

Three Further Parables of Growth (13:24–33)

From Matthew 13:10 till this point Jesus has been speaking to his disciples.

“Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”” (Matthew 13:10, ESV)

Reading Matthew 13:34, we see that this new material starting here in Matthew 13:24 is spoken to the crowds.

“All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.” (Matthew 13:34, ESV)

The Parable of the Weeds (13:24–30)

We left off in 13:23 with the good soil. We now pick up with that soil and see Satan’s plan to affect the good seed flourishing in the good soil. Not only does Jesus sow seed, the devil does as well.

“If the enemy cannot keep the seed from striking root, which is his *first* goal in history, as the drama of the first soil in the first parable taught, then our second parable teaches that he works *next* to distract workers from their preoccupation with the Word *by overwhelming them with a loathing of evil*. If the enemy cannot strike the root, he will smash the fruit....”¹

Matthew 13:24 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field,

good seed.... “In the parable of the sower all the seed was good; it was the soil that was the problem. But in this story the problem arises not from the soil but from a second type of seed, so the first seed is declared to be “good.””²

“It would not normally need to be said that a farmer chose *good* seed to sow; the explicit indication anticipates some coming problem.”³

We can see here in Hosea that it is the people of God that he is planting.

“and I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say, ‘You are my God.’” (Hosea 2:23, ESV)

Matthew 13:25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 27.

² France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 525). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

³ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 544). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.



sleeping.... ““Sleeping” (v. 25) does not imply that the servants were neglectful but that the enemy was stealthy and malicious.”⁴

sowed.... He sowed among the good because he was not able to root out the good seed, which would be much preferred but impossible to do.

“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” (John 10:29, ESV)

weeds⁵.... “Bearded darnel is perhaps the most likely suggestion. This weed looks rather like wheat when young, but matures to have a black seed and plays host to a fungus that can be quite toxic to humans.”⁶

among the wheat.... “...the major work of the Evil One is not, as often thought, outside the church but in the midst of her.”⁷ It is the Church that is the major location of Satan’s work. “As the church is the place of both the holiest and unholy sowings on earth, so she is perpetually both divine and demonic....”⁸ The “disciples must not be discouraged when opposition to the gospel comes from ministers of the gospel and leaders in the church.”⁹

Matthew 13:26 *So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.*

Wherever God erects a house of prayer,
The Devil always builds a chapel there;
And 't will be found, upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation.

-- Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)

⁴ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 316). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁵ weeds ζιζάνιον “A plant, in appearance not unlike corn or wheat, having at first the same sort of stalk and the same greenness, but not bringing forth any worthwhile fruit....” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁶ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 545). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 27.

⁸ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 27.

⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 27.

“Because of its similar growth the darnel infestation would not be readily apparent until the plants begin to form ears (hence the weeds “becoming visible” at the time when the wheat “produced a crop,” v. 26), and by that time it is too late to eradicate the darnel without damaging the wheat with which its roots are intertwined.”¹⁰

Matthew 13:27 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’

Here we begin the interpretation. This is similar to the parable of the sower except that instead of Jesus giving the interpretation later, he gives it, at least in part, during the giving of the parable. But in both cases, we are given the meaning of the parable by Jesus himself. However, still the disciples do not fully “get it” so in verse 36 he gives them additional an explanation on its meaning.

“The landowner is being asked whether he or his supplier had exercised adequate quality control for this particular batch of seed. Presumably the presence of some *zizania* [weeds] would not have occasioned surprise, but the second sowing would produce a remarkably large amount. A question about seed quality is quite to the point.”¹¹

We have a tendency as we read the Bible to immediately jump to our age in unpacking its message. But keeping our focus on the immediate context, let’s first look back at chapters 11 & 12 with its story of the coming of the Son of Man and of the response of Israel in unbelief. In the presence of the good seed sowed by Jesus, the question is “*How then does it (Israel) have weeds?*” “*If Jesus and faith in Jesus are the wheat of God, why is this wheat so surrounded by and infected with the weeds of unbelief?*”¹²

In the parable of the soil, only one of the four soils proved useful to farming. Now we are told that even in the good soil, there are bad seed. So, our parables of the soil and seed addresses the issue of unbelief in Israel; Israel is infected with weeds growing alongside of true children of God.

Matthew 13:28 He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’

“...one might ask whether Messiah’s people should immediately separate the crop [Matthew 13:18-23] from the weeds; and this...parable answers the question negatively: there will be a delay in separation until the harvest.”¹³ The addresses the harvest at the end of the world.

An enemy has done this.... The problem is not bad seed. “The landowner is confident that he knows what has happened. This is just the sort of thing that a

¹⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 526). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹¹ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 546). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 28.

¹³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 315–316). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

particular hostile neighbor would do! His confidence is presumably based on previous experience of provocation from this quarter.”¹⁴

do you want us to go and gather them? The slaves offer a solution that the master rejects.

Matthew 13:29 But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.

“But there are disadvantages to this suggestion, perhaps more so when the invasion of *zizania* is so extensive. The wheat will be disturbed. Pulling out the *zizania* will inevitably lead to the uprooting of some of the wheat as well.”¹⁵ The Crusades, Inquisitions, and witch trials all fly in the face of this teaching by Jesus. So, many seeking to extract the tares, have destroyed the people of God.

Matthew 13:30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”

harvest.... ““Harvest” is a common metaphor for the final judgment....”¹⁶

But the enemy is also planting in God’s garden. God has a plan to deal with that. On the day of harvest, he will identify the good and bad fruit and judge accordingly. “...bearing the right fruit is a natural outcome of being the right kind of plant.”¹⁷

“In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel.” (Isaiah 27:12, ESV)

“God sows his people, but Satan is also active, sowing those who seem to be part of the people of God but will prove to be so only falsely. Though Satan’s interference is an affront to God, he will not act decisively yet to root out the problem: the plants growing from the good seed must not be disturbed; they must be given every opportunity to bring their fruit to maturity. But God will not indefinitely tolerate the alien planting. His purpose for his people will be brought to culmination, and what has been sown by Satan is to be rooted out and destroyed.”¹⁸

to be burned.... See Matthew 13:39-42.

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
(Matthew 3:12, ESV)

¹⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 546). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁵ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 546). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 316). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁷ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 547). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁸ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 547). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven (13:31–33)

Anchoring ourselves in the context of Matthew, we note that chapter 11 and 12 were turning points in the story. The religious leaders there are publicly accusing Jesus of working in the power of Satan concluding that he should therefore die. Jesus responds by changing his ministry methods, now using parables to communicate a message that rejects unbelieving Israel, treasonous to the religious leaders of the nation. However, since there is a question as to the meaning of the parables, it is now harder to accuse Jesus of crimes.

The parable of the sower and the soil addresses a major question: why is it that Israel does not respond in mass in repentance and faith to the presence of the Messiah? The answer: bad soil. The parable of the seed continues this discussion asking: why are there few disciples? The answer: bad seed mixed with the good. With these parables, the poor response to Jesus message is explained. And the discouraging fact is, there is but a small group of disciples that express faith in Jesus. The next two parables, the mustard seed and the leaven address what Jesus will do with these small beginnings.

From this interpretation, the Church has focused on the application of these teachings to their situation. They are the offspring of these small beginnings; the tree and the leaven grows in their midst.

Up to this point Jesus has given two parables which he then followed up with authorized interpretations to their meanings. The reader is expected to employ these interpretive keys to understand the following parables. They stand without authorized interpretations, yet we are expected to figure them out. And perhaps to make the transition easier, Jesus continues with sowing. What can be learned from the prior interpretations by Jesus to give proper explanation to these parables?

“The main point of the Little Seed Parables is the contrast between the littleness of the means and the largeness of the end.”¹⁹

O where are kings and empires now
Of old that went and came?
But, Lord, your Church is praying yet,
A thousand years the same.
By A. Cleveland Coxe

Matthew 13:31 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

The kingdom of heaven.... The use of this term in a parable that describes the eventual success of the Church makes it clear that the terms are synonymous.

a grain.... Up to this point, Jesus has been speaking of grains, but here his message changes. The prior two parables have driven home the point; the followers of Jesus are few in number. What can Jesus do with so few?

¹⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 33.

Matthew 13:32 *It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*”

“Reports on the size of mustard bushes suggest a normal range of two to six feet, depending on the variety, with oversized plants of large varieties perhaps becoming as tall as nine feet.”²⁰

all the garden plants.... The greatness of the tree is in relation to the other plants grown in the “garden.” The comparison is with “garden plants” not with California Redwoods. This is also true of the smallness of the seed. It is the smallest seed in the garden, not the world.

The metaphor of trees and birds is common to scripture.

“...whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived—” (Daniel 4:21, ESV)

“On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.” (Ezekiel 17:23, ESV)

“So it towered high above all the trees of the field; its boughs grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots. All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations.” (Ezekiel 31:5–6, ESV)

Jesus provides no explanation as to what this parable means. He expects his audience to figure it out.

“No pious Jew doubted that the kingdom would come and that it would be vast and glorious. What Jesus is teaching goes beyond that: he is saying that there is a basic connection between the small beginnings taking place under his ministry and the kingdom in its future glory. Though the initial appearance of the kingdom may seem inconsequential, the tiny seed leads to the mature plant.”²¹

“There is an impressiveness to the final outcome that might be thought to be lacking in the modest scale of the beginnings; but the beginning already guarantees and in some sense generates the outcome. Matthew appeals to the mysterious forces of life which in the good purpose of God are contained within the seed. Planting sets a dynamic in motion that has its natural outcome in the mature plant. As God can be trusted with the potential in a planted seed, so he can be trusted with the potential set loose by the ministry of Jesus. What is happening in Jesus’ presence makes certain the future (full)

²⁰ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 551). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²¹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelain (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 318). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

coming of the kingdom, precisely because the life of that future kingdom is already making itself manifest.”²²

With but twelve disciples, the kingdom truly has a small beginning. Yet today there are hundreds of millions that identify themselves as Christians. The tree has grown significantly.

The Parable of the Leaven (13:33)

“The general thrust of this parable is the same as that of the mustard seed. The kingdom produces ultimate consequences out of all proportion to its insignificant beginnings.”²³

We here make a transition from good seeds planted in the ground to good bacteria, yeast, planted in bread dough. But the planting or sowing idea is in some sense still with us.

Matthew 13:33 He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

leaven²⁴.... yeast.

“The leaven was a piece of old fermented dough which was stored in fermenting juices until mixed in with the fresh batch of dough.”²⁵

“The normal method of bringing about fermentation in bread-making in the ancient world was to insert into the new dough a small amount of old, fermented dough reserved from the previous baking; it is this “leaven” (or sourdough) rather than “yeast” proper which the woman is here using.”²⁶

three measures of flour.... This is “about eight and a half (Imperial) gallons or thirty-eight liters, which would represent about fifty pounds of flour.”²⁷ She was preparing for a feast! The outcome of these small beginnings is huge.

“With minor variation we reach the same conclusion as with the previous parable: God can be trusted regarding the potential in a lump of leaven; how much more can he be trusted concerning the potential set loose by the ministry of Jesus! What is happening

²² Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 552). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 318–319). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²⁴ *leaven ζύμη* “...leaven employed in making bread rise—‘yeast.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁵ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 553). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁶ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 528). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁷ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 554). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

in Jesus' presence makes certain the future (full) coming of the kingdom, precisely because the life of that future kingdom is already making itself manifest."²⁸

"If there is a distinction between this parable and the last one, it is that the mustard seed suggests extensive growth and the yeast intensive transformation. The yeast doesn't grow, it permeates.... In both parables it is clear that at present the kingdom of heaven operates, not apocalyptically, but quietly and from small beginnings."²⁹

²⁸ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 554). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

²⁹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 319). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.