

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MATTHEW 13:31, 32

WE now come to the first of the parables of which the King gave no distinct explanation. It is therefore important that we proceed with care. There are perils of interpretation which we must avoid, and principles of interpretation which we must observe.

The perils to which I refer are two:

- First, popularity of opinion;
- Secondly, misinterpretation of history.

Unless we guard against the first we shall constantly find ourselves mistaken as to the meaning of Scripture. The fact that in the judgment of a majority of expositors a passage has a certain meaning is not necessarily proof that that meaning is correct. Popular interpretations of the Old Testament Scriptures resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

We need also very carefully to guard against a misinterpretation of history which may drive us to misinterpretation of the parables. We may be inclined to say these parables mean certain things because of what has happened in the centuries: while yet as a matter of fact we do not correctly understand the history.

As to the principles of interpretation. First, we must expect to find in this parable harmony of teaching with the other parables. We must be suspicious of any interpretation of the one parable which contradicts that of any other. We may take it for granted that Christ is consistent in His teaching. Hence the value of the fact that the first two parables were explained by the King Himself.

From these explanations we may proceed to an examination of all the rest. Once again, we must remember the consistency of our Lord's figures. He does not confuse them in His use. The sower of the different parables always represents the same person, and so throughout. When He has given us the explanation of a figure we may apply that explanation uniformly. Let us now inquire into the meaning of our parable, remembering both the perils and principles of interpretation. It is generally believed that by it Jesus intended to teach the satisfactory growth of the Kingdom idea until it became dominant in human history, and an expositor of Holy Scripture, whom I personally value most highly, but from whom at this point I differ, expresses the popular interpretation as follows:

“The parables already considered might suggest that the Kingdom was destined to partial and shaded success. The first spoke of three parts of the seed as coming to nothing, and the second, of the fourth part as coming up amid tares. The listeners might say, ‘Is this all?’ Therefore in the next two, our Lord sets forth a brighter aspect of the future of the Kingdom, exhibiting in the former its growth from small beginnings to great magnitude, and in the second its transforming influence on the mass in which it is deposited.”

Such a view admits in the first two parables what they most certainly suggest and teach; but it then declares that the next two contradict that teaching. I claim, therefore, that such interpretation, though popular, is incorrect.

Take the history of the Kingdom during the past nineteen centuries. Is there anyone who will care to affirm that it has been a complete success? Is it not true if I may borrow this phrase again that it has met only with “partial and shaded success”? Who will care to say that the Kingdom of God has ever been truly exhibited among men?

We talk very glibly about Christian nations; but there are no Christian nations. Of course, if we use the phrase in a limited sense we may by comparison be called Christian nations; but even so I fear that our Christianity, manifested nationally, is of a very poor type. The world has never seen the Kingdom of God set up in perfection yet; and notwithstanding the fact that nineteen centuries have passed away, the Kingdom idea of Jesus has met with but “partial and shaded success.”

Let no one misinterpret me, God is not failing. He is doing the work He intends to do, and beyond the little while of this age and the tiny span of our endeavor, He has other and mighty work to accomplish. Do not let us ever attempt to interpret the doings of God by the appearances of half an hour, or half a millennium. To make any parable teach the complete and final success of the Kingdom purpose in the present age is not only to misinterpret the other parables to make them square with this idea, but it is to misinterpret the actual facts of history.

The general teaching of the parables is that throughout this age there will be difficulty, limitation, admixture, opposition. Separation between the conflicting elements is postponed to the consummation of the age, when perfect victory will follow.

Now, notice the figures in this parable which have appeared in previous ones.

- The seed - and we have already seen that in the thought of Jesus the seed is ever that of human lives in which the word has been realized.
- The sower according to His own teaching - the sower is Himself, the Son of Man.
- The soil and as we have heard Him say, “**the field is the world.**”
- The birds and according to His interpretation already given, they are such as harm rather than help.

These facts must be kept in mind as we proceed to examine this parable, first as to the picture presented, and then as to the lessons taught.

The picture presented is one of an unnatural development, and unintended issue. The mustard is well known in Palestine, and is not a tree, but a herb. As a tree it has been well described as a “garden shrub outdoing itself,” and all attempts to make it symbolic of unqualified success are of the nature of special pleading. In connection with this parable I have been interested to notice how many expositors refer to a sentence in Dr. Thomson’s *The Land and the Book*. He says:

“Is this wild mustard that is growing so luxuriantly and blossoming so fragrantly along our path? It is; and I have always found it here in the spring; and, a little later than this, the whole surface of the vale will be gilded over with its yellow flowers. I have seen this plant on the rich plain of Akkar as tall as the horse and his rider.”

It is this last sentence which is so constantly quoted in support of the idea that the mustard seed becomes a tree. Let us, however, read further from Dr. Thomson in this connection. He continues:

“It has occurred to me on former visits that the mustard tree of the parable probably grew at this spot, or possibly at Tabiga, near Capernaum, for the water in both is somewhat similar and so are the vegetable productions. To furnish an adequate basis for the parable, it is necessary to suppose that a variety of it was cultivated in the time of our Saviour, which grew to an enormous size, and shot forth large branches, so that the fowls of the air could lodge in the branches of it. It may have been perennial and have grown to a considerable tree, and there are traditions in the country of such so large that a man could climb into them; and after having seen red pepper bushes grow on year after year into tall shrubs, and the castor bean line the brooks about Damascus like the willows and poplars, I can readily credit the existence of mustard trees large enough to meet the demands of our Lord’s parable.”

Thus it is evident that Dr. Thomson, after careful observation, was convinced that it was possible for there to be, occasionally and exceptionally, a mustard tree large enough to correspond with the description of Jesus.

What is the necessary and simple deduction? That if there be such a tree it is abnormal, unnatural, something which has escaped its original intention.

Again, so accurate a writer as Dr. Hamilton says:

“When this little seed is sown in the ‘garden’ or ‘field’ it shoots up, and soon overtops the pulse and other potherbs around it and becomes a ‘great tree;’ not meaning thereby an oak or a cedar, but a plant sufficiently tall and expansive for birds to find shelter in the branches.”

These quotations serve to show the difficulty that the popular interpretation of this parable at once creates. A mustard seed cannot properly and normally produce a magnificent and far-spreading tree. It must be recognized that Jesus was describing something out of the ordinary, something unnatural. The mustard is a herb and not a tree, and if it so happen that the mustard plant, which is naturally small and unobtrusive, pass out of the stage of the yellow flowering herb of beauty to that of a great and mighty tree with branches, then both process and result are abnormal and unnatural. Dr. Carr says:

“The mustard plant does not grow to a very great height, so that Luke’s expression, ‘**waxed a great tree**’ must not be pressed.”

But I cannot consent so to deal with Luke’s expression. I must abide by the actual words, and doing so I learn from the lips of Jesus the fact of the perverted growth of the Kingdom in this age. The mustard seed was to become greater than all herbs, but when it becomes greater than its true species it is abnormal. It is not what the man who planted it intended it to be, and the fact that it affords lodgment in its branches for the birds of the heaven, proves its abnormality.

What, then, are the lessons which the parable teaches us?

First, that in this age there will be an unnatural development of the Kingdom principle.

The true line of development is suggested by the figure of the mustard seed which is that of lowliness, meekness, unobtrusiveness. What has been the actual development? From the mustard seed, the herb denoting humility, has arisen a great and lofty tree significant of pride, dominance, mastership.

I recall a conversation I once had with Sir Hall Caine, soon after the publication of his book, *The Christian*. I strongly objected to what seemed to me to be a misinterpretation of the Christian ideal in that book, and I said to him.

“Do you mean to tell the world that John Storm is a Christian?”

His answer was a remarkable one.

“By no means. I intend to teach the fact that we do not understand what Christ really taught.”

He then gave me two illustrations of what he meant. “I am prepared,” he said, “to put the whole ethical teaching of Jesus into two phrases: first, ‘**He that is greatest among you shall be your servant**’ and second, ‘**Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth.**’ “

I am not for the moment discussing the comprehensiveness of these two principles I am simply quoting Sir Hall Caine. He then declared, what is perfectly patent to all of us, that our national greatness is such as has resulted from our violation of these two principles. *We have sought power before service, and possession before sacrifice.*

Turning from Sir Hall Caine’s declaration of the nation’s failure to realize the Kingdom, I ask if the Church of God has realized that Kingdom in its ideal of lowliness, of meekness, of service? In the days when Jesus was preaching the Kingdom His own immediate followers were constantly asking, “Who is master among us?” “Who is the greatest among us?” “Who shall sit at the King’s right hand in power?” In the early Church the same spirit was manifest, men so craving for mastership, homage, power, that Peter was compelled to write to those who had oversight of the flock of God, charging them not to “**lord it**” over God’s heritage.

In process of time Constantine espoused the cause of Christianity. With reference to this epoch one of the old expositors says that the mustard seed planted in Judea was but a small thing, but it suddenly sprang into a tree, great and magnificent, in that wonderful hour when Constantine became a Christian. That statement is, I believe, true, but was the development good or bad? Did it help Christianity or hinder it? I am of opinion that nothing so hindered the true Kingdom principle in the world, as Constantine's espousal of the cause of Christianity.

In the Papacy the same principle is manifest. The spirit of the Church which desires worldly power and worldly authority, is the very opposite of the spirit of lowliness and meekness and service. The small and lowly seed has become a great tree, and into its branches the fowls of the air have come to lodge. Greatness in external and material things is but a false greatness, and wherever the Church has risen to anything like worldly power it has become a refuge for the things that are unclean and polluting and life-destructive.

We must remind ourselves again that the Lord in these parables is not dealing with the true nature of the Kingdom, neither is He declaring the ultimate issue thereof.

God's Kingdom will yet be set up on this earth, and the true principles of greatness revealed in His own humility and enunciated in His teaching will be the principles which obtain in the affairs of the world.

Somewhere on in that dim distance and measuring distances by our measures it sometimes looks a long way he will be counted great who has girded himself with a towel to serve.

Sometime, when God's great Kingdom comes, we shall not imagine that he is great who has mastered his fellow man; rather, he who has served him in lowly and loving unobtrusiveness.

The ideal is already dawning. Men are beginning to see its glory. An influence is being exerted to-day among men which will come to harvest when the King Himself comes.

Do not imagine that this parable teaches the ultimate failure of the Kingdom life and growth, but it does teach comparative failure, the result of misinterpretation and misapplication of the ideals of Jesus.

Men have attempted by manipulation of material things to make of Christianity a great imperial power. The figure of the tree as denoting worldly greatness was used of Nebuchadnezzar and of Pharaoh, and in this sense our Lord made use of it. True to His prediction, the seed typifying the meekness and lowliness of the Kingdom ideal has developed along a false line which has resulted in a tree of worldly power affording shelter and protection to that which is evil and dishonoring.

What is the bearing of this study upon us?

Surely first the recognition of the facts of the case in order that we may be aided thereby in our life and service.

I pass by that application, however, that in a closing word I may make a personal one. In our individual life, and so far as possible in our Church capacity, we ought to attempt to realize the purpose of the King. We ought to be ready to turn from the false greatness which He disowns to the true greatness which He recognizes.

In individual life, and also in the corporate life of the Church, we shall realize His purpose in proportion as we remember that in meekness and lowliness, in unceasing zeal and consecrated service, in perpetual outpouring of the life in sacrificial toil, in endless running on His errands of tender mercy we shall be most loyal to the King, and shall best give the world to see the infinite contrast between the material ideal of pomp and pageantry and pride, and the spiritual ideal of simplicity and sweetness and service.

Christ was under no delusion as to what would happen in this age.

- A sower sowing seed, and only a quarter of it responsive!
- A sower sowing seed, and an enemy sowing darnel!
- A sower sowing seed which transgresses the bounds of its own nature and becomes a tree sheltering evil things.

It is for us to bow in the presence of His knowledge of the characteristics of the age which He was introducing; but it is ours, moreover, to give ourselves so fully to Him in consecration as to realize in the sphere of our own responsibility His ideals and His purposes, and so to move toward the consummation of the age, and the dawning of the one which lies beyond.

~ end of chapter 35 ~

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