
Matthew 13 Parables

Session 5 - The Parables of the
Mustard Seed & the Leaven

Matthew 13:31-35



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Background

- Jesus did not give an explanation for the meaning of these parables.

Principles of interpretation

1. **Context is King** ~ often the immediate context of an unclear passage will shed light on its meaning.
 2. **Scripture interprets Scripture** ~ a similar idea in a similar context may shed light on the meaning of an unclear passage.
 3. **Say what the text says** ~ Scripture itself is the sole authority; use caution making inferences about the meaning of unclear passages.
- Elements of these parables will be consistent rather than contradictory.
 - Use the explanation of the first “kingdom parable” as the pattern for interpreting the two unexplained parables.

Parable of the Mustard Seed

- A man planted a single mustard seed in his field; **seed** (*kokkos*) is singular in number.
- It is smaller than other common garden seeds, but it ultimately grows to a surprising height.
- Some can reach 10 to 15 feet tall.
- It is a **garden plant** (*lachanon*) ~ common potted herb; known to grow large.
- Seed-eating birds are attracted to the seed pods at harvest time.
- At the end of the annual growing season the seeds are harvested to make useful products for both food and medicine.



Parable of the Mustard Seed

- Birds **nest** in the branches (*kataskēnoō*) ~ “to rest, live, or settle among the branches.”
- **Branches** (*klados*) ~ shoots or twigs; does not mean thick tree branches.
- The mustard plant does not mutate to become something different than its original nature.
- **Large spreading tree with birds flocking to its branches** (Judges 9:15; Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:3-14; Daniel 4:7-23) ~ great and powerful empire. Use caution when appealing to cross-references from different contexts in Scripture to justify an interpretation.



Example Inferences

- **Religious apostasy** will run rampant in the last days
(2 Thess 2:3-12; 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 3:1-7, 4:3-4; 2 Pet 2:1-3, 3:3-4; Rev 17).
- It is possible that Jesus was prefiguring later revelation in this parable. Should we read all of that later revelation back into Jesus' *Parable of the Mustard Seed*? Not unless the text itself justifies such an interpretation.
- **Birds** ~ “agents of the evil one” or simply behaving as normal seed-eating birds? Birds typically seek food in fields where seeds lay on the ground, or in bushes and trees which produce seed pods at the time of the harvest.
- But ... a garden tree where birds are active does not necessarily represent anything other than birds behaving exactly as we would expect normal birds to behave.

Common Interpretations

- “The kingdom of heaven, though now very small and seemingly insignificant, would one day grow into a large body of believers. That is the central lesson of this parable.”
- “The introduction of the tiny mustard seed points to the beginnings of the kingdom from a small remnant of believing Jews and Gentiles until it embraces the entire world.”
- But ... the kingdom of heaven was **rejected** by the nation of Israel. These parables deal with the intervening age during which the kingdom is **postponed**. God promises that the kingdom **will come**, but it is not in existence today.

Context as the Key

- We must refer to the first “kingdom parable,” the one Jesus did explain, in order to find clues to help determine His meaning here.
- The *Parable of the Wheat & Tares* taught that the kingdom would not come until the time of harvest at the “end of the age.”
- In a similar context Jesus used the characteristics of a tree to indicate the approaching end of the age (Matt 24:32-33). The same figure could be applied to the mustard tree:

“So, you too, when you see the gathering birds and the ripe pods on the mustard tree, recognize that He is near – that the time for the kingdom to be established is right at the door.”

Parable of the Leaven

- **Leaven** (*zumē*) ~ “to ferment, picturing the bubbling effect of yeast in dough.” Does it represent something good or evil?
- Jesus used “leaven” only in a negative sense (Matt 16:6-12), as did the apostle Paul (1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:7-10).
- Another small beginning with a piece of leaven permeating a large batch of dough.
- **It was all leavened** ~ comparable to the full grown mustard plant and to the mature wheat and tares at the harvest.
- Good & bad would exist side by side until the end of the growth cycle.



Jesus spoke to the crowds only in parables

- Review the second session in this series for the reason why Jesus taught the multitude using only parables.
- Jesus' teaching in parables corresponded to what the psalmist Asaph wrote in Psalm 78:2 ~ what Asaph wrote was well suited to describe Jesus' teaching method to the multitudes.
- Asaph was called a prophet, which was confirmed in 1 Chron 25:2.
- **"I will open my mouth in parables"** ~ almost identical to the Greek translation of the Hebrew text (LXX).
- **"I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world"** ~ Jesus shared "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 13:11).

Summary

- Jesus' parables illustrate the time between Israel's rejection of their King and His eventual appearance to establish the kingdom.
- The long period of time between these two events was a truth that had not been previously revealed in the Old Testament.
- The kingdom will not be established until the end of that age.
- His predictions are consistent across all of the "kingdom parables."
- There would be an uneasy coexistence of good and evil side-by-side throughout this intervening period.