

Bible Study Guide: Week of 7-20-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

The parable of the Mustard Seed is one of the most familiar parables in scripture. Mustard was an invasive and weedy plant in Jesus' time and region, so for someone to intentionally sow such a seed would have been unusual. The focus of this parable seems to be the idea of something large and substantial and useful coming out of something seemingly small and insignificant and worthless. By the world's standards the gospel message is strange and foolish, but with God's power and work that message sprouts and grows and provides refuge for those who come to trust in God.

33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Like a mustard seed, yeast is a tiny organism that is pretty much useless on its own. But mixed into flour, yeast has a profound effect. Once again, something small and seemingly useless can prove quite important and powerful. So it is with the gospel message about the kingdom of heaven.

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Like the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, these two parables parallel one another. In the first, a person accidentally stumbles upon a great treasure and then gives up everything to possess it. In the second, a person sets out in search of a great treasure and likewise gives up everything along the way. Jesus' primary point here seems to be that the Kingdom of Heaven is very valuable and, regardless of how one comes to find it, the Kingdom of Heaven demands giving up all other riches and loyalties. These parables illustrate Jesus' teaching to "take up one's cross and follow" and his advice to the rich young ruler to "sell all you have, give the money away, then follow me."

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

This parable has some similarities to the parable of the wheat and the weeds that we looked at last week. The idea of gathering in both good and bad and then separating the two at the end of the gathering process is the same in both parables.

49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this explanation of the parable of the net and the good and bad fish, Jesus draws a further parallel with the parable of the wheat and the weeds—in both, there is a gathering of good and bad, there is a sorting process and separation, and there is a burning of the "bad things." Both also employ the same idiom of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" to describe the judgment that is to come. And ultimately, both speak a note of hope to the community gathered in Jesus' name that God will one day accomplish what seems impossible to us—that evil and sin will be no more and those who seek to harm the weak and vulnerable will be reckoned with. There is certainly a warning and a threat here, but there is a note of comfort and promise, as well.

51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes."

The disciples are more optimistic here than I might be in their circumstance. Have *I* understood all of this? I'm pretty sure I have not yet understood everything there is to be understood about these parables. It is possible that Jesus is asking if they understand the parable of the net and the good and bad fish. If this is the case, they might truly understand this parable, as many of Jesus' first disciples were fishermen. Perhaps Jesus is finally speaking in terms that they can understand.

52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

"Scribes" in the gospels are often portrayed in negative terms alongside the Pharisees, but the role of scribe was critical, both in Jesus' contemporary Judaism and in the early church. A scribe was one trained to interpret and apply God's word to the lives of God's people. Today, we might use the term "pastor" or "deacon" or "teacher" or "leader" to describe this role. Jesus is speaking specifically about leaders who are "trained for the kingdom of heaven," that is, those who teach and preach the gospel. In order to do so, one must understand holy history and scripture and tradition and bring those "old treasures" to bear on the lives of the hearers. Likewise, the teacher must understand what is going on in the world in the current day and age and thus bring this "new treasure" to bear on the lives of the hearers, also. In Jesus' context, this may have meant bringing the Old Testament as well as the contemporary gospel message to bear on the early church community. For us, it may mean bringing both scripture and contemporary concerns to the attention of our hearers.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. When have you seen a “mustard seed sized” act of faith sprout and blossom into something greater?**
- 2. Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a great treasure and a very valuable pearl. What is it about the kingdom of heaven that you think of as valuable and worth your time and commitment?**
- 3. What does it mean to be a “scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven?” Who are these scribes today? How do today’s scribes “bring out of their treasures what is new and what is old?”**