

### **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

<sup>31</sup>He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup>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.” <sup>33</sup>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.”

<sup>44</sup>“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. <sup>45</sup>“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup>on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. <sup>47</sup>“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup>when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup>So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>51</sup>“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup>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.”

### **DO WE WELCOME THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?**

Some things never change. Among them is the **human tendency to avoid embarrassment**. You know that feeling when your ears start burning, you're whole head takes on the color of a ripe tomato. If any of you ever had the misfortune of having your **pants split** in the back at school, you are not likely to forget it, and if it didn't happen to you, you remember the poor kid that it *did* happen to. You remember what it's like when a teacher asks you question, and you haven't been paying attention in class. If you've ever been extremely embarrassed, you take precautions not to let it happen again.

One of my favorite expressions that I learned in school was “**there's no such thing as a dumb question.**” The fact that someone came up with that saying is evidence that we believe that the opposite is true; clearly there are questions that we don't dare ask because they are, by our own assessment, dumb questions. There were many times, in college, when a lively discussion about the readings would occur during class, and I had done none of the reading, so I had no clue what anyone was talking about, and were I to ask a question, it would have been something like, “What are you talking about?” I can think of quite a few times when a teacher asks, “Any more questions?” and of course I don't ask any because it would expose my ignorance. I have a hunch that's how Jesus' audience felt when after presenting six parables Jesus asks them, “Have you understood all this?” to which they answer “Yes.” Now if I was preaching about six parables I ask the same question (“Have you understood all this?”), and everyone in the church says, “Yes,” I would question their honesty. I think Jesus wondered the same thing about his congregation, because saying “Yes” when you mean “no” is another way of saying “I am too embarrassed to ask any questions,” which means that we're more content to dwell in eternal ignorance than to risk momentary embarrassment.

So we're lucky that we have these parables written before us. We can hold Jesus' question ("Have you understood all this?") in check while we explore what he said, and we can tell Jesus, "I'll get back to you on that," and try to figure out what he meant. We won't be able to do it in the next ten minutes, but I'll share with you *some* of the things that I think Jesus is saying to us about the Kingdom of heaven through some of these parables.

First we should understand that the kingdom of heaven is hardly noticeable. Today people in churches often bemoan the fact that fewer people seem to take church seriously, that it's not that important to worship or even to believe in God anymore. Many speak of the good old days when the church was the center of the community, where children grew up, dated one another, married one another, and then had their own children baptized in the church thus continuing a cycle. That cycle has been broken in the last fifty or so years, and church attendance is declining in general in America, but I don't believe that that necessarily means that the kingdom of heaven has been shrinking, because my experience has informed me that church attendance does NOT correlate well with discipleship; large churches don't mean large numbers of disciples, and small churches don't mean small numbers of disciples, so lower church attendance does not mean fewer disciples of Jesus, and anyone who understands the demands of discipleship should recognize that the kingdom of heaven on earth is still in mustard-seed state. But Jesus is telling us through these parables that the kingdom is coming, and it's going to be big. Just as in Jesus' day there were many who were trying their darnedest to do what Jesus wanted them to do, to walk on the narrow path, so today there are many frustrated disciples who see that their best efforts don't seem to be producing much fruit. Jesus is saying, "Hang in there; the kingdom is coming, and it will be greater than you might imagine."

Jesus is also telling us that the kingdom of God is to be cherished above all else; we hear the absurd examples of people who would sell all they have to buy a field where a treasure is hidden or a single pearl! I think Jesus uses these rather absurd examples – who, after all, would sell everything they have for a single pearl or a field where a treasure is buried in the dirt? Well, alright, maybe the treasure buried in the dirt, but the pearl? Jesus challenges us by implying that we should give up everything for a pearl, because we don't assign *THAT* much value to any single pearl, not enough to sell all that we have. What does that tell us about our value system? That we don't see the value of God's kingdom the way we should, which explains why the pearl and the treasure are hidden. We don't see eye-to-eye with Jesus. If we valued the kingdom of heaven even as if it were the finest pearl, we would hardly give up everything we have to own it. Sure we would give up some of our time, some of our money for the kingdom. Sure we would come to church on most Sundays and give a portion of our income to the church, but do we cherish the kingdom of heaven enough to give up all we have? An honest answer to that question explains why Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed or some yeast.

Because the tragic truth may be that we not only can't recognize the value of the kingdom of heaven; we may actively *resist* the kingdom of heaven. Mustard is and was a weed, and while we see some good use for it nowadays, yeast was a symbol of evil or corruption in scripture;

part of the Passover ritual is removing all leavened breads from one's home before the festival, which is called "the festival of the unleavened bread." Why is Jesus comparing the kingdom of heaven to a weed or to a contaminant? Because that is exactly the way many people see it, as something detestable and undesirable. How often do we compromise God's will and convince ourselves that we're complying with it? How often do we put our personal needs first and other's last? How often do we try to shape the church into something that best suits our own expectations and close our ears and our hearts and our minds to God's expectations, because God would expect us to love and accept and co-labor with people who just don't do things the way we want them to be done or say things the way we want them to be said? How often do we resist change because we've become comfortable with the way things are, which is, in essence, the way we've made things be to best suit our preferences? How have we resisted the Holy Spirit to protect our own egos, and done it all in the name of God or church? How often have we looked at others as weeds and contaminants when they are in fact people sent by God to this place, in search of acceptance, in search of grace, in search something divine, only to receive from us criticism, rejection, and contempt? Again it matters little how many people are here if the Spirit of God is not present within us or around us. We could have ten times as many people coming here on Sunday, but if there is no love between us, no grace, no forgiveness, and no will to serve one another, how can we call ourselves a church?

You know churches often speak of the Gospel, literally the "good news" of Jesus Christ, but it's only good news for those who choose to follow him, and following him means following him completely – you can't say, "I'll forgive one person but not another. I'll welcome her, but not him." I'll try to love the stranger, but not the person who sits three rows behind me." Disciples don't decide which of the master's laws to follow and which not to; disciples strive to follow all of their master's rules; and you can't call Jesus your master if you're the one calling the shots.

And so we need to have eyes set on Jesus and on the path where he is leading us. We need eyes that can see how precious the kingdom of heaven really is, so that we'll be inspired to give ourselves fully to its growth. And we need eyes that can help us recognize our own selfishness, our own willfulness that would have us pursue our own agendas and claim that it's God's agenda. May God give us clear sight, and hearts that yearn for his kingdom.