

Matthew 21-01-17a

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church, where, with a bit of a late start, we're going to continue our study in Matthew chapter 13. In the interest of time, I have already prayed. You'll just have to trust me on that.

We're going to dive right in. We're looking at the seed parables. Jesus is using them to communicate about the kingdom of God.

Now, I want to say something at the outset about this. Here's the thing about a parable. Jesus presents the parable.

That's the actual Greek word he put before them. He presented a parable. And once we see the parable, we say, oh, I see.

There's a sower, there's seed, there's thorns, there's rocks, there's birds. There's 30, 60, and 100. So let me decipher this and figure out what it is.

Well, Jesus has helpfully done so in this chapter. And he told us that the seed was the word of the kingdom and explained these things. We have a tendency, once we know what the correspondence is in the parable, to stop at that point.

But remember, Jesus is speaking to the people in parables so that those to whom it has been given will understand the truth of what he's saying. Why is it given to them? As he says in the Gospel of John, the love of the Father is not in some of them. And without a love for the Father, the Father does not give to them that understanding.

If you love the Father, if you want to know what the Father is doing, you ask, you seek, you knock, and it is given. So this isn't predestination. It's not election.

It's not God being arbitrary, capricious, or whimsical. There is a reason why it has been given to the disciples to understand. We've been over this.

So think about the parable. The parable is coded truth. We've got the key to unlock that truth.

We say, okay, I know it's not really about seeds and soil and birds and thorns. It's really about the word of the kingdom and what happens with it. Well, we want to be sure and not miss the full process because we tend to think, oh, I know what the parable of the sower is about.

It's about the word of the kingdom and the thorns and the birds and the soil and so on. But once we get the word, what are we supposed to do with it? We observe, we interpret, and we apply. So it is not enough to hear the parable of the sower and

understand what it's really talking about.

Once we have understood what it's really talking about, it is time to interpret and apply for ourselves. We know that the word of the kingdom in Jesus' day was to the Old Testament saints of his generation. They are still Old Testament.

It is covenant promises of God. It is time for the fulfillment of those kingdom promises. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.

The Lord says, God has accepted and fulfilled. So, come to him and listen to him, listen to him, and look at him, and then change your mind. Change your mind.

Believe the good news. So when Jesus says in verse 19, when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it. But this is a problem, a pre-existing problem.

The soil was already hard packed. The thorns were already present. The rocky soil that's shallow and doesn't let the word take root was already that way.

It's a pre-existing condition that causes the reception of the seed to be unfruitful. As with all Old Testament truth, we understand that God was working with Israel, dealing with Israel, teaching Israel, judging Israel, and we are a different people. But it is the same God with the same standards, the same expectations for faith and obedience, the same ability for us to claim righteousness by faith.

We're different. This is the age of the Holy Spirit. We are no longer under law but under grace and so on.

But it is like a Venn diagram where in the center there is a great amount of overlap, and it is that overlap that we seek to understand. So as we look at these parables, please join me in remembering that it's not enough to solve the puzzle of the correspondence. What do the elements of the parable stand for? We tend to say, ah, I see, and then walk away and forget that there's a purpose of the parable, and it is to communicate this truth.

This truth at first blush, at first point of application pertains to Israel, but as with much of the Bible, we learn and make application for ourselves now. So, what is the correspondence in the parable of the sower and the seed? It's very interesting to me that this parable is given in more than one gospel. It is also in Mark chapter 13.

It is also in Luke chapter 8. And we have a different verb in each one of these for the reception of the seed by those who hear it. So, turn with me quickly to Mark chapter 4 in the vicinity of verse 13. Jesus says, after having presented the parable, we have some of the same central material given, seeing they may see and not perceive, and so on.

Then in verse 13, he says, do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. Then you have the wayside. You

have the stony ground in verse 16.

You have the thorns in verse 18. And then in verse 20, these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word and do what? Those who hear the word, what's the next word in your text? Accept. Mark chapter 4 verse 20.

The ones where the seed is sown on good ground, these hear the word and accept it. What was the word in Matthew? Those who hear the word and what? Understand it. Understand.

Now, turn to Luke chapter 8. This is the advantage we have of having done the other Gospels, is I can not only follow Matthew's line of reasoning, but we can also do a wonderful comparison study across the Gospels and look at our parallel passages. Luke chapter 8, beginning in verse 11. The parable is this.

The seed is the word of God. You have the ones by the wayside, the ones on the rock in verse 13, the ones among thorns in verse 14. Verse 15, this is Luke 8, 15.

But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it. They have a noble and good heart. Notice, pre-existing condition.

When they hear the word, these are people that already have a noble and a good heart. And when they receive the word of God, verse 11, they having heard it with that heart, keep it. So across our three Gospels, what are the conditions for the seed to bear fruit? In Matthew, what? Starts with a U and ends with stand.

Understand it. In Mark, starts with a A, accept it. Luke, with that noble and good heart, keep it.

Understand it, accept it, and keep it. Now, wonderful thing to have parsed the parable and know what the seed and the soils and so on represent. What is the application for you and for me? When we hear the word of our kingdom, which is not the millennial kingdom per se, we are viewing being with the Lord Jesus where He is.

And it's a bit seen through a glass darkly exactly what we will be doing during the millennial kingdom. But we know we are headed for the kingdom of the Father. That is certain.

We are looking at those overcomer promises that the Lord Jesus presents in Revelation 2 and Revelation 3. To him who overcomes, I will grant. In order to receive that inheritance, in order to fulfill that potential, what do we need to do with the word of God? We need to understand it. We need to accept it as authoritative for our faith and our lives.

We need to keep it, not just understand it, not just accept that it's true, but live in its light. Make it happen in our lives. Strive to enter by the narrow gate.

You do not have to strive to be saved, but to enter into the fullness of eternal life. We work at it. We work at our understanding.

Wrestle with these truths. Dig. Seek it as silver.

Search for it as for hid treasure. You can't lay on a cot and roll your head to the right and look over and find the treasure. You get your pigmatic.

You get your shovel. You get your post hole digger. And by the sweat of your brow you dig into that soil and seek that treasure.

Ask. Keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking.

Knock and keep on knocking. Lord, I am one who wants to know. I'm like the importunate widow.

I'm going to keep coming to the judge and asking for what I want. And what I want is understanding. I want to understand it so that I can accept it, so that I can keep it.

I want to improve my good and noble heart, make it better and more noble. And only the word of God with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit can do that. Parable of the sower.

Wonderful thing to lay these gospels side by side and get that three dimensional picture. Well, we moved forward from that and we saw in Matthew chapter 13 the parable of the wheat and tares. And we have held off examining that until we come to verse 37 where Jesus explains it.

So we looked at verse 31. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all seeds. But when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

I did a little bit more work on the Greek in this verse this past week. And I am happy to tell you that when it says, which indeed is the least of all seeds, you remember in like English class, I don't remember if it was junior high or high school, probably junior high, where we had comparative adjectives. I compare something and something is either good, better, or best compared to something else.

So you have a comparative and you have a superlative. Least is a superlative in the sense that it says this is as small as it can get. If you are least, that's at the end of the spectrum.

There's nothing lesser than least. This is not the superlative. This is the comparative.

It indeed is the lesser of the seeds. Lesser, not least. The Bible is not scientifically inaccurate.

If somebody wants to come and say, oh, Jesus didn't know his seeds. There are smaller seeds that botanists are aware of. This is lesser of the garden seeds that people typically planted in the ancient Near East in Jesus' day.

Mustard was one of the smaller, not smallest, smaller of the seeds. When it is grown, it is greater, not greatest. And the translation is actually correct here in the second one.

It is greater than the herbs. Not the greatest of all herbs, but greater. It becomes a tree.

And the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. And we've talked about the birds of the air. They have occurred in both of these parables now.

And what do we know about the birds? I mentioned this last time. The birds that come and snatch away the word before it can penetrate. Because it did not penetrate.

Because there was not a good and noble heart receiving that word. The birds snatch it away. Birds are a bad thing.

And I am reminded that one of the first places you see this characteristic of birds is back in the book of Genesis. When God has Abraham make a very special covenant sacrifice. Turn with me back to the book of Genesis.

I'll actually have to look for the chapter. It's in the vicinity of 16 through 18. And you remember that God told Abraham to take several different animals and cut them in half.

Do you remember that? And then Abraham is to wait. And nothing happens all day long. Is it 15? Thank you.

I knew if I searched long enough I would either find it or someone would help me out. God's covenant with Abraham in chapter 15 of Genesis. In verse 7, God says I'm the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to inherit it.

Abraham says in verse 8, Lord God how shall I know that I will inherit it? God says bring me a three-year-old heifer, three-year-old female goat, three-year-old ram, a turtle dove and a young pigeon. So he brought all these things to him and cut them in two down the middle and placed each piece opposite the other. But he did not cut the birds in two.

And you remember there's a similar use of birds in Leviticus 14 with the cleansing of a leper where you use two birds instead of one. So when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abraham drove them away. Verse 11.

So Abraham sits there all day long. And in verse 12, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham. Horror and great darkness fell upon him.

This is not without significance. We've looked at it in great detail. But the horror and darkness as Abraham, Abraham sleeps.

This is affirmation of a wonderful, gracious covenant promise to Abraham. But in order to receive that affirmation, Abraham spends the day battling away the birds of the air who want to come and pick at the pieces of these sacrificial animals. And as he falls asleep, there is darkness and great horror before the fulfillment, before the affirmation, before the presence of God represented by the smoking oven and burning torch in verse 17 passes between those pieces.

This is important to remember as we look at Matthew chapter 13 and the interpretation of the parables. It's not all roses. Must I be born on flowery beds of ease as the old hymn lyric goes? Jesus said in this world, you will have tribulation.

But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. Doesn't change.

His overcoming doesn't change the fact that we're going to face some difficulties. One of the difficulties is the birds trying to come and mess up Abraham's obedience to God in presenting these sacrificial animals. Abraham has to stay there and he's got to shoo the birds of the air away.

When we have the word of God, the enemy is going to try to snatch it away before it sinks into our hearts. We do not want to be hard packed ground. We want that seed to sink in and produce roots that are deep and permanent and to bear its fruit.

But there is the threat of the birds of the air. There are always birds. The second parable, if you turn back to Matthew chapter 13, also talks about birds.

Mustard seed, which is lesser of the seeds, but when it is grown, it is greater than herbs and becomes a tree and birds of the air come and nest in its branches. It's been a lot of interesting commentary about the mustard seed parable. There are those who suggest that the mustard seed is Jesus himself because it's a very small single seed mentioned here in the parable.

And it is as though God the father is the sower, the Lord Jesus is the seed. And putting that one king into his garden, into Israel, produces the kingdom, the tree, which is the kingdom. It starts with the seed, which is Jesus himself.

You could go back to Genesis and say, you know, there will be enmity between thy seed and her seed, and it gets a little bit fanciful at that point. But the interesting thought, whether it pertains to this parable or not, I thought it was really a cool observation that a mustard seed only releases its power. You only get the taste and the smell when the

seed is bruised, when it is crushed.

And, of course, it is in the bruising of the Lord Jesus that the power for salvation and the potential for the kingdom is released. So whether or not that's what Jesus had in mind with the mustard seed parable, I wanted to share that with you because I thought it was a nice insight. And it is true of the Lord Jesus, whether it's present in this parable or not.

It's like some other passages we sometimes use conveniently, although maybe the meaning we are pressing them for might not have been intended. What we do understand is that the mustard tree represents the kingdom, and that as it grows over time, as it becomes large enough, birds begin to roost in its branches. And birds are typically a bad thing.

And even when you think, well, didn't birds, didn't the ravens feed Elijah at the brook Cherith? I see a picture there of God using the secular world and our secular job and our employment, which has nothing to do at first blush with being believers, or we reflect our faith indirectly as we do our jobs as under the Lord and so on. But we get sustenance from the world, and there can be a lot of evil in the company we work for. There can be sin on the part of the people who oversee us or who treat their underlings unfairly and so on.

But it is true that God uses the things of this world and provides for us despite the fact that the source is not perfect, and the source may in some cases actually be doing quite a bit of wrong. But God used ravens to feed Elijah. He can use the ravens to feed us.

It doesn't mean that the birds are suddenly good just because they are forced by God to take care of his people. Then in verse 33 we have the parable of the leaven. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven.

Leaven universally in scripture represents evil, the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. And I entertained arguments from several sources this past week that, well, the idea of the leaven is that it spreads, and it doesn't necessarily always have to be bad. Eagles are birds, and they're a good thing.

Those who wait upon the Lord will mount up with wings as eagles. One of the faces of the cherubim is an eagle head, and couldn't that be a good thing? Okay, if you want to disassociate the spreading nature, the flowing and fulfilling nature of the leaven, I just always get nervous when I see leaven, because every place you find it, it seems to represent something bad. But the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.

Who is the woman? Is it important to figure out who the woman is? I saw a man who said, I'm horrified by the suggestion that the woman is the Holy Spirit. That just doesn't seem appropriate to make the Holy Spirit a woman hiding the truth of the gospel in the

church and having it spread throughout. Here's the thing about leaven.

And if you want to or don't want to attach the negative connotation to leaven here, one thing is safe to say. Once the leaven has been placed in the three measures of meal, the entire lump, the entire portion, this is over a bushel of meal, is now characterized by it. Anybody can look at that meal, that lump of dough, and see that it is leavened.

When you're trying to bake a thing that's supposed to rise, you're doing a cake or a loaf of bread, you can tell immediately if you overheated your, what do we call leaven in those packets? Yeast. You know, you can kill your yeast if you put it in too hot of water, and because it's killed, the dough doesn't rise. You can tell by looking if it has risen or not.

And you can tell by looking what has happened when leaven has been hidden in a thing. There are those who suggest that leaven represents spiritual power because it's invisible. You don't see how it works in the ancient world particularly.

They didn't realize that it's, you know, little animalcules, little minuscule biological creatures who are excreting gas as they digest things that are in the dough. They just knew that if you had a little piece of leavened dough and you put it in some new dough, suddenly it would spread through the whole thing and it would all be leavened as these little creatures spread and infiltrate the entire thing. So the main idea is the spread.

In the kingdom, as it grows like a tree, you have more and more birds roosting in the branches. As a lump of dough, as the kingdom over time continues to exist, it is more and more infiltrated by and characterized by and begins to look like leavened dough instead of unleavened dough. Change over time, residence of evil over time.

So, we look at these parables. All of them involve time, whether it is the seed that is sowed on various kinds of soil. Time reveals how well the seed is doing in that soil.

Time reveals what happens to the mustard tree. Time reveals what happens to the dough where leaven is hidden. I see the hidden leaven personally in the millennial kingdom as suppressed evil.

The rule with the rod of iron, the perfect government, the capital punishment, the suppression of evil forces it out of sight and underground. It is going to be entertained in men's hearts. It is going to be invisible.

It will not be overt because the Lord's government quickly deals with it. And it does not appear on the surface. But over time, the kingdom is going to be permeated more and more by those who are going to be willing to run to Satan when he is released from the bottomless pit at the end of the ten centuries.

And there is going to be so many people that have been invisible in the kingdom. Kind of

like the tares that have not yet revealed themselves to not be wheat. But when Satan is released, suddenly it galvanizes all of these hidden rejecters, those who have a rebellious heart but are overtly obedient.

They're going to be revealed when Satan is released. And it's going to be apparent that the entire lump has been leavened. If you are looking for unleavened bread to put on the table of showbread, if you are looking for unleavened bread to celebrate the Passover, leavened bread won't do.

And if leaven has been hidden in it and you want unleavened, you can't remove the leaven from leavened bread. You can't reverse that process. Once the birds have nested in the branches of the tree, it's well nigh impossible to get the birds out of the tree.

They have come there and that's a one-way process that happens over time, as we're going to see in the parable of the wheat and the tares. Once those tares are sown in the field, you can't really un-sow them. So what do you do? Well, in another place, we're going to see what happens if leaven is present where you don't want it.

We're going to see what happens if a tree becomes something that is not desirable anymore. We're going to see what happens to a field that is sown with an undesirable element. But for us, by way of application, over time we realize that there are things, as people say, up with which we have to put.

There are things that must be endured. There is the presence of evil in the world. There is the presence of evil in our government.

There is the presence of evil in our culture and in our society. And it can be growing over time. We see it.

We can be alarmed by it. And yet, it is not appropriate to go after it, to try to remove it by force. God doesn't send a servant with a stick up into the mustard tree to try to bat away the birds.

He doesn't use some sort of mysterious process to take the leaven back out of the meal. And He does not send His servants into the field that has been sown with tares to try to remove the tares before the process is complete, before the growing season is complete, before the time of harvest. It has to be tolerated.

You can be in and among evil without being of it, a part of it, or tainted by it. The wheat is always separate from the tares. The tree is always different than the birds.

And the kingdom, as something that becomes more and more infiltrated and characterized by and visibly changed by the presence of the leaven, the woman doesn't take the dough as soon as she sees it start to rise and throw it out. It stays there. There is a purpose in allowing leaven.

There's a purpose in allowing birds. There's a purpose in allowing tares. God has an ultimate purpose in leaving us in the midst of these things for a specified time.

There's a time when the dough stops rising. There's a time when the tree gets as big as it's going to get. There is a time of harvest for the field.

So by way of application, having parsed the parable and seen the truths that it contains about the millennial kingdom, what does it mean for us? We can sometimes get quite vexed, quite oppressed by things in our lives, things in our circumstances, things in our country, in our culture, in our government, in the world at large that seem to be growing worse and worse and worse. In our end time study, we've seen that many of these can be graphed with the hockey stick shape, where they just seem to be exponentially worse by the week, by the day, sometimes by the hour. Application for us, do not be alarmed.

It is a part of God's plan that these things be allowed to exist and to grow. It's not the place of the wheat to try to choke out the weeds. It's not a place of the dough to try to expel the leaven.

It's not the place of the mustard tree to shake its branches and get rid of the birds. God has got the solution in hand. He has chosen to allow these things to coexist.

Have you ever seen the bumper stickers coexist and it's got all these little symbols for the various religions? Well, there is a mustard seed of truth in that, that God has not purged the world at this point. He will allow a space of time. You think about the pre-flood civilization.

At the right time, God sent the flood. At the right time, God judged Israel. At the right time, God sent the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the right time in the millennial kingdom, these things will be dealt with. It is at the end of the age. It is at the harvest.

The axe will be laid to the root of the trees. The chaff will be burned. The tares will be burned.

The wheat will be gathered into the barn. But this gathering is something that is done at God's behest. And this is a strong argument against us trying to build the kingdom so that He will come, to build a Christian nation, to purge out evil elements in our own strength and by our own energies.

We have the power of our vote. We have the power of our voice. We have the power of our presence.

We can shine as lights in the midst of our crooked and perverse generation. We can be salt. We can evidence hope in a way that causes people to ask us what the reason is for

it.

But overt crusader action to improve society, to purge evils, doesn't seem to be God's way. The job of the wheat is to grow. The job of the tree is to grow.

We are to be those of a good and noble heart. Receive the word that is implanted in us and bear fruit. Not worry about is the stalk next to me a tare? Should I try to reach over there with one of my wheat stalks and uproot that weed? God has got reapers that are going to take care of that job.

So, again, the point of our first session, not only do we want to understand these parables historically and dispensationally, but also personally. God's way is always God's way. He has a time when He will judge.

Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord. The Lord will judge His people. And it's up to us to tend to our knitting, to hoe our own row, as my grandmother used to say.

We've got our hands full being improved ourselves by the presence and power of the Spirit and of the word. Let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to look at the interpretation that Jesus gives for the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Fascinating, not only for what it says about Israel and the kingdom, but for what it says to and for us. Let's pause here and take our break.