

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 68

The Tree and the Leaven

The Kingdom Series Part 7

by Alex Robertson

We are looking at the 'parables of the kingdom' in Matthew 13. So far we have looked at the parables of the sower and the tares and wheat. Now we come to 2 short parables, amounting to only 3 verses in total. "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of 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 the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." And "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened" (Matthew 13:31-33)

No Interpretation

For the first time we have parables which are not interpreted by Jesus. So our first question has to be: is the mustard tree with the birds nesting in its branches a good or a bad thing? Is the leavened dough a good or a bad thing? One of the principles we learned from Jesus about these parables of the kingdom is that not all who hear them will understand them. It is certainly true that there have been very different interpretations of these parables. Many commentators believe these parables speak positively of the spread of the kingdom of God through the world, providing a home and a shelter for believers as the tree provides a nest for birds. They say it speaks of the growth of the kingdom, as the addition of leaven makes the bread dough grow in size.

Although these are respected commentators, I have to question their conclusions. I believe that the mustard seed and the (unleavened) dough are good things; the birds of the air and the leaven are bad things; and the result in each case (the tree and the leavened dough) is a mixture of good and bad. Let me explain why I believe this.

We are following on from a parable which spoke of bad seed being sown alongside the good seed. Clearly things are not all well in the kingdom if this is taking place. Even the parable of the sower shows a huge mixture of different reactions to the word of the kingdom, not all by any means positive. It would be a little strange if Jesus then proceeded to give 2 parables which basically said, "Everything's fine, everything's growing, everything's great".

In fact we can divide the 7 parables into 1, 3 and 3. The parable of the sower stands on its own as an introduction. The next 3 parables (2, 3 and 4) speak of the devil's plan to corrupt the kingdom. The last 3 parables speak of God's plan to purify the kingdom. The devil's plan is mixture, corruption, confusion; God's plan is separation, purity, simplicity.

So firstly the context of these 2 parables leads me to believe that they are more likely to symbolize bad things that corrupt the kingdom than good things that make the kingdom grow. Secondly, the symbolism in these parables leads me to draw the same conclusion.

The symbolism of leaven

Let's consider the parable of the leaven first. Throughout scripture leaven signifies something bad. In the Old Testament, no sacrifices were offered with leaven (see Exodus 34:25; Leviticus 2:11, 6:17, 10:12). Amos mocked the sinfulness of backslidden Israel by talking of leavened sacrifices: "Come to Bethel, and transgress ... offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven. For this liketh you, O ye children of Israel" (Amos 4:4-5). In the New Testament it is no different. Jesus told his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Saducees" (Matthew 16:6) by which he meant their corrupt teaching. Paul told the Corinthians, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven" (1 Corinthians 5:6,7) and repeated the phrase in Galatians 5:9. Everywhere in scripture it signifies a corrupting influence. Nevertheless, one commentator who prefers to see this parable in a positive light even goes so far as to say that leaven always signifies something bad in scripture except in this one place (Matthew 13), where it symbolizes positive growth. But the bible is not like that. It is consistent. The symbolism is marvellously consistent. It is there to teach us and help us to understand.

Leaven is corrupt dough

When we understand what leaven actually is, we can see why it is a perfect symbol of corruption. Leaven is not yeast. It is bread dough which has 'gone off'. It is also called 'sourdough'. In the same way as milk which has 'gone off' at a certain temperature becomes yoghurt because of the bacteria produced in the 'going off' process, so when bread dough is left to 'go off', the resultant bacteria turn it into sourdough, which when mixed with new dough causes it to rise. (Although significantly, it doesn't actually 'grow' at all – it's just the appearance of growth. The substance remains the same. The so-called 'growth' is all just hot air!) So leaven is simply corrupt dough.

The symbolism of the tree

Let's look at the symbolism of the other parable. A great tree where the birds of the air come to lodge in the branches – does that ever appear in other scriptures? Yes it does. In Ezekiel 31 God compares Pharaoh to a great tree, a cedar in Lebanon, and "all the fowls of the air made their nests in his boughs" (Ezekiel 31:6). But this symbolizes the pride of Pharaoh and his mighty empire, and God will bring him down: "Because thou hast lifted thyself up in height. I have delivered him into the hand of the mighty one of the heathen . His branches are broken, his boughs are fallen. Upon his ruin shall all the fowl of heaven remain" (verses 10-13). In Daniel we also find a similar scripture. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a great tree which grew strong and high, and "the fowls of heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof" (Daniel 4:12). Exactly the same symbol, and exactly the same meaning – Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, "The tree which thou sawest, it is thou, O king" (verses 20,22). But

Nebuchadnezzar's pride and greatness would also be judged and destroyed: "Hew down the tree, cut off his branches ... leave the stump" (verses 14,15). So a great tree with the birds of heaven nesting in its branches doesn't symbolize godly growth; it symbolizes something which has become not just great numerically but great in pride, and which God will have to judge.

The birds of the air

What about "the birds of the air" themselves? We only have to look back a few verses to the parable of the sower to see that there the birds who ate the seed that landed on the path were a symbol for the devil (see Matthew 13:4,19). And Paul talks of "the principalities and powers in heavenly places" and "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 3:10, 2:2). What do we have here? Not a picture of a kingdom growing in godliness, but a picture of a kingdom becoming powerful and proud, and one in which the principalities and powers, demons and evil spirits, feel quite at home – so much so that they actually dwell there. Could this be a picture of the kingdom of God?

The answer comes from the final key to the interpretation of these parables, which is history. These parables are also prophecy, or at least they were prophecy when Jesus spoke them. Now they are chiefly history. Looking back at the history of the church we can see what happened. Jesus and the apostles did sow the word of the kingdom (parable 1). But after their death, as they warned, false prophets came in amongst the people with false teaching (parable 2). This happened in the second century. Nevertheless there was persecution. But then the persecution stopped, and the church gradually gained power in the world. Naturally when the persecution stopped, the church grew. The persecution kept the church pure. No one was going to join the church without any true commitment, because they knew they could lose everything, including their lives. But when the persecution stopped, the Christians saw the opportunity of blending elements of Greek philosophy with Christianity (thus making it more acceptable to intellectuals) and ingratiating themselves with the men in power, most of all the emperor.

The end result

The end result was, of course, a corrupt mixture. Under political patronage, the church grew (numerically) mightily, but in order to do so it had to become corrupt. In the 4th century the emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. It didn't worry him that he worshipped the sun god as well as Christ. Then came 'forced conversions' – whole nations compelled to become 'Christian' for reasons of political expediency. The whole thing was corrupt, a travesty and a mockery of the pure gospel that Jesus had preached. Truly the mustard seed was a pure gospel, but the great tree which it became was not what was intended. And as Paul prophesied, the birds of the air, "seducing spirits and doctrines of demons", made their way into the church. When false teaching becomes the official teaching of the church, the birds have made their nests in the tree. The original 'lump' of dough was pure, but the corrupt leaven got mixed in with it. Yes, it 'grew' – but the growth was nothing more than hot air, people honouring God with their lips but with hearts far from him. Growth at the expense of purity is of no interest to God.

Nevertheless, Jesus prophesied – if you accept this interpretation of the parables – that it would happen. In the next parables (and the next issue) we will see God’s answer to this terrible state of affairs.

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

Corruption Sets In

Maurice and I recently visited Uganda and were amazed to find that evangelical charismatic Christianity out there has flourished only over the last 20 years since the overthrow of the dictator Idi Amin. There has been an onrush of Christian teachers from the West ... especially the Prosperity Gospel where the people are being taught to sow seeds into various ministries in order for God to prosper the givers financially. This message is seen daily on the Christian TV channels. Already the Ugandan Christians are desirous of the Western lifestyle, they want the home entertainment, big cars, big houses, and want paying for everything they do. Any sacrifice they make is so that they can get back more in this material world.

The Christianity that took God years to purify in the fires of persecution is being corrupted by the leaven (false doctrine) of the Pharisees, and it is spreading throughout the whole country as more and more people have access to the TV screens.

Great Britain has changed beyond all recognition over the past 50 years. It is quite unbelievable that a tiny island such as Britain could rule half the world, but that was the case. We had become a big tree, very proud of our achievements and little by little forgot to give God the glory. It was the British people who ventured overseas to take the gospel to many African countries, but we are gradually losing social and religious freedom in our own country. Oxfam have been banned from displaying anything portraying the birth of Jesus or angels around Christmas time for fear of offending the Muslims. Our state schools are no longer free to teach Christianity as the true faith, they tell us we must teach our children to understand all religions, even if it means taking part in Eid and Halloween. It is becoming increasingly difficult to freely preach about Jesus Christ in prisons. We have to be very careful with our words and are only permitted to answer questions, not preach what we believe. But then, this is not surprising as the prison doors have been opened to satanist priests.

Founded on miracles

Sharon, the church I attended for many years as a young Christian, was founded on miracles and supernatural acts of God. The pioneers, Pastor Barratt and Pastor Williams, held yearly crusades at the church when we would advertise extensively for the sick to come for healing. Bus-loads of people would turn up and we would witness dramatic sights as people were touched by God. People

even travelled from other countries, as did one famous cricketer from India, to be healed. I was the church organist and each week I would look out at a sea of different faces from my advantageous position on the church platform.

Pastor Williams had a strange experience when he worked at the bakery for a short period of time. Somehow or other the bread-making ingredients measurements got mixed up and too much yeast had been put into the mixture. During the time for allowing the dough to rise, the mixture got completely out of control and was spreading everywhere. The bakers didn't know what to do as the dough acted as though it was alive and kept swelling and growing. There was a right panic in the bakery!

So it was with the church. People kept flocking, but they came for the miracles, not necessarily for God. People wanted excitement, not sacrifice or commitment. I was carried along myself for quite a while, riding on the back of the church's reputation. The church gospel group which I had become a member of was set for doing great things. We believed that if we could become famous and landed a record deal, and got noticed by the big guys in television, we could influence the country, perhaps the world, for God. We worked hard to become competent musicians, practising for long hours. We wrote songs, staged concerts and recorded a number of albums. In church circles we managed to earn quite a good name and were kept very busy providing musical interludes in church services and conferences. We even introduced drama (this was 30 years ago!) and staged whatever we did well.

Bursting the bubble

I remember vividly one concert we put on. The first part I dressed in a tight black tee-shirt with trousers to match, and the guys wore black vests and black trousers. After the interval we all changed – white vests and trousers for the guys and tight white tee-shirt and trousers for me. We thought we looked great ... so did the kids in the audience. But a visiting pastor from America who was watching, a man whom we had come to respect very highly, happened to make a comment to Maurice and I after the concert which burst our bubble in seconds, by saying that what we sang and ministered was very good, but our appearance didn't glorify God. I must say we were quite miffed by what he said and defended ourselves by saying he was behind the times, and too old to appreciate our actions. But we never did it again as inside we felt quite ashamed and knew that he was right.

Some years down the line God made it clear to Pastor Barratt that He wanted him to take the church aside for a time, away from all the visitors and excitement seekers, and to teach them the lifestyle of a disciple from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 & 7. The tree had become too big and God wanted to sift out all the hangers-on who were hiding in the tree. The church was purged and many people left because the tone and atmosphere had become 'too serious'. But others who wanted a deeper walk with God were added. I know one thing – my life completely changed.

Mixed motives

Maurice and I had used recording studios to make our albums for a number of years, but decided it was time to set up in business ourselves. Singing Christian songs and trying to get God's Spirit onto

tape is quite difficult when worldly men are doing the studio engineering. We knew the difficulties, and realised that other Christian musicians would come across the same problems, because of this we decided that we would build our own recording studio and make it available for others as well as ourselves. In our hearts we wanted to do this as a ministry for the Body of Christ. We wanted our prices to be lower than that of commercial studios to make it affordable for Christians so we put together a package that was a really good deal. We arranged the songs, provided musicians and backing vocals, recorded the songs, mastered the album, then sent it away for pressing. We also did the art work and designed the record sleeves which we sent off for printing. This worked really well for a few years and we made quite a number of albums for different people, but we found after a time that our focus had changed.

Ministry or business?

In the beginning we had wanted to help anyone who we felt had a real ministry rather than a big ego, but because we had to buy lots of equipment to have better facilities we needed lots of work, which meant that we would record anyone who came to us, whether they had a good voice or not – we would do anything we could to make them sound better! But we had changed, and not for the better, our focus had now become financial. We wanted to make money and run a business. We didn't say it out loud and would always defend whatever we were doing by stating categorically that we were running a ministry, but our actions didn't match our words.

It was during this period of our lives that Pastor Barratt began to preach from the Sermon On The Mount. God was really on it and every Sunday morning after hearing the message the sword of the Spirit would drive home another shocking revelation of ourselves and our hidden agendas. It's quite unbelievable how hypocrisy (leaven) can creep into your life without you even noticing it. God's searchlight hurt very much, I didn't enjoy the services any longer as they became too searching, too painful. And yet I couldn't keep away. But things had to change. You can't sit under ministry like that and remain the same, so Maurice and I had to come to some decisions. God faced us with whether we wanted a ministry or business. In cold blood the answer was easy – of course we wanted a ministry. But then He told us to sell the business, and that was a different story. Nevertheless, we did it, and that action certainly "purged the leaven" out of our ministry.