

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parables of the yeast** in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21 and **the parable of the mustard seed** in Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-34 and Luke 13:18-19. These are parables concerning THE GROWTH OF GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Please read Matthew 13:31-33, Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-21 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Luke 13:20-21 says, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Mark 4:30-32 says, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is *the smallest* seed you plant in the ground. Yet, when planted, it grows and becomes *the largest* of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

What are the true-to-life elements of the stories of these two parables?

(S) The quantity of meal. The Bible literally says that the woman "took yeast and hid it in three measures of meal." This was quite a large quantity of meal. Some say that this was about 22 litres of meal.

(T) The yeast is a substance consisting of fungous cells. These cells develop by germination in contact with sugar liquids and produce fermentation. In the Bible yeast was used to cause wine to ferment and bread to rise.

(S) The mustard seed is of Egyptian origin and is the smallest among seeds sown in a garden. Proverbially it indicates anything very minute in its beginning. But though insignificant at first, the mustard seed grows and grows until it becomes a tree.

(T) The mustard tree. In Palestine, the mustard tree is a very large garden plant and can reach a height of three to five metres. In the autumn, its branches become rigid so that many birds come to take shelter in it. The Bible says, they come "to make their tents" in its branches. Thus, the birds come to shelter from the storm, rest from weariness and shade from the heat of the sun. They also come to feed on the very small black seeds, which they remove from the pods, but this feature is not mentioned in the parable. Thus, all in all, the picture of the mustard tree is that of a wonderful place to make one's home!

(S) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

In the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, *the setting* is contained in Matthew 13:3-30,34-35. It shows that Jesus spoke the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast to the crowds in close connection with the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

The stories of these parables are contained in Matthew 13:31-33, Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-21.

The explanation or application of these parables is not given by Jesus. The parables must therefore be interpreted from the stories themselves and their context.

(T) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

The yeast is a relevant detail, because Jesus compares the kingdom of God with it. However, this detail has been interpreted differently by different Christians. *In the Bible, a particular symbol may have either a bad or a good significance, depending on the context.* For example, the symbol of "a serpent" is *bad* in Genesis 3:13, where he deceived Eve and tempted her to sin. However, the symbol of "the serpent" is *good* in Numbers 21:8, where it symbolised Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross. Likewise, the symbol of "yeast" has a *bad* meaning in Matthew 16:6, where Jesus warns against the teachings and religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees. But in the parable of the yeast, the symbol "yeast" has a *good* meaning, where, as Jesus himself teaches, it clearly represents "the kingdom or kingship of God", that is, "the reign of God, which is wholeheartedly acknowledged in the heart and life of the Christian." Yeast

has the characteristic to ferment until it has permeated the whole batch of dough. It represents *the transforming influence of the kingdom of God in life*.

(S) The mustard seed is a relevant detail, because Jesus compares the kingdom of God with it. Because this is the *smallest* of the seeds of the garden plants, it represents *the insignificant small beginning of the kingdom of God in life*.

The mustard tree is also a relevant detail, because the mustard seed becomes a very useful mustard tree. The mustard tree, which is *a very large* garden plant and gives a place for the birds of heaven to make their tents, represents *the significant great results of the kingdom of God in life*.

(T) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the yeast and the parable of the mustard seed teach about *the growth of God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable of the yeast is that "once the reign of God has been established in the hearts of Christians, it will continue its process of influence until it has transformed and renewed everything." The main message of the parable of the mustard seed is that "although the kingdom of God has an insignificant small beginning, it grows to very great results." While the parable of the yeast emphasises especially *the hidden and inward growth* of the kingdom of God, the parable of the mustard seed emphasises especially *the visible and outward growth* of the kingdom of God. The parable of the yeast teaches that the saving, preserving and creative influence of the reign of God through the Holy Spirit in the hearts of Christians *will effect every sphere of their personal lives*. It will affect every aspect of their personality, character, behaviour, relationships, work and ministry. And the parable of the mustard seed teaches that the saving, preserving and creative influence of the reign of God in the hearts and lives of Christians *will eventually effect every sphere of life in the world*. It will affect family life, education, government, industry, commerce and the nations in the world.

Acknowledging the sovereign work of God in the inward and outward growth of his kingdom is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. The people of God's kingdom acknowledge God's complete sovereignty in all matters that relate to the inward and outward growth of his kingdom. The kingdom in its final manifestation will have permeated everyone and encompass everything that will be a part of the new heaven and the new earth. *No shameful or deceitful person and nothing impure will ever enter it* (Mt 13:41; Rev 21:27).

(S) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

How do these parables compare to the other parables concerning growth in God's kingdom?

(T) The parable of the sower emphasises *the human responsibility* with respect to the seed, which is the word of God. The seed cannot sprout, grow, and bear fruit unless it falls into good soil. It means that the gospel or the message of the New Testament will only bear fruit when the heart of man responds favourably to it.

(S) The parable of the seed growing in secret emphasises *the divine sovereignty* with respect to the seed, which is the word of God. God alone causes the establishment and progress of his reign in the hearts, lives and spheres of people. It is because of his sovereign will that the spiritual seed, which represents the word of God, asserts its increasingly powerful influence upon the hearts of people and consequently on society in general.

(T) The parable of the yeast and the parable of the mustard seed emphasise *the abundant result of spiritual growth*, when man co-operates with God. Philippians 2:12-13 says, "Therefore, ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Thus, *when man works out his salvation, as the parable of the sower emphasises, because God is working within him, as the parable of the seed growing in secret emphasises, then abundant growth is the result, as the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed emphasise!* Practically, inner healing, positive self-esteem, growth in love, faith, hope, confidence and increase in evangelisation and world missions are some of the effects of the kingdom of God in the lives of Christians.

(S) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parables.

(T) The main message of these four parables about the growth of God's kingdom is that when man's good response to God's word co-operates with God's irresistible work in his heart, then abundant growth will be the result in both the inward and outward life of man and in every sphere of human society in the world. ***When man willingly co-operates with God's sovereign work within him, then abundant growth is the result*** (Phil 2:12-13)!

The parable of the sower emphasises *the human responsibility to respond favourably* to God's word. The parable of the seed growing secretly emphasises *the irresistible sovereign work of God's word* in people and in the world. The parable of the yeast emphasises *the inward growth* and the parable of the mustard seed emphasises *the outward growth*, which the reign of God causes in the lives of individual people as well as in the whole human society in the world.

(S) God's kingdom is established by Someone outside man himself. The parables of the sower, the weeds among the wheat, the seed growing secretly, the yeast and the mustard seed all teach that man is only saved by *a Saviour coming from outside himself*. Nobody can pull himself up by his own shoelaces! Likewise nobody can think, talk or work his way into God's kingdom by himself. God takes the sovereign initiative to send Jesus Christ and other people to sow the seed of the gospel in your heart. They preach the gospel to you before you can even begin to respond by conversion and faith (Act 13:46-48). God works irresistibly through the Holy Spirit to cause the seed of the gospel to germinate, to grow and to bear fruit (Jn 3:3-8). Only God draws people to Jesus Christ (Jn 6:44,37).

(T) God's kingdom operates from the inside of man to the outside of man. The parable of the yeast and of the mustard seed teach that once the reign of Christ through the Holy Spirit has been established in the heart of a person, it also begins to operate from the inside of man to the outside of man! The reign of Christ will continue its process of influence until it has transformed and renewed everything that will be a part of the new earth. *The kingship of Christ inside a Christian* penetrates every aspect of a Christian's being and results in changing his thoughts, motives, attitudes, character, and his speaking, behaviour, relationships and ministry, just like yeast penetrates the whole batch of dough. *And the kingship of Christ outside the Christian* exerts its influence for good in the person's own life, his circumstances, his family life and his life in society, just like the mustard tree becomes a place for the birds of the air to make their home.

The kingship of Christ is in the process of capturing every area of human life. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul states his purpose as a Christian worker, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." God's kingdom through Christ not only brings people into a personal relationship with God, but its purpose is to bring every thought into submission and therefore in harmony with the mind of Jesus Christ. The kingship of Christ progressively brings more and more tongues to confess Christ as Lord and more and more knees to bow before him as Lord (Phil 2:9-11).

The great result of God's kingdom in the world is that every aspect of human culture and human endeavour begins to be blessed. Not only the church, but also science, art, literature, education, farming, business, industry, commerce, government, and all the other departments of human thought and endeavour begin to be blessed by the activities of Christians. Throughout the Christian era, Christians have had a great influence on the establishment of hospitals, care of the handicapped, the abolition of slavery, the restoration of woman's rights, the alleviation of poverty, the education of the illiterate, the promotion of honesty and incorruptibility among people who govern and do business, the treatment of prisoners of war, women, workers and the underprivileged, etc. The kingdom of God promotes truth, love, holiness, faithfulness, sincerity, courage and justice, etc. among the people on earth! The Bible does not teach that this ideal will be reached before the Second Coming of Christ. Only through the cataclysmic events at the Second Coming of Christ, will the kingdom of God in its perfect and final form be established. But meanwhile, the growth of God's kingdom is taking place through the proclamation of the gospel and through the obedience of Christians to God's word.

(S) The outward manifestation of God's kingdom is gradual. The parable of the mustard seed teaches that the beginning of God's kingdom is seemingly insignificant, but from this small beginning great results will grow. Matthew 3:11 teaches that also this truth is *a mystery or secret* that needs further clarification or re-emphasis.

Christ's loyal followers were often impatient. Relatively speaking, this group was so small and weak that at times they must have almost despaired. John 6:15 and Acts 1:6 relate that they were looking for revolutionary political changes right here and now. They may have referred to the words of John the Baptist, "After me will come one who is more powerful than I. ... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:11-12). They expected cataclysmic events to happen immediately or at least very soon!

Also the Old Testament teaches that spiritual great results generally develop from small beginnings. For example, Ezekiel 17:22-24 says, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take *a shoot* from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off *a tender sprig* from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the

Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it'."

The New Testament also refers to this, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor 1:26-31).

The parable of the mustard seed teaches that God's rule of grace, no matter how despised and seemingly insignificant at its beginning, is destined to go forward and continually conquer more and more people, their hearts, lives and every sphere of their lives. This parable encourages the followers of Christ to be patient, to trust and obey, to keep on praying and proclaiming the gospel, because God's plan and programme cannot fail!

(T) ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. As preparation, please read Matthew 13:44-46.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".