

THE KINGDOM PARABLES: PART 1

MATTHEW 13:18-43

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey
November 11, 2001

When I first went to Taiwan, I enrolled in a private school in Taipei to study the Chinese language. One day my teacher asked me if I would participate in a speech contest. After thinking about the offer, I responded by saying that if I could give a witness to my faith, I would be willing to enter my name. My teacher was a Christian. He said to me, "In this school, the hearts of many of the teachers have already hardened to the point that they are unable to receive the truth directly." But he said, "If you give your witness in the form of a story or parable, they might listen to what you have to say."

My teacher understood well the reason for using parables to communicate truth. Every time our Lord Jesus taught in parables, it was because He knew those listening had already lost the ability to accept truth in a direct way. Therefore, He had to use the method of telling a story. If people can accept the story, then perhaps they can also be brought to the point where they can accept the truth contained in the story.

Every time Jesus used parables to communicate certain truths, He was making a special effort to help people understand those truths. And, He wouldn't make such an effort unless it was very important for people to understand.

In verse 11 of MATTHEW 13, Jesus said to His disciples, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you, but not to them." It was possible for the truth of the kingdom of heaven to be given to the disciples, because their hearts were receptive to the truth, but that was not the case with the general public.

In verse 12, Jesus said, "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." Man's ability to receive truth will either increase or decrease depending on what he does with the truth he already has.

In the thirteenth chapter of MATTHEW, Jesus is talking to the crowds. How should we measure their ability to receive truth?

In verse 13, Jesus said, "Though seeing, they do not see, though hearing, they do not hear." Their ability to receive truth directly had already sunk to a very low level.

But, Jesus still wanted them to understand, because He knew the truth about the kingdom of God is extremely important. Jesus understood that down through the ages, the reason why God's people have gone astray is due, in a large part, because they do not understand the meaning of the kingdom of God. So, Jesus wanted them to understand. And, it is extremely important that we also understand.

But, I will admit that it is not easy to understand the meaning of the kingdom of God. I will also admit that my own personal misunderstanding has caused me hardship in the past. But, through the hardship, I have been forced to search for a better understanding. I have tried to read the stories again and again in order to make sense out of what sometimes appears to be crazy activity taking place in the Church.

I love the Church, and I have dedicated my life to helping establish God's kingdom here upon this earth. But all too often, the results of my labors are not very impressive. People I have baptized are no longer attending church. Churches I have helped to start are facing many problems. One of the churches I helped to start had to close.

So, I have learned that there are two ways I can look at my work. There are two ways that we can look at the Church. One way is negative and one way is positive. Some people don't like to talk about problems in the church, but we can learn some valuable lessons from the problems.

This afternoon I want to use the parables recorded in MATTHEW 13 to help you see the Church in two different ways. The first four parables talk about the Church as seen with the naked eye. It is a negative picture of the Church. Then, there are three parables that present a positive picture of the Church. It is a picture of the Church as seen

through the eyes of faith. If you love the Church, then both of these pictures will be very helpful to you. We will take a look at the first picture this week and the second picture next week.

Let's begin now by taking a look at the Church as we see it through the naked eye. This viewpoint is presented in the first four parables.

The first parable is the parable of the sower. In verse 3 of MATTHEW 13 Jesus said, "A farmer went out to sow his seed."

Most people see the seed as representing truth or God's Word. They say that God plants His truth in the hearts of people. This is true. God does plant His Word in the hearts of people.

But, God also does something else. After He plants His truth in the hearts of people, He takes those people who have received the truth, and He plants them in the world.

The seed is planted in the field, and the field represents the world in these parables. God puts the people who have received the truth into the world so that they can give witness to the truth that they have received.

And, when we look at the Church, we should see people giving witness to the truth that has been planted in their hearts. But as you know, often this is not what we see.

When God's chosen people are scattered throughout the world, they are confronted by the enemy. Satan will convince some people that the truth they received is not really truth at all. Those people will listen to the voice of Satan, and they will let go of the truth and loose their witness. The seed that falls on the path represents these people.

Some people will be attacked by temptations of the flesh. Their hasty decision to receive the truth in the first place may have been an emotional one. And now, when confronted by strong desires and emotions, they turn away from the truth and loose their witness. Seed sown on the rocky places represents this kind of person.

And, then again, we see the man who should be influencing his environment with the truth which he has in his heart, but just the opposite is happening. The environment is having a greater impact on his life, and as a result, his witness is little by little choked out until he looses it altogether. The seed planted among the thorns represents this kind of person.

So, in the first picture of the kingdom of God, we see three-fourths of the people loosing their witness. But, we still thank God, because there is still another kind of person who does not loose his witness. And, as a result of his witness, spiritual fruit is produced. Seed planted in the good soil represents this kind of person.

But, we cannot deny the negative picture. We still have to face up to the fact that three-fourths of the seed talked about in this story represent Christians who have become unproductive in their witness. I have been told that in Taiwan as much as 50% of those who are baptized are no longer attending church. God's Church, from the beginning up to the time when Christ returns again, will always have people who should be giving witness to the truth they have received, but for some reason they have lost their witness.

Perhaps the loss of witness talked about in this parable should not be considered a permanent loss. There have been certain times I have felt that I have fallen into one of these categories and have lost my witness for a certain period of time. Afterwards, I repented and my ability to witness was restored. The truth of the matter is that, at any given period of time, you can look at the Church and see people who have lost their witness.

The church as viewed with the naked eye is not perfect, and Jesus is using these parables to try and help us understand this.

Please look at the parable of the weeds recorded in verses 24 through 30. Its explanation is found in verses 36 through 43. According to Christ's explanation, the field is the world. Verse 37 says that the One who planted the good seed is the Son of Man. So again we see the Son of Man taking people who have received the truth in their hearts and placing them in the world to be His witnesses.

But, in verse 25, we see something different. When everyone is asleep, the enemy came and planted weed seeds.

The weed seeds are planted by Satan. They are not like the good seed. The reasons these people come to church have nothing to do with eternal life. These people do not have a witness. The reason they do not have a witness is not that they have lost their witness; rather, it is that they never had a witness in the first place.

I have seen many people come to church not because they want to find salvation from sin, but because they want help. They want to learn English, or they want advise to help them solve a problem. Some come for political reasons. They want to find an atmosphere where they can promote their cause. These people may attend the church for a long time. They may even become part of the leadership of the church.

And so, we have a picture of the church where the weeds and wheat grow together. At the start you can hardly tell them apart, and after they have grown together for a long time, it's too late to pull out the weeds. This is the church that we see with the naked eye. And, the picture will not change until Christ returns again.

But, that is not all. The church as seen with the naked eye is also a church that finds its identity in buildings and numbers and programs. The very standards used by the world to measure power and success are also used by the church to measure its own spirituality. This is not to say that it is wrong for a church to build a large building and have large numbers of people attending services. But, we must be aware that we will be tempted by the enemy to think that we are more spiritual just because we have a larger building and a large number of people attending services. Churches should fight this temptation. Sad to say, however, too many churches give in to this temptation.

In verse 31, we read the parable of the mustard seed. In this parable, we see some symbols that are repeated. Like before, the sower represents the Son of Man. The seed are those chosen to be witnesses to the truth that God has placed in their hearts. The field is the world. And, the birds represent Satan or evil.

And then, we have another symbol that has not been repeated. It is the tree. In Israel a good kind of mustard tree. It is good, because it produces fruit useful to men. But, it is a small tree. However, there is a mustard tree that does not produce fruit useful to men. It can grow up to ten or even fifteen feet tall. It is helpful to know that the mustard tree that grows large is the kind that does not produce fruit useful to men.

King Nebuchadnezzar, king of the great Babylonian empire, once saw a vision of a great tree in the midst of the earth which grew large and became strong. In that vision the tree represented all the worldly power and might which the king himself had acquired. It was a symbol of a proud king.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we see something which has humble beginnings become something which is proud, using worldly standards such as building and numbers and programs to measure its own spirituality. And the result is that birds come to live in its branches. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like this. This is what we see when we look at the church with our eyes. And, even if we don't like what we see, we can't eliminate it. Until Christ returns again, this is what we will see.

And then, there is the parable of the yeast that is added to the lump of dough which is recorded in verse 32. In the Bible, yeast always represents something bad. One day Jesus told his disciples about the hypocritical behavior of the Pharisees. At that time, He said, "beware of the yeast of the Pharisees." And then, in 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul teaches us not to be involved in immoral behavior. He says, "get rid of the old yeast that we may become a new batch of dough without yeast." In the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed to make bread without yeast.

So again, we see a negative picture of the church. It is a picture where the immoral mind-set of the world is influencing the church.

Often when we look at the Church, the only difference between Christians and non-Christians that we see is that Christians attend a lot of meetings. When it comes to daily living there is very little difference.

The yeast of the world has affected the whole lump of dough to the point where it is very hard to see the difference between the world and the Church.

The kingdom of God as viewed with the naked eye is not perfect. The church is not pure. There are lots of problems. Three fourths of the seed do not produce fruit. Weeds and wheat are mixed together. Humble seeds have grown into proud trees with birds nesting on their branches. Worldly standards are used to measure success, and Satan laughs. The spiritual pollution of the world has penetrated the Church.

This is what we see when we look at the church. It is not a pretty picture, but it is a picture that we must live with until Christ comes again. Any revival before that time will only be partial.

And, how should we apply this truth?

First of all, when we see these problems occur, we should not be shocked. We should not be so idealistic that unless we see the ideal church, we reject the church altogether.

I once met a young man who had prepared to enter the ministry, but later he left the church. When I asked him why, he told me that it was because he had discovered that the church was full of hypocrites.

But, that is exactly the kind of attitude we must avoid. Sometimes God will lead us to leave a particular church in order to help another church. But the reason for leaving should not be based on the fact that we have discovered that within the church certain people have hypocritical behavior. That kind of problem will be a part of God's visible kingdom until Christ returns.

Secondly, when we see the problems of the church, this ought to motivate us to make improvements. Although we cannot become perfect, we can improve. Although we can never reach perfection in this life, we can make perfection our goal.

I used to wonder why God commands us to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect. Doesn't He know that it is impossible for us to become perfect in this life?

And then, I realized that God meant this to be the goal for every Christian to strive toward. As long as perfection is our goal, there will always be room for improvement. Any goal less than perfection will stifle our motivation to become better than what we are.

A third application that we can pick up from these parables is that every church building, every church organization with all of its programs and traditions will come to an end. It is just a matter of time, and from the looks of things, probably not a very long time.

So, we don't want to place too much emphasis on the outward appearance of things. The most important question is not, "What should our church look like?" The most important question is "How can we best use our resources to glorify God?"

Finally, we should avoid comparing ourselves to other churches.

A young woman once told me that her church was the only church in which there was no arguing and no disagreement among its members. Later, I found out the reason why was because the rules were so strict that anyone who disagreed was immediately thrown out of the church.

The distinguishing feature of any cult is that they believe their church is the best, because only their church has reached perfection.

But, no church has reached perfection, and no church ever will. And as negative as that picture might seem to you and me, it is the picture that we must live with until Christ returns.

But, thank God it is not the only picture. Thank God there is another way we can look at the Church which is far more inspirational than the one I have just presented. But, you will have to return next week to hear me talk about it. Until then, may God help us to be patient as we confront the many problems we see in the Church. It is His Church, and He loves it far more than we will ever be able to. Let us never let the problems of the Church cause us to give up doing the work of establishing God's kingdom upon this earth.