

## Matthew 13:24–33

<sup>24</sup> He proposed another parable to them. “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. <sup>26</sup> When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup> The slaves of the householder came to him and said, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?’ <sup>28</sup> He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ His slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ <sup>29</sup> He replied, ‘No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup> Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, “First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.”’” <sup>31</sup> He proposed another parable to them. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. <sup>32</sup> It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the ‘birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.’” <sup>33</sup> He spoke to them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened.”

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### Context

This week’s gospel continues with Jesus’ response to the rising opposition from all quarters of first century Palestinian life as described in Mt 11-12. Chapter 12 especially outlines the growing opposition and questions from a broad range of sectors – and, as it happens, Matthew 12 is not part of the Sunday cycle of readings, but is covered extensively in the weekday readings.

In the New American Bible (NAB) translation used by the Church for its proclamation of the gospel, Mt 12 “headers” include the following:

- **Picking Grain on the Sabbath** – Jesus’ status as the authoritative interpreter of the law is exemplified in the incident of the disciples’ plucking and eating grain on the sabbath. The account ends with the clear message: “... *the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath.*” (v.8)
- **The Man with a Withered Hand** – The question of sabbath observance continues as Jesus initiated a challenge to the Pharisees rooted in his earlier question to them: “*If you knew what this meant, I desire mercy, not sacrifice*” (v.7). This account ends with the Pharisee plotting to put Jesus to death.
- **The Chosen Servant** – In the midst of the rising opposition to Jesus from the Pharisees, Matthew pauses and places Jesus’ response in the context of the OT Servant of the Lord. Jesus was fully aware of the rising opposition (v. 15) but continued his healing activity (vv. 15–16). His modesty and gentleness in the face of hostility are viewed as the fulfillment of Isa 42:1–4.
- **Jesus and Beelzebul** – The healing of a possessed man who was blind and mute provides the occasion for exploring the source of Jesus’ power. The healing (v. 22) produces two reactions: wonder on the part of the crowds whether Jesus is the Son of David or Messiah (v. 23), and hostility from the Pharisees, who are convinced that he is the instrument of Satan (v. 24).
- **A Tree and its Fruits** – Jesus takes the offensive with three warnings: (1) Closeness to Jesus is absolutely essential, and the Pharisees must recognize it or run the risk of being on the wrong side when God’s kingdom comes (v. 30). (2) The only unforgivable sin is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, as the Pharisees were doing in the case of Jesus. Failure to recognize the Son of Man for what he is may be understandable and even pardonable, but failure to recognize the source of his power is inexcusable (vv. 31–32). (3) The Pharisees’ opposition to Jesus stems from their wickedness, and in the final judgment they will be judged with regard to their willingness or unwillingness to confess that Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit (vv. 33–37).
- **The Demand for a Sign** – Despite all the miracles that Jesus had already worked, the scribes and Pharisees ask for more signs. The basic meaning of the sign of Jonah seems to involve the preaching of repentance to non-Jews and its acceptance by them. In verse 40, Matthew has given a second

interpretation of the sign of Jonah: the three days spent by the prophet inside the fish (see Jonah 2) were a type or a foreshadowing of the three days between Jesus' death and his resurrection.

- **The Return of the Unclean Spirit** – The passage about the evil spirit's return is joined to the sign of Jonah by its reference to "this evil generation" (vv. 39, 45), and to the entire section beginning at 12:22 by its concern with evil spirits.
- **The True Family of Jesus** – The long treatment of unbelief and rejection that began in the missionary discourse of chapter 10 and continued in the incidents of chapters 11–12 concludes with the definition of the true family of Jesus as those who do God's will.

Chapter 12 tells how widespread is the opposition (or resistance) to Jesus' saving message: Pharisees, the people, and perhaps even those closest to Jesus – his disciples and family. Signs of power and healing only lead to requests for more signs. Why do people not believe? Is there any explanation for the condition of things we have arrived at by the end of Matthew 12? Indeed there is; the explanation begins with simple words: "A sower went out to sow" (13:3)

Matthew 13 is a "day of parables." The parable of the sower is spoken in public to *great crowds* (vv. 1–3), but its explanation and the teaching about parables are spoken only to the disciples (vv. 10–11). More parables are then spoken to 'the crowds' (v. 34), but the crowds are again left behind (v. 36), and the second explanation and further parables are spoken to the disciples in 'the house' (which Jesus had left in v. 1). The unresponsive crowds are thus clearly distinguished from the disciples to whom alone explanation is given, and this distinction is spelt out in vv. 11–17.

This short section of the Gospel according to Matthew presents a quick succession of parables:

- Weeds among the Wheat (vv.24-30)
- Mustard Seed (vv.31-32)
- Yeast (v.33)
  - At this point Jesus leaves the crowd and speaks only to the disciples when he explains the parable of the weeds in the field (vv.36-43)
- The Treasure, the Pearl, and the Net thrown into the Sea (vv.44-50)

Last week's gospel, the parable of the "Sower and the Seed," began Jesus' explanation of why people would resist or refuse *the word of the Kingdom of heaven* (13:19). This "word" is an expression that encapsulates all the proclamations, deeds and miracles given to the people that they might believe (Mt 8-9).

## Commentary

Although our gospel text does not seem to indicate the audience, v.34 (*All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables*) does make it clear that the hearers are not the disciples alone, but that the crowd is again and active participant. Given the disciples' question: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (v.10) and the fact that Jesus is again speaking in parables, it is clear that a larger audience is present.

### Weeds Among the Wheat

This parable is unique to Matthew and unlike the other evangelists who also tell a pericope of the "Sower and the Seed," Matthew's use and placement of this unique parable seems to serve as a reinforcement of the themes of on-going conversion (understanding, action, joy, perseverance in suffering brought about by *tribulation or persecution*, and ultimately bearing fruit superabundantly. The context of the parable is clearly "in the world" that place where *anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit* (v.22).

The opening of the parable might lead some readers astray: "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man." It is standard means of comparison (cf. 7:24; 13:31, 33; 18:23; 22:2; 25:1; 11:16) and reflects

a standard Jewish idiom for “It is this way with the kingdom.” In other words, the “way” is the entire parable, not simply *a man who sowed good seed in his field* (13:24). Yet the man is not unimportant in the story. Unlike the person in the “Sower and the Seed” who may be a worker, a farmer, a hired hand, or the land owner; here in this parable, the *man who sowed good seed in his field* is clearly the *householder* (v.27) who is the *Master* (v.27) and who has *his enemy* (v.25). The man’s authority suits him as an analogy for God. A well-to-do man would easily be a head of a household, which figured as an illustration in rabbinic parables, and even Greek philosophers could employ a householder as an analogy for God.

Given the agrarian character of much of ancient life, it should not surprise us that fields figure prominently as settings in rabbinic parables, but their meaning is entirely *ad hoc* rather than standard. However, given the allegorical use of the soil in vv.3-9 and the apparent reemphasizing of those earlier themes, it may be that the land represents the “soil” of the people of God those who make up the “universe” of people for whom Jesus came to bring salvation. In other words, *the kingdom of heaven*.

Two key figures in the parable are the *enemy* and the *weeds*. The *weeds* are probably darnel, a poisonous plant related to wheat and virtually indistinguishable from it until the ears form. To sow darnel among wheat as an act of revenge was punishable in Roman law, which suggests that the parable depicts a real-life situation. Who would do such a thing? Only an enemy or rival.

With early signs of the infestation, it was perhaps possible to uproot the weeds before their roots were entangled with those of the wheat – something the servants seem willing to propose (v.28). A light infestation of darnel could be tackled by careful weeding, but mistakes would easily be made (v.29). In the case of a heavy infestation the stronger roots of the darnel would be tangled with those of the wheat, making selective weeding impossible.

After the wheat and darnel were grown, they were easily distinguished and reapers could gather the darnel, which did have one use: given the scarcity of fuel, it would be burned.

One should note that this parable is explained in Mt 13, outside our gospel, but closely placed:

<sup>36</sup> Then, dismissing the crowds, he went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” <sup>37</sup> He said in reply, “He who sows good seed is the Son of Man, <sup>38</sup> the field is the world, the good seed the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. <sup>40</sup> Just as weeds are collected and burned (up) with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear.

The identification of the allegorical characters is not hidden, but what is the intention of the parable as a whole, especially as it pertains to the decision by the Master to leave the wheat and the darnel untouched until the harvest. I would suggest that the meaning may well be connected to the unique element of this parable: there are two sowings.

In the parable of the “Sower and the Seed” (vv.3-9) There is one sowing with seed, a symbol of the good and potent word of God, which generates believers, and the issue is “What kind of soil are you?” But in the parable of the “Weeds Among the Wheat” there are two sowings, and the question is “Are the good seed sown by the householder/Jesus? Or are you the toxic seed sown by the enemy/Satan. This is an expression of a Matthean view of two kingdoms: of heaven and of the world.

The parable of the “Weeds Among the Wheat” points out the presence of the kingdom in the world: children of the kingdom must coexist with children of the evil one in this world until the end. As

mentioned above, this reinforces the themes of on-going conversion (understanding, action, joy, perseverance in suffering brought about by *tribulation or persecution*, and ultimately bearing fruit superabundantly “in the world,” that place where *anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit* (v.22).

### *Our Impatience with the Weeds*

The landowner (God) is quite patient and accepts that there will be “weeds” among the harvest – it is the lot of the human enterprises. Some people do not/will not/cannot hear the Word sown in to their lives. The laborers in the parable are quick to want to eradicate the poison. I think history has shown that we reach beyond our calling – not to simply point out error – but to extinguish the source and root of that error. In the first centuries of the Church, when some of the epic battles over theological orthodoxy and heresy were waged, executions were not part of the Church’s response. There might be condemnation, banishment and loss of position, but people were not put to death. Yet a millennia later the island nation of England has its book of Protestant and Catholic martyrs as witness to our human reaction to “weeds” among us, despite the Gospel message.

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez nicely summarizes this point:

In marked contrast to the forbearance and patience of God, there is a tendency among his creatures to distinguish, discriminate and, all too often, to disparage and even to dispose of one another. Differences which are perceived as a measure of weakness or a diminishment of personal worth have unfortunately proven to be sufficient impetus for provoking some of the darkest periods in the history of humankind.

In an effort to separate “good” from “bad”, or the law-abiding from the insurgents, Claudius forced a separation and commanded all Jews to leave Rome (ca. 49-50 C.E.). Centuries later, Jews would be similarly expelled from Spain (1492). Later yet, and in an act of unique horror, Adolf Hitler attempted to definitively separate and annihilate every Jewish person in order to construct what he perceived to be a superior race. When he was finally stopped in 1945, only 3,000,000 out of a population of 9,000,000 Jews in Europe remained alive. Millions of non-Jews were also killed during the third Reich, their only crime being the fact that they were judged as different and therefore lesser than their persecutors.

During the Middle Ages (ca. 1150 C.E.), formal investigative tribunals were established with an eye to safeguarding the integrity and authenticity of the faith. But when Pope Innocent III declared heresy a capital time in 1199 C.E. and when the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 C.E.) provided secular punishment for heretics, all manner of cruelty and injustice ensued. Inquisitors were ruthless in their prosecution of those whose ideas ranged anywhere from the truly heretical to the merely diverse. Those alleged to be heretics had no rights; they were forced to prove their own innocence without benefit of counsel.

Similar attempts at separating those judged to be orthodox from those who were not resulted in the infamous witch trials which swept Europe from the thirteenth to the early eighteenth century and crossed the Atlantic to take hold in the Americas in the seventeenth century. Religious intolerance perpetrated the torture and deaths of actual practitioners of black magic, necromancy, etc. as well as others who were accused simply because they happened to have red hair, or who, because of nervousness may have stumbled through the Lord’s Prayer.

Segregation and separation of peoples because of their different ideas, or social mores, has been a blight on the visage of humanity for centuries.

### The Mustard Seed and Yeast

There is much debate over the meaning of these two short parables. Some Christians believe that the imagery of the parables is meant to portray the presence of evil within professing Christendom. This is due primarily to an understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven as a “mystery” encompassing Christendom, understood as organized Christianity. Christendom as a whole contains evil elements mixed with the good, so both parables are usually viewed as picturing that evil. The birds nesting in the mustard tree are unbelievers. It is also pointed out that yeast is often a symbol of evil (Exod 12:15, 19; Matt 16:6, 11–12; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Gal 5:9; but see Lev 7:13–14; 23:17) and asserted that the parable of the yeast portrays the growth of evil within Christendom. This view of the parables is often held in conscious opposition to a view which understands the images of the growth of the Kingdom in the two parables as indicating the ultimate conversion of the world to Christianity before Christ returns.

There is good reason to disagree with the view that emphasizes the presence of evil. First, its understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven as the mystery of evil within Christendom between the two advents of Jesus is doubtful. Rather, the Kingdom in Matthew is the rule of God, inaugurated through the words and works of Jesus and consummated at his return. Second, it is very doubtful that straightforward statements that compare the Kingdom of God to yeast or to mustard seed should be understood as a portrayal of evil. After all, it is the growth of God’s rule, not Satan’s, which is being portrayed. One need not assume that birds or yeast must always be viewed as biblical symbols for evil—consider that the imagery of a lion portrays Satan in one context and Jesus in another (1 Pet 5:8; Rev 5:5). The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast speak of the deceptively subtle yet dramatically significant growth of God’s Kingdom. Despite frequent fruitless responses to the Kingdom message, it does bear much fruit in many cases (13:23). Even John the Baptist may doubt its advance, but it is advancing just the same (11:1–6). The strong man is being bound, and his goods are being plundered (12:29).

While some may view this advance of the Kingdom over-optimistically, others view the present age too pessimistically because they do not acknowledge that the Kingdom was inaugurated and began its advance during the earthly ministry of Jesus. It may presently seem as insignificant as a mustard seed, but it will eventually be the largest tree in the garden. Its growth may be as imperceptible as the influence of yeast in a loaf of bread, but in the end it will be pervasive throughout the earth. The use of humble symbols like mustard seeds and yeast is appropriate for God’s humble servant who does not cry out in the streets (12:19) and who rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a stallion (21:1–5). The majority of scholars hold that that these parables portray a contrast between the present reality and the ultimate destiny of the Kingdom. That which is now humble will be glorious. The realization that God is already at work and that there is a unity of the ultimate with the present should give all believers hope.

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### Notes

**Matthew 13:25 *While everyone was asleep*:** There are many places in Scripture where *sleep* is a metaphor for spiritual neglect or sloth (*cf.* Mk 13:36, 1 Thess 5:6-8 or 1 Pt 5:8). But given the whole narrative of the parable it is more likely to simply describe when the enemy would come do his nefarious deed.

**Mathew 13:25 *weeds*:** *zizanian* – darnel, a poisonous weed that in its first stage of growth resembles wheat. Widespread in the Mediterranean, darnel grew each year to between one and two feet (30–60 cm.); preserved samples of wheat and barley in Egyptian tombs and excavations in Lachish show inadvertent mixtures of darnel, which can cause sickness and even death. Etymologically it may be that the Hebrew word of darnel (*zûn*) was associated with the Hebrew *znh* (to commit fornication) –

thus later rabbis (*Gen. Rab.* 28:8) viewed darnel as false wheat stemming from the sinful period before the Flood.

**Matthew 13:28 *An enemy has done this*:** It is not hard to make identification which pits the householder against the enemy. The enemy here depicts Satan – something made clear in v.39.

**Matthew 13:30 *Let them grow together until harvest*:** The householder’s response is one of tolerance in the present time. The task of judging between good and bad is left to the householder at the judgment. *harvest*: a common biblical metaphor for the time of God's judgment; cf Jeremiah 51:33; Joel 4:13; Hosea 6:11. Jesus regularly reused his eschatological agricultural images rather than assigning all details the same sense; thus, e.g., terms for “collect” or “gather” are positive in Mt 3:12; 13:48; represent judgment here as in Is 13:4; Joel 3:2, 11; Zeph 3:8; Zech 12:3; 14:2; Rev 16:16; and the good and wicked together in Mt 25:32; Is 2:2–4; 66:18.

**Matthew 13:32 *the smallest of all the seeds*:** the mustard seed is not technically the smallest seed, but the phrase must be taken in its context as affirming that the mustard seed was the smallest herb seed commonly planted in Palestine. The mustard seed emphasizes how the Kingdom grows from an insignificant beginning into the largest of garden shrubs, suitable for nesting birds (cf. Ps 104:12; Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:12). *becomes a large bush*: The Greek expression is *lachanon*, literally “herb” or “vegetation” [EDNT 2:345]. The mustard bush/tree could reach a height of 8-12 feet, but not generally. The bush provided shade for the birds beneath the bush’s foliage.

**Matthew 13:33 *yeast...mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened*.** The yeast pictures the tangible but subtle influence of the Kingdom as it permeates the world. The amount of flour leavened by the yeast is three *satas*. This is surprisingly large, amounting to 21.6 pints, 35 liters, or nearly a bushel of flour, enough to feed around 150 people. These two parables, unlike the first two, are not interpreted by Jesus, so there is less agreement among scholars as to their meaning. The major question is whether the symbolism portrays the spread of evil within Christendom, or the spread of the rule of God in the world through the words and works of Jesus and his disciples. Except here and in Matthew 16:12, yeast (or "leaven") is, in New Testament usage, a symbol of corruption (see Matthew 16:6, 11-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:9).

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