

## The Seed Parables

Matt. 13:31-33

These two parables are very interesting from a theological perspective because there are two traditional interpretations of the parables and the interpretations are diametrically opposite.

The majority interpretation sees the parables as good news, 3 out of 4 seeds may be wasted and even when the good seed is planted in a good field the devil comes along and plants tares among the wheat. But, a mustard seed (very small) can grow into a tree becoming greater than the herbs and a place where birds will come and nest and a little leaven (very small in volume compared to the 3 measures of meal) will soon leaven the entire mix so that you will have enough bread for over a hundred people. So, also, the church with its little Christ and simple gospel will become powerful, so much so that it will be great and will leaven the world with the good news of Christ. Many philosophies will rise and fall but the church marches on.

The minority interpretation sees the parables as a warning against the tendencies of self-importance and corruption. The mustard seed's growth is seen as unnatural and the birds nesting in the tree is bad news rather than good since the birds are a symbol of the devil. Leaven is associated in Scripture with sin and so the leaven that leavens the 3 measures of meal spoils the meal instead of making the meal into bread that will feed many.

The proponents of the first interpretation includes a vast majority of the commentators that I have read over nearly 40 years of preaching and teaching this parable. The primary proponent that I am aware of to the second and minority interpretation is G. Campbell Morgan, a twentieth century preacher and Bible expositor who has been one of my favorites through the years. So, how do you choose? Should I follow this guy I really like or everybody else?

Wrong question... Becoming aware of the controversy should prompt us to ask the question, how would those who heard Jesus tell these stories have understood them? We should remind

ourselves often that the events in the Bible all took place in their own specific context. We cannot afford to presume that we understand what the Bible is saying if we have not made an effort to cross over into the culture into which these things were first spoken.

Rita and I missed a Sunday this summer in order to attend her cousin's wedding. We stayed the night on both Friday and Saturday in Concord with Philip and Preethi, our son and daughter-in-law. We asked them to recommend a church and so they mentioned that their neighbors went to a particular church which turned out to be a Nazarene church. So, we went there and they celebrated the Lord's Supper during the service. They did it differently than we do. They had a striking arrangement on the table. Two Chalices and two loaves of bread artfully displayed were a promise of the ceremony soon to come. When it was time the Pastor broke the bread and attendants held the bread and cups so that the congregants could file past, bread off a piece of bread and dip it in the cup and then eat and return to their seats. The breaking of the bread and the dipping might be closer to what happened at the Last Supper than what we do. But the bread was leavened, really nice French bread type of loaves. The bread that Jesus broke was unleavened. This goes back to the original Passover when God instructed the people to make unleavened bread that would keep as they fled from Egypt, beginning an extended journey whose duration they could not imagine. Leavened bread would soon have molded and was no good for kind of journey Israel was about to begin. The point is that we tend to impose our own culture on that of the Bible and by doing so miss the message that is intended for us.

Can we know how the people would have heard Jesus' stories? Jesus knew His crowd and understood how He would be heard. The mustard seed and the leaven in these stories would have made an obvious suggestion to the people. They would have had associations that would have characterized the mustard seed and the leaven according to their common use. Is this recoverable?

G. Campbell Morgan researched the mustard plant of Palestine and found that it was not a tree but a small bush at best. A mustard

seed that produced a tree big enough for the birds to nest in it would have represented an unusual circumstance. Further, the birds nesting in the tree would have been viewed negatively as birds were often a symbol of evil. In the first parable of the sower Jesus had used the birds that ate the seed by the wayside as a metaphor of the devil. Leaven also had a negative connotation. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" was a way of saying that any corruption that is introduced into an entity will soon corrupt the entire entity. Paul used the saying in this very manner when he confronted the Corinthian church about the sin in the church and its danger in respect to the man who had an adulterous relationship.

Was Jesus encouraging His disciples with a description of the power and prestige that they would one day achieve or was He warning them of the dangers of that the growth of the church would bring, including the problems of deep corruption that could destroy the church from within?

Following Pentecost the church in Jerusalem did grow exponentially and that growth is celebrated in the Book of Acts. It was a good thing that the church grew. Every member is a soul. Every member is a soul saved from hell and on the way to heaven. The many who were saved were soon scattered by the persecution that sent them throughout the world and they preached the gospel as they went. But in Acts 5 we have the story of Ananias and Saphira. This couple observed the accolades that were directed toward Barnabas who had sold property and given the proceeds to the church for the care of the poor widows. They also sold some land and when they got a good price for it they gave a portion of the proceeds to the church for the care of the widows. But they told everyone that they had given all the proceeds of their sale for this purpose, and by doing so they sought to achieve the same status that Barnabas had been awarded for what he had done. Their action threatened the church with corruption. They had treated the gaining of status and respect in the church as if it were a commodity that could be bought. If they had attained some high office in the church by this means then what they had done would

have become known by some and this would have produced cynicism. Those who did not know would

not have been told. The act would later have been covered up in order to protect the purity of the church. The couple's success would have been copied by others with similar motives. Now the leadership of the church would not be characterized by humble service to Christ but by those who were ambitious and who sought to have and exercise power. Peter was directed by the Spirit to first, test the couple as to their motives and honesty and then to deal very harshly with them lest they corrupt the church. The incident gave pause to all. Everyone thought twice before drawing attention to themselves.

Purity and sincerity are essential in the work of Christ. They are integral to what it means to be Christ's body. We do not seek to possess and exercise power for our own ends. We seek to walk with the Lord, to love as He does and to be instruments whom He can use to achieve His healing and redemptive work in the lives of the lost around us and in the body of believers who are His church. Selfish agendas and personal vendettas have no place in Christ's church.