

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

BY MICHAEL KASTING

LIVING WAY

BIBLE STUDY

Living Way Bible Study, Inc. (LWBS) is an auxiliary of the Pacific Southwest District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). All studies are written and/or edited by LCMS pastors. We have been providing studies to churches throughout the U. S. and Canada since 1982.

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Living Way Bible Study, Inc.



562. 237. 2495



888. 383. 8119



info4LWBS@aol. com



www. livingwaybiblestudy. org



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Welcome!

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LWBS is a practical course of study with a special emphasis on the application of God's Word to the life of the individual. While emphasizing practical application, LWBS presents each book of the Bible as the holy, inspired Word of God, the confessional position of The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word.

*“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our
Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”*

2 Peter 3:18

STUDY STRUCTURE

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

1. **PERSONAL** – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P. A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
2. **SMALL GROUPS** – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P. A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
3. **THE MESSAGE** – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
4. **THE NARRATIVE** – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P. A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P. A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P. A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P. A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

MICHAEL KASTING

LWBS Courses:

Romans – 2016

Acts – 2017

Matthew – 2018

Jeremiah – 2023

The Parables of Jesus – 2023

Hosea – 2023

Author, “*Into the Valley of Shadows: Our Journey Through Alzheimer’s Disease*”,
Lutheran Witness, February 2023. <https://witness.lcms.org>

Graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis – 1972

Forty-three years of ministry with LCMS serving the following congregations:

Memorial, Vancouver, WA

Concordia, Akron, OH

Faith, Sequim, WA

Trinity, Oregon City, OR

Trinity, Casey, IL

Served as vicar supervisor, circuit counselor, spiritual growth workshop leader, and writer for several publications.

Authored and published several books:

Time and Grace – A Pastor’s Story, 2012

Blood and Life – Sermons on the Old Testament, 2013

Through the Needle’s Eye: Sermons on the Gospels, 2016

Singing Heaven’s Song Now: Sermons on the Epistles, 2021

Into the Valley of Shadows: Our Journey Through Alzheimer’s Disease, 2023

Short-term mission in Kyrgyzstan, 2006

Retired from ministry in 2015

LWBS editor for several courses

Married Sue (Rodebaugh) in 1968. They have three adult children and seven grandchildren. Pastor enjoys traveling, gardening, hiking, reading, singing in church choir.

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Bailey, Kenneth. *Poet and Peasant: a Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

A book filled with insights about Jesus and His Lucan parables in their cultural setting.

Filson, Floyd. *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960. *Black's New Testament Commentaries*.

A simple, straightforward commentary on the Gospel. Not highly technical.

Gibbs, Jeffrey. *Matthew 1:11-11:1*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006.

A rich resource. Detailed, thoughtful, and well-reasoned. There are Greek notes for pastors, but the readable commentary is accessible to all.

Gibbs, Jeffrey. *Matthew 11:2-20:34*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 2010.

Gibbs, Jeffrey. *Matthew 21:1-28:20*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 2018.

Just, Arthur. *Luke 1:1-9:50*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 1996.

Another richly detailed, thoughtful, informative work. Plenty of Greek for the clergy, and the commentary is accessible to laity as well.

Just, Arthur. *Luke 9:50-24:53*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 1997.

Plummer, Alfred. *The Gospel According to St. Luke*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969.

Classic commentary with abundant Greek notes and many thoughtful insights, but the small font is an obstacle.

Scharlemann, Martin. *Proclaiming the Parables*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1963.

Though less than 100 pages in length, this book is insightful about the nature and interpretation of the parables. It dwells at length on five of them. Easily accessible to both clergy and laity.

Taylor, Vincent. *The Gospel According to St. Mark*. London: Macmillan, 1966.

Clergy will find this helpful, but it is too technical for lay use. Taylor offers the entire Greek text and copious notes. With this book, as with Plummer's, the small print is a hindrance.

SOURCES FOR THIS STUDY

The basic Bible text this course will employ is the New International Version (NIV) as printed in the *CSSB* (1986 edition), along with the English Standard Version (ESV).

This study leans heavily on the work of Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs and Dr. Arthur Just in their Concordia Commentaries on Matthew and Luke respectively. Also quoted are commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels by Floyd Filson, Vincent Taylor, and Alfred Plummer and separate works by Kenneth Bailey and Martin Scharlemann as listed in the bibliography. There are many other random citations from authors not included in the bibliography.

Our primary resources, of course, are the Gospels themselves.

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Tell Me A Story!

The toddler climbs into her grandpa's lap and looks soulfully into his eyes. "Tell me a story, Grandpa!" she begs. It's a scene almost as old as families themselves.

Story-telling bridges the generations. A Greek slave named Aesop born in 620 BC collected stories of animals acting as people. His stories had lessons that were thereby passed on to children during his lifetime and for all the centuries since. Today we still read stories to our children not merely to entertain but also to teach the difference between good and evil, wise and foolish. Remember hearing about Cinderella? The three little pigs and the big bad wolf? The gingerbread man? Stories and illustrations provide pictures for the mind, vehicles for meaning and values to be shared.

It's not only our children who need such things! We adults are not content with mere assertions, however true they might be. We want pictures. "A picture is worth 1000 words." We need to hear someone say "for example." Parishioners hunger for the pastor to employ illustrations so that we may respond, "Now I get it!" We can enter the pictures, live the stories.

Jesus was a preacher who knew how to wrap the message of the kingdom in images and stories from the experiences of his hearers. He took his hearers to the kitchen, the grain field, and the road to Jericho. He spoke of banquet halls and courtrooms. Some of his pictures were utterly simple. But many were complex, with puzzling elements that required careful thought and further explanation. His illustrations have come to be called parables.

But we will find that the parables are more than mere illustrations. They are part of our Lord's revelation of God's grace and reign among us. They engage and summon us to a response. Martin Scharlemann says, "A person who hears or reads a parable of Jesus is confronted by the necessity of making up his mind about Jesus Himself."

What's A Parable?

Most of us would say we know what a parable is. “An earthly story with a heavenly meaning” was the definition given to this writer long ago. P. G. Wodehouse makes one of his characters say, “A parable is one of those stories in the Bible which sounds like a pleasant yarn but keeps something up its sleeve which pops up and leaves you flat.” According to Robert Mounce, a parable is “a simple story from daily life that illustrates an ethical or religious truth.” But the reality is more complex.

The Greek word *parabolee* literally means a “placing beside” for the purpose of comparison. A parable may be a homey saying, a lengthy illustration, or a narrative from nature or human circumstances. Its object is to set forth a spiritual lesson. The word “parable” occurs 48 times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but not at all in John. That Greek word can also be translated “proverb” (Luke 4:23) or “lesson” (Matthew 24:32) and applied to forms of speech that tell no story at all. Dr. Jeff Gibbs concludes, “No definition has won general acceptance,” but then he offers his own: “Parable refers to a small past-time narrative that Jesus tells in order to communicate a deeper meaning.” Most writers agree on the fact that parables offer “two levels” of meaning and require the listener’s reflection.” He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 13:9). Luke has stories we normally call parables but are not labeled as such (the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son).

Even making a list of the Gospels’ parables isn’t easy. Scholars’ lists vary wildly. F. F. Bruce numbered 33. C. H. Dodd counted 44. Cornelius van Koetsveld included 79! *The Concordia Self-Study Bible* (hereafter *CSSB*) lists 40. It all depends on which commentary you consult and which definition you use. But there is no doubt that parables are important. They comprise as much as a third of Jesus’ recorded teachings. Almost all of Matthew 13, for example, is devoted to Jesus’ telling (and in two cases interpreting) seven “Kingdom Parables.” That chapter is so named because six of them are prefaced with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like.”

Why Parables?

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Why did Jesus tell parables? One might assume that the human hunger for illustration is a necessary and sufficient reason. But Jesus’ own explanation is more nuanced. In Matthew 13, the aforementioned “parable chapter,” the disciples notice that Jesus has taken a new approach to His teaching. Until that time He had been teaching regularly in the synagogues. Only once more would He do so (vv. 13:54f.), an appearance that generated unbelief. From that point on His normal “classrooms” would be the seashore, the roadside, and homes (until He finally came to Jerusalem and taught in the temple). More strikingly, the disciples observe, He had begun to teach by using parables. So they ask directly, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

The parables, He explains, are spoken in response to misunderstanding and opposition. The crowds don’t “know the secrets of the kingdom” as do the disciples. “This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” He is, it appears, deliberately hiding things that must remain “secret” until God chooses to reveal them. That’s the import of the passage Jesus then quotes in explanation from Isaiah 6:9-10:

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them” (Matthew 13:14-15).

Isaiah had been sent to a people stubbornly opposed to God. God’s response to their disobedience and unbelief was to veil His message. Their own dullness and rebellion kept them from “hearing and seeing” God’s compassionate intent! Now, says Jesus, the story is being repeated. The people of Israel are again resisting. God is again making His response to the unbelief that has greeted this message of the kingdom. The parables are not simply illustrations to clarify, as a pastor might use a sermon illustration. Initially, their function is to “conceal” more than to “reveal.”

But Jesus is not abandoning the crowds, not writing them off. “He who has ears, let him hear” is an invitation to those who are, for now, in the dark about the kingdom. He invites them to ponder the parable and, by God’s grace, receive what it offers. He continues to teach them, but now in more obscure fashion, using parables to engage their curiosity and invite their reflection. Parables begin by hiding, but end by revealing. Even with His own disciples, Jesus employs parables and makes the same challenge: “He who has ears, let him hear.”

Course Outline

In this course we will explore and ponder these interesting and sometimes baffling parables together. One frequent refrain we’ve already mentioned is “The kingdom of heaven is like.” The same phrase (worded “kingdom of God”) appears also in Mark and Luke. Jesus came as king to usher in the kingdom of God. His teaching focused squarely on that kingdom and its realization in our lives. Many of the parables are vivid images of the kingdom in action. This course, therefore, is organized around the theme of the kingdom – how it comes, what it proclaims, and what sort of life it engenders.

During the class we’ll take up more than half of the parables Jesus employed. We’ll refer to the “Synoptic” Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) frequently. Matthew and Luke contain the greatest number of parables. At least eight are unique to Matthew, ten to Luke. Mark has only one unique to his Gospel, while John contains no parables at all.

Here’s the outline we’ll follow:

***Lesson 1 Introduction* What are parables? Why did Jesus use them?**

THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM – SEED SOWN AND SPROUTING

Lesson 2 – THE SEED AND ITS GROWTH

Seed Growing Secretly

Mark 4:26-29

The Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32 Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

Wheat and Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Lesson 3 – THE SOIL AND ITS PRODUCTIVITY

The Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

The Fruitless Fig Tree

Luke 13:6-9

THE MESSAGE OF THE KINGDOM — THE VALUE AND JOY OF SALVATION**Lesson 4 – NEW FOR OLD – UNSURPASSED VALUE**

Patched Clothes/New Wine, Old Wineskins
 Matthew 9:16-17 Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-38
Treasure in a Field/Pearl of Great Price
 Matthew 13:44-46

Lesson 5 – LOST AND FOUND – SOURCE OF JOY

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son (Prodigal Son)
 Luke 15:1-32

Lesson 6 – GOD INVITES –NO EXCUSES!

The Great Banquet
 Luke 14:15-24
The Marriage Feast
 Matthew 22:1-14

THE MANNER OF LIFE IN THE KINGDOM**Lesson 7 – THE WORK WE DO**

Wise and Foolish Builders
 Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49
The Talents and the Minas
 Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

Lesson 8 – THE TIME WE ARE GIVEN

Laborers in the Vineyard
 Matthew 20:1-16
The Shrewd Manager
 Luke 16:1-9

Lesson 9 – LOVING THE NEIGHBOR

The Good Samaritan
 Luke 10:29-37

Lesson 10 – FORGIVENESS AND PRAYER

The Unmerciful Servant
 Matthew 18:23-35
The Persistent Widow
 Luke 18:1-8

Lesson 11 – READINESS FOR HIS RETURN

The Ten Virgins
 Matthew 25:1-13
The Rich Fool
 Luke 12:16-21

Lesson 12 – REVIEW AND REFLECTION ON WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

For the next few months, let's sit at Jesus' feet, listen and consider what He wants to teach us. Along the way, we'll pray that the seeds He sows will take root and bear fruit in our lives.

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Personal Application

Heavenly Father, bless this new venture. I confess that sometimes events in the world and conditions in the church disappoint or even frighten me. As I begin this study, speak to me in the parables of Jesus about Your mysterious, wonderful, and often hidden work of grace. Give me ears to hear and eyes to see as I read His words. In Jesus' name. Amen.

GETTING STARTED

1. Do you have a favorite parable already? If so, share with your group.
2. What did you learn about parables in this introduction? Was there anything that surprised you?
3. Someone wrote: "A parable may obscure as well as explain." Do you agree or disagree? Does Jesus' quote of Isaiah 6:9-10 make sense to you?

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY — READ MARK 4:26-29

4. What is it the farmer CAN do? What is it he CANNOT do?
5. Can you recall instances in which someone came to church, came to faith, or experienced some wondrous transformation that was unexpected and without any apparent connection to anyone's efforts? If so, share.
6. The mention of "sickle" and "harvest" is an allusion to Joel 3:13. Read that verse in its context. What "harvest" is God promising there? What does "harvest" include in this parable?

THE MUSTARD SEED — READ MATTHEW 13:31-32; MARK 4:30-32; AND LUKE 13:18-19.

7. At the time of Jesus, would the kingdom work He had begun be more like the "seed" or more like the "tree" (Matthew and Luke) in size? Note the number Luke records in Acts 1:15!
8. Make search on the Internet and see if you can discover how many people worldwide are currently called Christians.

9. In what ways can we see “birds in the branches” of God’s kingdom today? The Wheat and Weeds - read Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
10. Review and record the explanation Jesus Himself gives of the elements of this parable;
- a. the sower (the owner)
 - b. the field
 - c. the good seed
 - d. the weeds
 - e. the enemy
 - f. the harvest
 - g. the harvesters –
11. Most of us are not surprised to hear about the world’s evils. But are you ever surprised to discover trouble or even open wickedness in the church?
12. The servants suggest pulling up the weeds (v. 28). What concern does the owner express about this idea?
13. What options does a congregation have in its approach to members who are engaging in manifestly wicked lives? What are the risks and benefits of each option?
14. Read Mathew 18:15-18 and 1 Corinthians 5, especially vv. 12-13. Taking these passages together with this parable, how are we to approach “church discipline”?

FOR REFLECTION

15. Of the three parables you’ve read in this lesson, which one prompts the most reflection? Why?

THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM – SEED SOWN AND SPROUTING

Lesson 2

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Lessons two and three take up the mystery of the spread of God's kingdom. This lesson directs our attention to the seed of God's Word and its generative power. The next lesson will focus on the reception of that seed into the soil of the human heart.

An Annual Miracle

Every spring it happens - the annual miracle of barren fields becoming bountiful crops. For miraculous it surely is that bare ground should yield countless tons of food to sustain us. The average wheat crop in the United States is 40 bushels per acre. The average corn crop is nearly 200 bushels per acre! We all know WHAT happens. Farmers plant acres of seeds – corn, oats, wheat, soybeans, rye, and more. The seeds germinate and sprout, pushing green shoots through the soil and filling each plant with vegetables and grains. But the real question is WHY. What is the mysterious power locked inside the seeds that sets it all in motion?

The kingdom of God comes in a similar way. Jesus employed the image of seed sown, sprouting, and growing to produce a harvest. The Word of God, which is the divine seed, also has that mysterious power to germinate faith and produce a harvest of good works in the lives of hearers. The result is the miracle that brings life and abundant fruit from what was bare and dead. The harvest is a life with God that never ends.

Taken together, the three parables in this lesson caution against human arrogance that supposes our planting and hard

***Hear this: God
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One day you
will see His
harvest!***

work are the key. They also comfort us when we grow disillusioned with the seeming failure of the church and its mission. Hear this: God is at work. One day you will see His harvest!

Hear this: God is at work. One day you will see His harvest!

The Mystery of Growth – The Seed Growing Secretly

Mark 4:26-29

The power of God's Word and the growth of God's kingdom is a mystery, plain and simple. We church folk, pastors and people, may go about our work with a farmer's diligence, yet in the end we really can't explain how the miracle of faith and changed lives take place.

That's the point of our first parable, "The Seed Growing Secretly." This parable, the only one peculiar to Mark, focuses on the seed and its astonishing power to grow. The farmer's task is predictable. Every spring he "scatters seed on the ground." There were no tractors or special planting machinery in those days. The Jewish farmer, with a seed bag slung over his shoulder, walked his field, tossing handfuls of seed into every available place, whether path, rocky or weedy soil, or open space (as in the parable of the sower). In the parable, the farmer simply plants, then goes on about his daily routine of working, sleeping and rising for the next day's work. He cannot produce the mysterious power in that seed, nor even understand it! The seed "sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."

The mystery is reinforced in Mark 4:28: "All by itself the soil produces grain." The Greek word translated "all by itself" is *automatee*, from which comes our English word "automatically." What happens there, says Vincent Taylor, "is independent of man and is wrought by the power of God alone." All that is left for the farmer is to "put the sickle to it" because harvest time has come. Pastoral diligence and congregational organization, both good things, are not the secret of the kingdom's growth. It is the amazing grace of God working in and through His Word.

I remember occasions during my years as a parish pastor when all I could do was to shake my head in wonder. A young couple I'd never met showed up at church one morning. A man I'd given up on years earlier suddenly made a U-turn from alcoholism to sobriety. A teen boy decided to devote his life to mission work. In each of these cases, when I inquired why it had happened, the answer was astonishingly similar – something like, "I don't really know. It just felt like that's what God wanted me to do." The seed grew secretly. I was left to harvest what God had already grown.

The world's history, in fact, will end in a harvest. The final verse mentions both "sickle" and "harvest," an echo of Joel 3:12-13, where God proclaims a coming judgment on the wickedness of the nations. Here in this parable, the picture is more hopeful. Both on the farm and in God's kingdom, there is a happy and hopeful goal. The farmer hopes for a bumper crop of grain. God's harvest time is Judgment Day, when He will deal with both the wicked and the righteous (see the parable of wheat and weeds later in this lesson). The gathering of His people to eternal life is a promise that sustains us along the way. The whole parable is an antidote against disillusionment. The kingdom will grow. The harvest will come!

Humble Beginnings – The Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

But when? To be sure, Jesus' arrival has brought the kingdom near and the planting is underway, but the harvest awaits its arrival at an unknown time. For the time being there is a tension between the "already" and the "not yet." The parable of the mustard seed, told in all the Synoptics, is an illustration of that tension.

Though God is reigning NOW, His reign may appear unimpressive or even disappointing as far as normal human expectations are concerned, asserts Jeff Gibbs. The beginnings of the kingdom are humble. At the same time, they hold the promise of a grand future. This parable says, “One day it will be different, but for now, this is what you get.”

The mustard seed is tiny, “the smallest seed you plant” (Mark 4:31). It is not, of course, the smallest of ALL seeds known, but the smallest that Israel’s farmers planted. Though tiny, its growth is remarkable. What starts small “becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:32).

There is uncertainty about which variety of “mustard” plant is meant. Plummer mentions *salvadora persica*, which grows in the Middle East and may reach a height of 20 feet. Its small, pungent seeds may be used as a mustard-like condiment. Some experts think it is more likely the black mustard plant (*brassica nigra*) still cultivated in Israel. Though normally only about 4 feet tall, it could sometimes grow to 8 feet. Either plant is large enough for birds. Jack Kingsbury points out that “the mustard plant hardly qualifies as a ‘tree,’ and the term may be a deliberate exaggeration designed to evoke an echo of Daniel 4:12, 21.”

A few commentators, including Arthur Just, have suggested that the birds represent the Gentile nations (including most of us) who “nest” within the worldwide kingdom of God and there find their true home. The inclusion of Gentiles may or may not be the point Jesus was making, but it surely should not be lost on us that at this writing there are an estimated 2.2 billion followers of Jesus, the world’s single largest religion. That’s enormous growth.

This parable found an interesting application some years ago. The Lutheran Women’s Missionary League distributed “Mustard Seeds” in the form of slips of paper that contained short Bible studies. Developed in 1971, the Mustard Seed packets were designed to help women working outside the home share their faith during coffee breaks and lunch hour discussions. The women were encouraged to trust that these small studies might have a large impact. Yes, says the parable!

The Wheat and the Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The mysterious power at work in the seed of God’s Word must do its work in a fallen world. There is another force at work, a force hostile to the kingdom of God. The result is disarray, confusion, and sometimes downright evil in the life of God’s church. Every farmer’s field has weeds. So does the church. Jesus said it would be so.

Matthew records a parable which depicts the kingdom of God as a mixed bag, a field of wheat laced with weeds. The owner’s servants discover it one morning and immediately relate the disconcerting news, along with a perplexed question: “Where did the weeds come from?” “An enemy did this,” is the owner’s laconic reply. Eager to help, they make a sensible proposal: “Do you want us to go and pull them up?” Surprisingly, the owner chooses not to do anything about it at present. The situation will change. He will handle the matter at the right time. One fine harvest day the weeds will be separated and burned.

In verse 36, the scene shifts: “Then he left the crowd and went into the house.” The uncomprehending crowds are left behind and the disciples are His audience. They do not stand aloof. They are following with trusting hearts but wobbly comprehension: “Explain to us the parable of the weeds.”

Patently, point by point, Jesus identifies each ingredient in the parable. He Himself is the owner who sowed good seed.” The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.” Harvest is a standard figure of Judgment Day (see Jeremiah 51:33 and Hosea 6:11, for example), the day when God will set everything right again. Jesus gives generous detail about the role of those angels and the fate of the wicked. The “righteous,” on the other hand, “will shine like the sun” (cf. Daniel 12:3).

The first lesson in the parable is a sobering one. There is trouble in the world and the church. Weeds and wheat are growing side by side. Indeed, the verb for “sowed” literally means “sow on top of” with the result that weeds are set “among the wheat” and their roots are intertwined.

The “world” Jesus’ disciples knew was a Jewish world in which all (including those hostile Pharisees and those greedy tax collectors) were part of the same visible community. While the field is explained as “the world,” it is obvious that the visible church in our day is a mixed bag of people, whether newcomers, pillars, delinquents, or hypocrites. Those of us who love the church find this most perplexing. Some are so disillusioned that they quit. We choose to stay, but wonder, “What can we do?”

The parable cautions us against the idea that by our diligent efforts at “quality control,” we can make sure that the church remains a pure, healthy fellowship.

Some interpreters go so far as to conclude we are being warned against church discipline that might remove someone from the fellowship. That cannot be the case in light of Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, where a manifestly wicked and impenitent person may have to be excommunicated. Even in those passages, however, the real goal is to restore and not simply remove the sinner (Matthew 18:15 “gain your brother” and 1 Corinthians 5:5 “his spirit may be saved”).

Church discipline is appropriate, but care and caution are clearly being urged in our dealing with people. Motives are harder to read than outward behavior. It is not easy to distinguish wheat from weeds. The owner in the parable is concerned that “you may root up the wheat.”

The second lesson is an encouraging one. Earlier Jesus has told the crowds of the master’s present inaction with a focus on the present. Here with His disciples He skips ahead to describe the harvest, telling the disciples about the future. The day will come, He assures them, when God will act decisively. Take the long view and don’t lose heart. Things will be set right in the end. We who live in a corrupt and violent world where, it often seems, no one is held accountable, find this message most heartening.

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Personal Application

Prayer: Lord God, open my eyes, my ears, and my heart to the Good News Your Son Jesus gives me in His parables. Make my heart fertile ground to receive the seed of Your teaching that I may have faith in Him and bear the fruit of joyful service to others. Let me, in turn, sow that message generously. In Jesus' name. Amen.

FOR REVIEW

1. According to Martin Scharlemann, "Normally a parable has but one main Point." How would you summarize the main point of:
 - a. The Seed Growing Secretly?
 - b. The Mustard Seed?
 - c. The Wheat and the Weeds?

2. What is God's ultimate solution to the existence of wicked people in the church?

THE SOWER – READ MATTHEW 13:1-23; MARK 4:1-20; AND LUKE 8:1-15

3. This parable is one of only three that appear in all the Synoptics (the others are The Mustard Seed and The Wicked Tenants). As you read the parallel accounts, record any details that differ. Do these differences matter?

4. This parable could also be called "The Parable of the Soils." According to Jesus, what does each soil represent?
 - a. The Path
 - b. Rocky Soil
 - c. Thorny Soil
 - d. Good Soil

5. With which of these four do you most readily identify?
6. A sermon obviously requires work by the preacher. What kind of work could listeners do to make their listening more fruitful?

THE FRUITLESS FIG TREE – READ LUKE 13:1-9

7. The context is important for understanding this parable. Read Luke 12:54-59. Can you see a connection between the warnings in this section and the warning in 13:5 that precedes the telling of this parable?
8. The parable is about a fig tree in a vineyard. For background, read Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 24:1-10; and Micah 7:1. How do these passages underline what God is seeking from Israel (and us!)?
9. There are two important mentions of time. What has characterized the three years? What will characterize the one year to follow?
10. Can you recall times in your life when you were given a “grace period” or “second chance”? What was the giver hoping would happen?
11. Have you ever given anyone else a second chance? In hindsight were you glad you did, or disappointed?
12. What kinds of divine interventions in our lives might be represented by the gardener’s plan to “dig around” and “fertilize” the tree?

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

13. After reading these parables, what have you come to appreciate more about the grace and mercy of God?