison with the value they receive. Many would refuse the fortune of Christ, because fool's gold is less expensive. Yet the only sure way

to purchase peace of mind, genuine joy, unmarred beauty, enduring righteousness and that crowning happiness to be found nowhere else is to accept the discipline, the self-denial and the cross. Any happy finder of the Kingdom should be willing to part with any prejudices, any previously dear values and ideas, in order to possess and enjoy all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ.

Matthew himself is one such "fortunate finder," because this publican probably never dreamed that one day he would look up from his ledgers into the face of a Jesus fully ready to invite him into special service in His Kingdom as an Apostle. This sudden hope so gripped him that he was willing to drop instantly and permanently his lucrative tax job and cast his lot with the Lord. **He goes and sells all that he has** for Jesus the yet-uncrowned King? Despite the apparent ridiculousness of staking everything on this one investment, something more than a good head for figures brought Matthew, wide-eyed, to his feet. It took some real vision, some true understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, and much real faith to think the yet undefined service of an itinerate, controversial Rabbi worth chucking away his cozy, materially rewarding position, in order to make his own all the Lord offered! (See notes on 9:9.)

On the basis of this man's sagacious personal acquisition of the Kingdom, Trench (*Notes*, 50) shares the following suggestive outline on buying well:

1. Purchase truth, instruction, wisdom and understanding: all things of the spirit! (Prov. 23:23)
2. Buy what has real value, ironically at no cost whatever! (Isa. 55:1)
3. Buy while there is still time! (Mt. 25:1-13)
4. Buy from Jesus the deep needs of our soul! (Rev. 3:18)

More comments on the impact of this parable will follow the Precious Pearl Parable.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What single point does this story have in common with that about the precious pearl?
2. What is there in the background of the disciples that made this



story necessary?

3. What is there in the immediate teaching of Jesus that rendered this story essential at this point in His message?
4. Explain the historical situation of the happy finder by illustrating the customs of Jesus' time that make His story a living reality to His original hearers, and, at the same time, prove the legitimacy of that man's course of action.
5. How does the happy finder of the treasure differ from the pearl merchant in the companion parable? Does this indicate a difference in emphasis between these stories? What, precisely, was the man doing when he discovered the treasure, or can we know this? Is this important?
6. To what (if anything) is reference made by the following symbols:
  - a. The hidden treasure?
  - b. The fortunate finder?
  - c. The field?
  - d. The finder's former possessions? ("all that he hath")?
7. What texts indicate that Jesus had already taught this truth before the great sermon in parables?

#### D. THE INESTIMABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM: THE PRICE OF TRUTH

#### 2. THE PARABLE OF THE PRECIOUS PEARL

TEXT: 13:45, 46

45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls: 46 and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

#### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why is it so very important that Jesus reveal to His disciples, even in this veiled way, that His Kingdom could only be discovered after diligent search on the world market? What was there in their background that called for this sort of information?

- b. How would you summarize the fundamental message of this story?
- c. Is the search for God's rule in your life the one absorbing passion of your existence, or does the cry of other things demand so much of your attention that you wonder who really is in control? What are you going to do about it?
- d. Are you willing to liquidate the whole collection of lesser values in your life to purchase the blessings of God's good government at whatever expense? Can you truthfully say, "When it comes to the Kingdom of God, cost is no object"?

### PARAPHRASE

"In a similar way, God's Kingdom is similar to the situation of a pearl merchant searching for exquisite pearls. When he found one pearl of inestimable value, he liquidated his entire collection and bought that one."

### SUMMARY

The Kingdom of God is worth all it costs! When a connoisseur seeks it with all diligence, its value will be so obvious and desirable that he will instantly recognize its preciousness and expend all his resources to gain it. The Kingdom consists in releasing our entire, miserable collection of lesser values in order to be filled with all of His.

### NOTES

**13:45 The kingdom of heaven is like unto a . . . merchant seeking goodly pearls.** This man, in contrast to the coincidental discoverer of the treasure in the preceding story, is an expert engaged in regular commerce on the pearl market. In his search he perhaps thought to be able to purchase the best ones with the cash he had in hand. This would leave his other possessions intact and still his own. Apparently, he had not yet imagined himself coming across a specimen so precious that it would cost him not only his present collection, but *all that he had*. That is, he could not conceive it until he saw it. But his wisdom, developed over the years in this field, recognizing

the excelling worth of this one pearl, demanded that he give up further search in order to possess this one at the expense of all else.

Had Jesus furnished us an interpretative key to this story, perhaps He would have said, "The goodly pearls are all the higher values of this life. The pearl merchant is a dedicated seeker of righteousness, service, virtue, peace, love, science, art, beauty and such. The one pearl of great price is the Kingdom of God. As the pearl merchant sold all that he had and bought it, so the disciple of the Kingdom gives up searching for satisfaction in those other worthy endeavors outside the Kingdom, only to rejoice that in possessions of the Kingdom all that was lovely or of value in them he now possesses in the Kingdom."

Here again appear the three basic steps:

1. The expert search. Do we see here Jesus' appreciation of the artists, the scientists, the philosophers, the poets, the philanthropists, etc., who are regularly, sometimes painfully, engaged in developing all that enriches life and elevates conduct, hoping to find satisfaction there? If so, each can find in the Kingdom of God that rare and infinite preciousness in comparison with which the relative value of all else pales into insignificance. Are these people well-rounded individuals who, despite their wealth in many human joys and fulfillment, suspect that some higher fulfillment, some superior happiness must exist without which all the others wane into mediocrity? Could absolute good ever become the actual experience of human beings? These hunger and thirst after righteousness (even if they cannot satisfactorily define it) and set out on an unrelenting quest until they should discover it. Perhaps they too do not yet believe, as they begin their quest, that their very search, when realized, will revolutionize their entire perspective, and, consequently, everything else.
2. The wisdom to evaluate the superiority of the Kingdom. The uniqueness of the single pearl did not deny the worth and loveliness of all other pearls, for they too had intrinsic value. All that made the smaller, less valuable pearls desirable, however, is present absolutely in this flawless exemplar. Its advantage lies in the fact that it possesses perfectly each good quality only partially or imperfectly realized in the inferior specimens. The good, however, are always the enemy of the best and we must choose between the very good and the best! We cannot content ourselves with mediocrity. This parable illustrates by contrast the case of the

Jews who had a zeal for righteousness, but who, when they saw God's most precious pearl, Jesus Christ, they refused to surrender their self-righteousness and all else they considered precious to save Him. Cornelius (Ac. 10—11:18) is a better example, as is Mary of Bethany (Lu. 10:38-42) and the Ethiopian official (Ac. 8:26-40)

3. The unhesitating readiness to release one's grip on anything else he deems of more importance or higher in value. The rich young ruler, by contrast, balked at accepting Jesus as the Lord and Master of his life, clutched his paltry collection of inferior pearls and stalked away. This is the critical decision faced by all would-be disciples. (See notes on 8:18-22.) When we have seen the supreme value of the Kingdom and the necessity of a personal response to the mercy of its gracious King, we must then, immediately, seize the opportunity before it pass forever beyond our reach—even if that means leaving the loved, the known and the apparent security of our present situation.

### THE SCANDAL CAUSED BY THESE TWO STORIES

It must have been frankly unexpected to hear the Nazarene speak of His Truth and His Kingdom as a commodity on the world market to be handled, evaluated, bought and sold like cabbages, as if it were somehow in competition with everything else that vies for men's attention and interest. For people who had just always supposed that, at the manifestation of the Messiah, the Truth of God would be equally evident and equally precious to everyone, this parable must have been, bluntly, unbelievable. The modern reader of both these parables about the hidden treasure and the pearl can sense only second-handedly the disappointment they caused for Jesus' original hearers, primarily because he is personally living in the time-period to which Jesus alludes and, because of this fact, has become accustomed to it. But the Twelve and the others lived before the arrival of these days, and their preconceptions about them were based upon their reading of the ancient prophecies and upon the then-current popular interpretations. Whether the mute multitudes grasped the full details of these stories or not, the quicker thinking among them must have been puzzling: "What kind of a kingdom does that Nazarene intend to represent to us anyway, if its preciousness is hidden

from everyone but a fortunate finder who stumbles onto it quite by accident, or perhaps the unexpected find of one carefully scouring the market? Or if, as we have believed, the Kingdom of the Messiah is to bring unprecedented wealth to the Hebrew people after centuries of suffering and sacrifice, how can Jesus affirm that the Kingdom is so expensive to its adherents that it will actually cost them everything they can scrape together to make it their own? This exaggerated idea of continued personal sacrifice is incompatible with our ideas of the Messianic Paradise wherein everyone will sit under his own vine and fig tree to be served by the kings of the earth who pour into Jerusalem bearing their wealth to contribute their glory to the Kingdom of Israel. Besides, if God intends to give the Kingdom to Israel as a natural right, why should it be thought necessary that ANY HEBREW should be imagined as required to decide whether he would BUY the Kingdom—and at extreme expense at that!" It is precisely at this point that any given hearer must decide whether he thinks Jesus knows what He is talking about. He must overcome the disappointment of his false hopes and the Lord's rejection of his mistaken conception of the Kingdom. Tragically, many never would.

And lest we smile at their incomprehension and difficulties, let us count the Demases who are willing to resell the Kingdom to repossess their lesser values! (Cf. 2 Ti. 4:10; 2 Pet. 2:1-22) Count the Christians who rightly think that salvation is free but are aghast to learn that it costs everything we have to obtain it, and who begin to put price ceilings on what they are willing to expend to have God's best. (See Special Study "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:24-28.) It was to this unpreparedness that Jesus addressed His challenges of the high cost of discipleship (Lk. 14:25-33; 9:23-26; 18:29, 30). Just how far the Church is from understanding her Lord here is measurable in terms of the humanitarian projects, the philanthropic enterprises, the social welfare schemes that are substituted for, rather than occasioned by, the realization of the Christ-life in her. Such projects may be expected as the natural outgrowth of the Rule of God in and through the Church. But when these projects and their supposedly Christian proponents in the name of the Kingdom of God categorically exclude the very means by which the spreading of the Kingdom is to take place, i.e., by proclaiming the whole counsel of God, then they have at that point cashed in the Kingdom in order to purchase gaudy pearls of far less value.

Consider also the fact that the glory of God's government is actually

hidden in our world even today. Men still blindly stumble past the Church, supposing it to be only another social betterment society with metaphysical overtones. Men also fail to recognize the principles, order and beauty of God's total control over the earth, because they are blinded by their own rebellion and their struggle with Nature in revolt. But, bless God, this all contributes to make faith real, since sight is impossible. (Ro. 8:18-25) Even when men come face to face with the Kingdom message they still must decide whether it is worth surrendering their partial plans, their inadequate goals, their incomplete wisdom, their transitory joys, their ethereal hopes to obtain something which their faith only partially helps them to understand! (Heb. 11:3; 1 Co. 1:18—2:10)

So the scandal is still there, because even during this Church-age, God has not permitted us personally to experience the glory of His final plans. A serious look at the world must lead to more doubts than solid optimism. But this very human uncertainty guarantees the absolute freedom of our choice and the moral quality of our decision to believe on good evidence what we can yet only imagine. (Cf. Eph. 1:17-23; 3:14-19; 2 Co. 4:16—5:7; Tit. 2:11-14; 1 Pt. 1:3-9)

### WHAT IS THE *HIDDEN TREASURE*, THE *PEARL OF GREAT PRICE*?

1. The Kingdom represented in the person of the King Himself, Jesus Christ. (Cf. 1 Pt. 2:4, 7) Everything that God treasures most is bound up in Jesus. (Col. 2:2, 3)
2. The realization of the Kingdom on earth is the realization of its ideal, the developing of everything Christlike in us. Morgan (*Matthew*, 171) is right to say that "We who come to Him worthless and base, are changed into worth and preciousness because He communicates to us His own infinite value . . ." and this results in a peace of mind because we have peace with God, a clean heart, a renewed mind, a hope in death and a heaven of glory. What lay formerly so far beyond our reach is now actually attainable by faith. (Ro. 5:1ff; Col. 1:27, 28. The entire Ephesian epistle helps us to appreciate this.)
3. Since the subjective realization of God's rule in the world is to be through the Church of Jesus Christ, no one can claim to have

submitted himself to the rule of God, hence, in the Kingdom, who claims to love Jesus but detests or ignores the Church which He purchased with His own blood. (Ac. 20:28; Eph. 1:18; 2:10; 3:10, 21; 5:25-30)

4. God's government of the universe is reality, truth itself. Any world-view or philosophy that is not big enough to take in this reality nor humble enough to let God be God in every aspect of every minuscule part of His Kingdom is just not grand enough for a believer. Contrarily, the believer who has accepted this truth by faith is able to see further, learn truth faster and master reality like no unbeliever ever could. The degree to which this is not true of the believer is the degree to which he is yet controlled by something other than Truth.

The choice between these interpretations makes no significant difference, since he who has the King as Sovereign is in the Kingdom; and he who buys the Kingdom at so great expense does so by joyfully acknowledging the King. Only such a mind is open to all truth and can live as a citizen at home in the universe, because he has become the son of its Owner and Governor. And, not at all least, he engages in an active campaign with others to make men holy. This is the Church.

### JESUS HAD SAID ALL THIS BEFORE

The supreme value of the Kingdom and the necessity that each individual make it his own by decisive action had already been implied in Jesus' earlier teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, He had insisted that men make heaven their highest treasure because of the uncertainties that attend all material wealth. (Mt. 6:19-21) Further, there is no possibility of compromise whereby one could hope to serve God while devoting himself to material wealth: they are two irreconcilable masters. Hence, a decisive choice between the two is imperative, because loving devotion can be rendered only to one. (Mt. 6:24) Then, after Jesus had assured men that the regular pre-occupations of life are already the concern of a loving heavenly Father, He ordered them to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Mt. 6:33; 7:11) The limitation of the choices to two is understood by the Lord's description of only two ways, as well as by His closing the Kingdom of Heaven to any who do not do God's will. (7:13-23)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. State in one well-chiselled sentence the meaning of the Pearl Parable.
2. What reality is symbolized by the following:
  - a. The pearl merchant?
  - b. The goodly pearls?
  - c. The pearl of great price?
  - d. The pearl merchant's other possessions ("all that he has")?
3. What single point does the parable about the pearl share with that of the happy discoverer of the treasure?
4. What difference of emphasis is evident in the parable of the pearl?
5. What passages in the Sermon on the Mount indicate that Jesus had already taught much of this same truth before, however in unparabolic language?

### III. JESUS' METHODOLOGY BEHIND PARABOLIC INSTRUCTION

#### A. THE PURPOSE FOR PARABLES

TEXT: 13:10-17

(Parallels: Mk. 4:10-12, 21-25; Lk. 8:9, 10, 16-18)

10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? 11 And he answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. 12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. 13 Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. 14 And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith,

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand;  
And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross,  
And their ears are dull of hearing,



And their eyes they have closed;  
Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes,  
And hear with their ears,  
And understand with their heart,  
And should turn again,  
And I should heal them.

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. 17 For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and saw them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Should we use parables? Why, what good purpose would they serve?
- b. Some Christians balk at the idea of Jesus' coming to earth to hide truth from some, while, at the same time, revealing it to others. How can Jesus be justified in not only hiding truth from some of His contemporaries, but also in making deliberate use of a method which would continue to hide the truth from people down through the centuries? As a matter of fact, Jesus not only chose to conceal the truth, but justified His course of action as correct and cited Scripture to show how such a course fitted perfectly into the situation perennially faced by all true prophets of God. How do you explain this? Is He being fair? How do you know?
- c. From what kind of people has God, or Jesus, hidden truth? Are these people responsible for not knowing truth that they could not see? If not, why not? If so, then how can they be held responsible for something they did not, even could not, know? Or does this correctly state their case?
- d. How can something be taken away from someone who has nothing? Yet, Jesus affirms that "whosoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that which he has." How can he both have something and still have nothing at the same time? Explain, then, how Jesus can give people something, and in the very act of giving it to them, He takes away what they have? How would you solve this riddle?
- e. What vital connection exists between Matthew's report of Jesus' general explanation for hiding truth (Mt. 13:10-17) and the other

Evangelists' report of Jesus' illustration about lamps under beds? (Cf. Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18)

- f. How is it true, as Jesus affirms, that "unto them (the multitudes) is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah . . ."? Did Isaiah have Jesus' audience in mind when writing for his own generation? If not, then how could Jesus apply this prophetic declaration with any propriety to His own hearers?
- g. What is the psychological truth behind the statement of Jesus: "The measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you," a truth that pinpoints the reason why people would have trouble grasping truth? (Mk. 4:24) How, then, is this idea the very motive for Jesus' switch to the parabolic system?
- h. Why does Jesus continue to hammer on the expression: "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear"? Further, what is so important about taking heed "how you hear" and "what you hear"? (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)
- i. What do you think makes people so unreceptive to Jesus' message that He feels compelled to hide it from them?

## PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

It was when He was alone that the disciples in His company, along with the Twelve, approached Him and began asking Him about the stories, "Why did you address the people only in stories?"

His answer was to the point: "Because it has been granted to you to know the revealed secrets of God's Kingdom. But for those who choose to remain outside, everything is presented in the form of stories, for to that kind of follower it has not been granted to understand these things.

"After all, is a lamp that has been lit ever brought in to be put under a dish, or under a container of some sort, or even under the bed? No, it is put on a stand, that those who enter the room may see the light. I say this, because there is nothing that is now secret that shall not someday be revealed, nor is there anything secret in what I tell you that shall not later be known or come to light. So, if anyone has ears to hear with, let him pay attention. Take care, then, how you listen and what you listen to. The measure of generous attention you give to the message will be the measure of information you will receive, and you will be able to comprehend even more that will be

given you. For to him who has some real understanding about the Kingdom will more information be given, and he will know a great deal about it. But from him who has no real understanding, even what truth he thinks he knows about it will mean little to him and he will lose even that too. This is the motive behind my speaking to the curiosity seekers in illustrative stories, since, though they have the ability to see, they do not actually see what I am driving at. Though they can listen, they still do not understand. The prophecy of Isaiah (6:9, 10) describes these people all too well:

'You shall hear, truly enough, without ever understanding.  
You shall certainly see, but never grasp what is being said to you.  
In fact, the mind of these people has become dull-witted,  
Their ears are bored from listening, they have closed their mind,  
So that they could not actually see with their eyes,  
Actually hear with their ears, actually understand with their mind,  
And actually repent, turning to me to heal and forgive them.'

"But you are to be congratulated, because you actually see and hear what is going on here. As a matter of fact, many are the ancient prophets and godly men who fervently longed to witness these events that you yourselves are seeing, and to hear the messages you are listening to, but whose death prevented it."

### SUMMARY

Jesus must now explain to His Apostles the fundamental psychological truth that the mind can learn only that truth that it is willing to accept. He was able to teach His disciples in clear, easily grasped, literal language, because they had opened their mind to let Him inform them on subjects about which only He could give authoritative information. But with the masses whose minds were already full of the rubbish of the rabbis, people who felt that they already knew too much to admit the Lord's teaching, Jesus repeated the same truth in story form. This system disguised the message under the scenery of the illustrations. Nevertheless, even Jesus admits that teaching is intended to reveal, not hide, truth. In fact, He points out that even this secret message, now so carefully unveiled to only His closest followers, will eventually be widely broadcast. But even so, only those who generously give real attention to what Jesus is teaching will be

able to see His meaning. Only those who trust Him and come to Him seeking explanations will learn.

## NOTES

### A. THE REASON FOR PARABLES (13:10, 11)

13:10 **The disciples came . . . to him**, as noticed in the Introduction, "when He was alone" (Mk. 4:10), a fact which places this section probably at the same time when "He left the crowds and went into the house" at the conclusion of His public message. (Mt. 13:34-36) There again it is said that "His disciples came to Him." The reaction is natural to suppose that Matthew refers to two separate moments in which His followers sought solutions. However, the following factors are determinative for the conclusion that they did not interrupt His sermon, but held their queries until they could corner Him for this confidential information:

1. Mark (4:10) specifies that Jesus was definitely alone.
2. Luke's version of their question does not puzzle so much over the Lord's strategy as it seeks the interpretation of "this parable," i.e., of the Sower (Lk. 8:9ff) This explanation was given only once and only in private (Mk. 4:13, 10)
3. Matthew himself, who records this explanation in this place, clearly informs us that "he said nothing to them without a parable." (Mt. 13:34; cf. Mk. 4:33, 34)
4. The last objection to the view that the disciples supposedly interrupted Jesus to pose Him this half-question, half-request that the Sower Parable be explained for the sake of the people, and that Jesus did comply, is its psychological improbability from His standpoint. While they were not above interrupting Him publicly to propose courses of action for Him (cf. Mt. 16:21-23; 15:12, 15; 14:15), it is to be doubted that the Lord should have deliberately surrendered that very psychological advantage that His parables gave Him over the very public He intended to keep on the outside—unless, of course, they came in humility as disciples to seek this very help He now generously gives the others.

**Why speakest thou unto them in parables?** That Jesus should

resort to riddle-like stories to present His truth, should present no surprise to the disciples, since part of their Hebrew culture was the teacher of wisdom whose parables with hidden meaning and recondite proverbs actually invited those who desired to apply themselves to meditate on the Law of the Most High and attend to the study of the prophets. (Cf. Prov. 1:2-6; also Ecclesiasticus 39:1-11; 51:23-30) This is true, because even the prophets themselves had left no means of admonishing Israel untried, even combining prophecy with parables. (Cf. Hos. 12:10) *Why . . . parables?* What is their special value as a teaching device?

1. A parable presents truth in a neutral setting apparently nowhere near the dangerous area of the hearer's prejudices.
2. A parable fires the imagination to envision truth from a different perspective. It forces a man to discover its truth for himself, making him do his own thinking. This, in turn, not only makes the truth learned his own possession but unforgettable, because the conclusions are his. But for those too lazy to think or too prejudiced to admit its truth, the parable effectively hides information. It begins with something understood or familiar and proceeds to illustrate ideas or experiences unfamiliar to the listener — an excellent educational principle. Abstractions take on concreteness and are easier to grasp.
3. A parable appeals to a man's discernment, causing him to make an impartial moral judgment, independent of his self-defense mechanism. Later, when the story's point becomes clear to him, either he will accept the lesson and repent, or else he will be forced to repudiate his own judgment formed when he first heard the story.
4. A parable obtains from the listener a personal, sympathetic participation in others' problems before he can feel menaced by the truth thus presented and before he can erect his defences.
5. A parable completely respects human freedom, not forcing its message on anyone who chooses not to commit himself to Jesus, enter into His fellowship as a student in order to learn the truth to which the parabolic images alluded. The responsibility for such absolute liberty, however, is left strictly and rightly with the individual himself.
6. While it is right to notice with Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 63), that a parable was spoken, not read, with an immediate impact, not the

- result of long study with commentaries and dictionaries, we must not forget that Jesus' parables incline toward allegorical interpretation, which requires pondering and study. It is this very element in His stories that drives the hearer to decide to go or not to Jesus for the key to understanding them.

But these men were not seeking this kind of information when they ask "Why . . . parables?" Rather, the inner circle of disciples senses a radical change in tactics and are disturbed enough about His apparent lack of communicativeness to demand explanation. Implicit in their question is the presumption that Christ did not in the beginning of His ministry make such unrelenting and exclusive use of parables as a teaching method. While there are some germ parables earlier and many others appear after this sermon (Luke 14-16 is a parable-rich section), yet they rightly notice that the wind has changed. Did they feel that the real problem was not: "Why is Jesus using unexplained stories?," but rather: "Why does this whole business about Jesus, His words and deeds, always seem to force people to a cleavage, rather than unite everyone behind Him? Some understand Him and believe; many more do not. It would seem that, since the Kingdom has arrived and the time is fulfilled, the invitation of God should be equally desirable for everyone. Instead, it seems as if He is pushing men to a decisive judgment about Him!"

At the outset of Jesus' ministry the situation was different. His evident purpose then was to get as wide a hearing as possible with a view to discipling as many as possible. This He managed with clear, initial instruction and not-too-disturbing preaching that convinced the multitudes of His authority superior to that of the scribes. However, knowing well that a milk-only diet would not train the Twelve for the demanding role of apostleship nor deepen the others, He took a second step by deliberately narrowing the field and upping the quality. This change of pace shows up in:

1. The adoption of the parabolic method to make His message temporarily esoteric, i.e., "for insiders only." (Mk. 4:11)
  2. Deliberately long trips taken into unpopulated or foreign areas for private teaching of the Twelve. (Mt. 15, 16)
  3. Intentionally scandalous sermons to keep crowds small. (Jn. 6)
- As a method for developing the Twelve and other close disciples into a world-conquering Church, this solution helps, but what of the others?

Jesus, the Teacher come from heaven, faced an extremely delicate problem. On the one hand, the minds of the people were so jammed with materialistic aims and ideas that most of them could not imagine that He was revealing a purely spiritual kingdom. (See notes on Mt. 11:2-6.) Yet, if they were ever to participate intelligently in it, He must reveal its true nature to them. On the other hand, if He bared all its harsh realities. He would succeed only in crushing out every spark of hope they had invested in Him, since, psychologically, they would not have borne the blow. Not only would they have left Him *en masse*, perhaps even dragging away with them His precious nucleus of Apostles, but they might have even crucified Him right there in Galilee! How could He possibly keep teaching them, holding them in His discipleship as long as He could, while lovingly preserving each little flicker of understanding and faith, and still hope to reveal the mysteries of the true nature of God's Kingdom which He was about to establish? The Lord was prepared. The parables are His masterful answer to this dilemma.

This is why Jesus' immediate reaction to His students' puzzled query draws attention to the strategy of the Kingdom of God. The rejection by many, and therefore the uncalculated experience of a lack of success, and the consequent need for "parables" and "mysteries," is no sign of defeat nor even something strange. It is all part of the larger strategy of God. (Cf. Col. 1:24-29; Eph. 3:7-13)

Best of all, this strategy functions marvelously! With just a simple, well-worded series of parables, Jesus the royal Judge began to divide the sheep from the goats, the true disciples from the indifferent. This is because each listener must decide whether to go to Jesus for explanations or not.

1. Those who are only idly curious do not worry about it if they cannot figure out the sense of His little stories.
2. The erudite, if they think they see what He is saying, reject His concepts as out of step with the thinking of the great rabbis in the tradition of, say, a Hillel, a Shammai, or more recently, a Gamaliel.
3. The nationalists, if they do not understand Him, may scoff at His little stories as too harmless for a great revolutionary. If they do comprehend His meaning, His anti-militaristic, non-nationalistic doctrine is a positive menace to their own program.
4. Others amble away, because no anguish, no concern for Jesus' success, no interest in learning the secrets, bothers them.

5. Only the fully committed followers ask for explanations by coming to Jesus. In fact, because of this understanding thus gained, they can go on to glorious service in the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, all unsuspected by its very protagonists, the judgment of God has begun. (Cf. Jn. 12:46-48; 9:39; 3:18)

### WHY PARABLES? JESUS' ANSWERS SUMMARIZED:

1. Because their message is for insiders only. (Mt. 13:11; Mk. 4:11; Lk. 8:10)
2. Because their message is only temporarily hidden and to be revealed later. (Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16, 17)
3. Because everyone is free, hence responsible, to seek and know their meaning. (Mk. 4:23)
4. Because openness to the teaching determines how much anyone can understand. (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)
5. Because parables effectually enrich the believer's understanding of the Kingdom while actually impoverishing the man who thought he understood the Kingdom when he really knew nothing about it. (Mt. 13:12; Mk. 4:25; Lk. 8:18b)
6. Because men close their minds to truth. (Mt. 13:13-15; Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10b)

13:11 **Unto you it is given to know . . . but to them it is not.** Mark's version (4:11) is most revealing:

To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may . . . not understand.

The "insider" is one who trusts Jesus, becomes His disciple and learns Christianity's secrets from the inside. Many moral lessons are understood by obedience to their dictates, rather than by pondering their meaning without ever personally experiencing their truth.

**To know the mysteries of the kingdom** is the attractive goal Jesus sets before everyone by His deliberate use of this allegorical style that intentionally hides and reveals truth simultaneously. He has an unquestionable respect for man's freedom to choose. He desires that each man receive God's truth because that man freely desires it. So,



as indicated above, a man must, because he can, freely decide whether or not he trusts the Master enough to go to Him for this "inside information." If God's Messianic Kingdom is to be understood at all, it is only visible in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Whoever stumbles on Jesus just will not be able to fathom the mystery.

Far from being actually "mysterious," i.e., incomprehensible to the average intelligence, *the mysteries of the kingdom* are simply the secret plans of God which He reveals to His people. (Cf. 1 Co. 2:6-16; Col. 1:26; Mt. 11:25, 26 notes; Eph. 3:3-6, 9-11; 1 Co. 15:51ff; Rev. 17:5-7) These *mysteries*, as judged by later revelations, were nothing but descriptions of a Kingdom whose principles, motives and rewards were so opposed to men's ideas of empire that Jesus later characterized it clearly as a Kingdom not of this world. (Jn. 18:36) The very idea that faith in God, obedience to anything but Moses, and a Kingdom admitting Gentiles on equal footing with the Jews, was not merely unfamiliar to Jesus' hearers. Such talk was positively unwanted! Anything would remain a positive mystery to people who depended upon their own technical knowledge, upon official status and upon accidental birth in the right nation for standing in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' previous, clear, literal teaching, when considered in contrast to standard Jewish views about the Kingdom of the Messiah, only became "mysterious" in direct proportion to their unwillingness to be taught. Conversely, they become clearer in direct proportion to one's openness to anything Jesus says. Ederheim (*Life*, I, 592) has it:

Such parables must have been utterly unintelligible to all who did not see in the humble, despised Nazarene and in His teaching, the Kingdom. But to those whose eyes, ears and hearts had been opened, they would carry the most needed instruction and most precious comfort and assurance.

Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 66) rightly reminds us that the success of a joke lies not only in the joke-telling ability of the speaker, but also in the mind of the hearer. Has the hearer a sense of humor and is he prepared to smile, or is he a humorless creature, grimly determined not to be amused? He might have noted, too, how the mood of the listener affects radically his reaction. (Prov. 25:20) This striking parallel suggested by Barclay illustrates nicely the difference in hearers faced by Jesus.

**13:11 Unto you is given to know the mysteries . . . but to them it**

**is not given.** To the question: "Why parables?" this is Jesus' first answer. But how does this explanation answer the question and show how parables, by nature, serve the purposes of God to create these distinctions?

1. **BECAUSE PARABLES REVEAL TRUTH** to those willing to seek it and submit to it. Primarily in this context it was to the Apostles that it was permitted to understand Jesus' secrets which they would later announce in the most public way possible. (Cf. Notes on 10:27) This truth is open to all who share this frame of mind found only in the committed student of Jesus. The secret of the difference between real followers and mere well-wishers is the very gesture expressed here: the disciples came and asked him, whereas the indifferent or only idly curious did not really care to know what these little stories might mean. Further, because of the multifaceted character of God's Kingdom, Jesus could continue to multiply illustrations and reveal worlds of truth by this medium, because the parables themselves would continue to teach long years after the full revelation had been given. Nevertheless, the allegorical nature of the stories themselves hid their meaning from any but close disciples who restlessly insisted upon explanations. (Cf. Mt. 7:7-11)
2. **BECAUSE PARABLES HIDE TRUTH** from those who intend to use it for their own purposes, whether their intentions proceeded from malicious motives in the sense that some, prematurely spying His meaning, would have used it to destroy everything He had been working to erect, or whether they would simply have been frustrated, because His ideas did not reflect their prejudices. In either case, the force of their opposition would be dissipated before they would have had time to recognize His intentions and, in one way or another, hinder His ministry. So He sets the unwelcome truth in a neutral setting, thus avoiding the negative emotional reactions rising out of their instinct of self-defense. Even while hiding truth from people, the Lord is mercifully helping them. He stimulated their imagination, appealed to their discernment, enlisted their sympathy and tried to encourage them to arrive on their own at an independent, impartial moral judgment without arousing their fear of being found wrong. Later, when the comparison is understood, either they can accept the teaching or be forced to act in contempt of their own judgment given when they first committed

themselves on the parable. Naturally, they may see that the Lord's ideas go against their own exalted opinions, and become antagonistic. But the Lord thinks it certainly worthwhile to approach people on their blind side, get into their brain with memorable stories which can later reveal the truth under conditions less threatening.

Now, if one of the purposes for Jesus' use of parables was to hide truth, when, by their nature, parables, in the strict sense, are intended to clarify, amplify or explain truth by providing lucid illustrations with which it is compared, how could parables ever function to mask or obscure it? Easy! Each hearer brought to Jesus his own personal set of prejudices, categories, frames of reference, philosophy of religious truth, etc., through which he filtered Jesus' words. Since Jesus explained none of His parables in public, each listener was thrown upon his own resources to try to organize in his own mind the truth thus presented to him.

- a. If at this point he discovers that he understands what Jesus is saying, but these ideas will not fit his preconceived categories or philosophical framework, the man has then to decide whether he will scrap his limited views and permit his mind to expand to let Jesus' categories and viewpoint find comfortable lodging in his thinking. This obviously depends on what he thinks of Jesus! If, however, he decides that his structures of prejudice are to be defended even at the expense of discarding, as menacing to his emotional security, whatever of Jesus' truth cannot be crammed into his biased mental orientation, then he will thrust into his intellectual limbo and forget any and every piece of information he deemed unacceptable. In this way, even this truth lying on the threshold of his understanding remains hidden to him, because he closed his mind to it.
  - b. On the other hand, if he discovers that he is not understanding anything Jesus is saying, at which point the truth is effectually hidden from him, he has to decide whether he will go to Jesus for explanations or not.
3. **BECAUSE PARABLES JUDGE HEARTS.** The hearer himself must decide about himself: "Do I trust Jesus to be God's true Prophet and approach Him for help, while admitting my ignorance and lack of understanding, or do I trust my traditional teachers' views to be sufficient?" Here in this very description of the Kingdom, Jesus put His own method to the acid test: He narrated the

Parable of the Sower and Soils, and almost immediately, because of the genius of the parabolic method itself, the listeners began to fit themselves into the very categories mentioned in that parable! Some understood His meaning; most did not. Some desire further clarification, others are puzzled but not interested enough to hear Him out. Still others go home because they are bored with long sermons anyway and are anxious to get on with life and good times. Thus, the parables become a test of their intellectual honesty: will they unceremoniously dismiss anything, however true, that implies unwanted duties? It tests their earnestness: will they go to any pains to solve these riddles and submit to their truth?

4. BECAUSE PARABLES SET TRUTH IN MEMORABLE FORM which will function later when the prejudices may be persuaded to surrender. To put it another way: the parables are really sticks of dynamite disguised as candy bars. They function as time-bombs planted in the mind of the listener, who at the moment does not see their purpose, but given time to be persuaded that Jesus' way was best after all, may accept their truth. Ironically, even the man who never accepts Jesus may see his own ideas destroyed by these parables even long after he forgets who told him the story. (See on 13:12.) Even the highest moral lessons preached in plain, abstract language can be soon forgotten, whereas the very same truth worked into an unforgettable illustration fastens itself in the memory and continues to do its work.

#### B. REVELATIONS ARE FOR PUBLICATION. (Mk. 4:21, 22; Lk. 8:16, 17)

His parable of the Lamp may be paraphrased like this: "Is anyone so foolish as to light a lamp to give light and then hide that very illumination under some container or even stick it under the bed, rather than on a lampstand? No, they put it up where everyone who enters the room may see the light, right? So there is nothing hidden except to be shown later. Secrets are for telling." The unspoken scruple involved in the disciples' question is: "But, Jesus, are you hiding the truth from these people forever, so that they can never be influenced by an appeal of the Gospel and be saved by it?" His response is twofold:

1. The Lord's Lamp Parable echoes His doctrine that His disciples are to be a world-wide influence for God. (Cf. Mt. 5:13-16) Thus, Jesus argues, in light of their common mission to bring God's light to the world, any secrecy could only be temporary, or for a special, limited purpose.
2. His explanation of the parable is a direct echo of His challenge to the Apostles on the eve of their first evangelistic mission in Galilee. (See notes on Mt. 10:26, 27.) He had at that time pointed to a time when what He had privately disclosed to them should be given the widest possible publicity. But this talk of privacy and "mysteries" only means that He had already foreseen an interval in which practical secrecy would mark His approach, an interval during which fuller publication of the good news would not have been possible. So, since He had already intimated it before, it was necessary only to remind them now that the moment had arrived for secrecy.

But to what phase of His own mission does *the lamp* in His humorous illustration refer?

1. To Jesus' illustrations as such? If so, He says that a parable is intended to give light, not hide truth permanently, as a lamp under a vessel or bed. In this case, the parables, when explained, throw a great deal of light on various aspects of the Kingdom. What is meant to convey information must not be left deliberately obscure.
2. To Jesus' preaching method in general? If so, then He is justifying this temporary use of obscure stories, the meaning of which is available only to the most serious students who because of this commitment to Him will come to be taught and fit into His program. In this case, He is saying, "What is a revelation for? To make it the exclusive property of the elite? The hope of glory for this dark world is 'Christ in you' (Col. 1:27), but how can that come about if men's only hope is jealously guarded from the ignorant, despised masses by an arrogant religious minority? How could any real revelation occur, if truth is always hidden inside undecipherable stories?"

If this latter interpretation reflects Jesus' intention more closely, then the exhortations which follow (Mk. 4:24, 25) might be intended to cause the disciples to consider seriously what they themselves are to do about the great secrets of the Kingdom which they had the distinct privilege to hear explained. In the words of González-Ruiz

(Marco, 121):

. . . if a proclaimer of the Gospel makes the mystery a secret reserved for an ecclesiastical elite, if he converts the dancing, splashing water of Life into a magic drug kept in an elegant flask to sell only to the wealthy, then that mummified mystery which he so jealously conserved in his theological museum will be stripped from him!

It is obvious that these texts (Mk. 4:21-25; Lk. 8:16-18) are meant primarily to explain Jesus' strategy. By extension, however, they sit in judgment on anyone who would proclaim the Kingdom message. If the Son of God used a deliberately concealing technique only for the purpose of achieving a limited objective, real disciples of the Lord today should evaluate His tactics in light of His ultimate goals, share those goals and, now freed from those local limitations, give His message the widest possible publication. Shortly, He will point to their precious personal privilege to see Him as light for which they would be held accountable, because what their eyes had seen and what they had heard Him say was to become the unshakeable testimony at the center of all their future preaching: (Mk. 4:24; Mt. 13:16, 17; cf. Ac. 4:20; 1 Jn. 1:1-4)

**Hide . . . manifest . . . secret . . . known.** Plummer (*Luke*, 223) reminds that *apokryphon* ("hidden away" from the public eye, see Lightfoot on Col. 2:3) was a favorite word with the Gnostics to indicate their esoteric books which might not be published. Lightfoot also notes that this was an honorable term to describe their doctrines and books "for members only." Is Jesus making use of such terminology to make His point? If so, Mt. 13:11 is where He indicated that the limits of His fellowship was to be the circle within which He would reveal His secrets. (Cf. *ta mystéria*) If this present text indicates that none of the Twelve or any other private group was permanently to cover up the Gospel story, and if any disciple of Jesus may know what the Kingdom is all about, still, in order adequately to appreciate it, one must be a *disciple*.

### C. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROCLAMATION (Mk. 4:23)

Mk. 4:23 **If any man has ears to hear, let him hear.** Jesus had already said this to the crowds. (Mt. 13:9) But this is the second time

during this private discussion with His closest disciples! (Mt. 13:43) Here this oft-repeated invitation is further development of Jesus' answer to the disciples' question: "Why parables?" and proof that the Lord had not finally nor absolutely closed the doors to the Kingdom in the face of anyone sincerely desiring to submit himself to anything God requires. No man need fear that fate should have excluded him from any possibility of enjoying the mercies of God. This seemingly pleonastic expression with which Jesus concludes numerous paragraphs is not a harmless little literary device used to signal the conclusion of a thought. It is, rather, the heart-cry of God who pleads with people not to turn a deaf ear on the emphatically important message just communicated. *Let him hear* with understanding, because the mysteries of the Kingdom are available to disciples. If he cannot understand, let him give up his self-justifications, his biases, his pride and complacency and come for answers to the Lord who invites all to share in His great "public secrets."

#### D. THE RULE OF PROGRESS AND THE REWARD FOR RESPONSIVENESS (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18)

Mk. 4:24 . . . **Take heed what you hear.** Content is so very crucial, since Jesus longs for people to get past the external form of His little word-pictures to see the reality, the real Kingdom He so urgently wanted them to understand. This is not so much a warning against the treacherous views of false teachers, as if He were saying, "Be cautious about accepting what you hear from others," as it is an urgent exhortation to pay careful attention to what they heard from Him. The content of these messages of Jesus would become for the Christians the source of their faith and the foundation of their preaching. (Mt. 28:20) So it was critical that this teaching be heard in its correct form. Because of the supernatural inspiration by the Holy Spirit which would have recalled everything to their minds and even reveal new truth where necessary, they would not be limited to a stereotyped oral tradition. Nevertheless, Jesus considers it essential that His message be correctly assimilated in order that it have a chance to function properly in transforming its hearers. He knows how dangerous would be the situation when a powerful, revolutionary message like His is only half-understood, and, so, wrongly applied by sincere people.

Luke's version, rather than emphasize content: "Take heed **WHAT** you hear," lays stress on men's personal psychological approach: "Take heed then **HOW** you hear." (Lk. 8:18) This warns against a merely intellectual interest or an idle curiosity, since men are morally responsible for what they do with what they learn. "Pay attention to the attitude with which you listen, with what attention you listen, and to what profit! Do you listen intelligently and with a good, honest heart?" Since the similarity of these two reports in such close proximity cannot be overlooked, someone will undoubtedly be tempted to accuse either Mark or Luke of not quoting Jesus correctly. The matter may be resolved in one of two ways:

1. Jesus actually made both statements, one being recorded by Mark and the other by Luke, because they are both needed to deal with the objective content of what is heard and with the subjective mood of this listener. (Later, Jesus put the "how" and the "what" in the same sentence. Lk. 12:11; cf. Mt. 10:19)
2. One of two Greek idioms may not yet have been fully understood or correctly translated, in the sense that Mark's "what" (*ti*) and Luke's "how" (*pōs*) might be discovered to be roughly equivalent, rather than the two separate emphases they are presently seen to be.

It is known, for instance, that *ti* in certain situations means "why?," functioning as a direct interrogative. (Arndt-Gingrich, 827) Is it possible that in our sentence that it be thought of as an indirect interrogative to be rendered: "Take heed **WHY** you hear!"? This scrutiny of motives is surprisingly close to Luke's version that examines one's attitude toward what is said.

**The measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you.** This proverbial principle, capable of rather varied applications, has no direct connection with Mt. 7:1 where the main point was: "Personal generosity or niggardliness in judging others will be reciprocated to you by them." Here, however, Jesus' psychological principle is relevant to that degree of generosity and openness with which anyone approaches His revelations: "The amount of open-mindedness or prejudice which you bring to me will determine how much truth I will be able to give you. Small trust will be rewarded with little effective communication, since you did not let me teach you. Even great ignorance, united with great faith that comes



to me for instruction, will go home full and overflowing. You will receive from my instruction precisely that amount of information which the receptiveness you show will allow!" When will men learn that paradox: the generous man always receives far more than he ever gave away, whereas the miser who never shares has nothing! If men desire a larger measure of the Lord's truth, let them bring him a larger measure of faith to put it in! How can He load a train-load of truth into a thimble of faith?

Here in these simple words the Lord of heaven lets us choose in absolute freedom just how much we want to be blessed. How blind and miserly is the man who stubbornly limits the degree of his devotion to Jesus, saying, "I will go so far and no farther!" (Contrast 2 Co. 8 and 9, esp. 9:6-11 in this connection.) No man can outgive God, because, after all he has sacrificed for the Kingdom, even to the point of surrendering his dearest personal prejudices so that the Lord can teach him, he joyfully discovers that he has been receiving far more all the time!

Mt. 13:12 **For to him who has, will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.** (Cf. Mk. 4:25; Lk. 8:18b) Although Jesus made varied use of this puzzling dictum, nevertheless, in each case there is an underlying call for generosity and energetic activity to take advantage of an unexcelled opportunity to make progress. (Cf. Mt. 25:29; Lk. 19:26) The thing that sharpens a rather ordinary sentence into this clever aphorism is the omission of its key word. What is it that a man *has*, that makes it possible for him to *be given more* to the point of having *abundance*? And what is it that can be taken away from a person who thinks he possesses it, when, in reality, he has nothing? (Notice Luke's version: ". . . even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.")

1. Until the beginning of this great sermon in parables, everyone in Jesus' audience certainly had the OPPORTUNITY to hear and know the truth about God's Kingdom. The parables will now change all this. Whereas some disciples would seize and appreciate this unexcelled privilege offered by God, and permit themselves to be taught by Jesus and thus go on to greater heights of understanding until they enjoyed an abundance of revelations, others would not recognize what they had before them. (Cf. Prov. 17:24) Supposing themselves to have the opportunity to know the truth,