

The Parable of the Mustard-Seed

by A.W. Pink

A.W. Pink's sermon on the Parable of the Mustard-Seed challenges common interpretations, emphasizing the dangers of worldly influence within Christianity.

Scripture: Matthew 13:31

Topics: "Corruption in the Church", "The Nature of the Kingdom of Heaven"

Description

A.W. Pink expounds on 'The Parable of the Mustard-Seed,' emphasizing that the parable illustrates the corrupting influence of worldly systems on the true nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. He argues against the popular interpretation that sees the mustard seed as a symbol of the Gospel's success, instead suggesting that the growth into a tree represents a deviation from the original intent of Christ's teachings. Pink highlights that the 'birds of the air' symbolize Satan and his agents, who find refuge in this corrupted system, indicating a departure from the true essence of Christianity. The sermon warns against the dangers of worldly prominence and the infiltration of falsehood within the Church, ultimately portraying a somber view of the historical development of Christendom. Pink's analysis serves as a call to discernment regarding the true nature of the Kingdom of Heaven amidst the challenges of worldly influence.

Transcript

The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

Chapter 3:

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD-SEED.

"Another parable put He forth unto them, saying, 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" (vv. 31, 32). It should be evident to all, that our understanding of this parable hinges upon a correct interpretation of its three central figures: the mustard-seed, the great tree which sprang from it, and the "birds of the air" which came and lodged in its branches.

What does each represent ? Now there are few passages of Scripture which have suffered more at the hands of commentators than the third and fourth parables of Matthew 13. They have been turned completely upside down; that is to say, they have been made to mean the very opposite of what the Lord

Jesus taught. The main cause of this erroneous interpretation may be traced back to a wrong understanding of the expression "kingdom of heaven." Those who have failed in their definition of this term are, necessarily, all at sea, when they come to the details of these parables.

The popular and current explanation of these parables is that they were meant to announce the glorious success of the Gospel. Thus, that of the mustard-seed is regarded as portraying the rapid extension of Christianity and the expansion of the Church of Christ. Beginning insignificantly and obscurely, its proportions have increased immensely, until ultimately it shall cover the earth. Let us first show how untenable and impossible this interpretation is: First, it must be steadily borne in mind that these seven parables form part of one connected and complete discourse whose teaching must necessarily be consistent and harmonious throughout.

Therefore, it is obvious that this third one cannot conflict with the teaching of the first two. In the first parable, instead of drawing a picture of a field in which the good Seed took root and flourished in every part of it, our Lord pointed out that most of its soil was unfavorable, and that only a fractional proportion bore an increase. Moreover, instead of promising that the good-ground section of the field would yield greater and greater returns, He announced that there would be a decreasing harvest--"some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." In the second parable, our Lord revealed the field as over-sown with "tares," and declared that these should continue until the harvest-time, which He defined as "the end of the age."

This fixes beyond all doubt the evil consequences of the Enemy's work, and positively forbids the expectation of a world won to Christ during this present dispensation, Christ plainly warned us that the evil effects of the Devil's labors at the beginning of the age would never be repaired. The crop as a whole is spoiled! Thus this third parable cannot teach that the failure of things in the hands of men will be removed and reversed. Second, the figure here selected by Christ should at once expose the fallacy of the popular interpretation.

Surely our Lord would never have taken a mustard-seed, which afterwards became a "tree," ever rooting itself deeper and deeper in the earth, to portray that people whose calling, hope, citizenship, and destiny is heavenly. Again and again He affirmed that His people were "not of the world." Again, a great tree with its towering branches speaks of prominence and loftiness, but lowliness and suffering, not prominence and exaltation, are the present portion of the New Testament saints.

The more any church of Christ climbs the ladder of worldly fame the more it sinks spiritually. That which is represented by this "tree" is not a people who are "strangers and pilgrims" down here, but a system whose roots lie deeply in the earth and which aims at greatness and expansion in the world. Third, that which Christ here describes is a monstrosity. We are aware that this is denied by some, but our Lord's own words are final. He tells us that when this mustard-seed is grown it is the "greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree" (v. 32).

"Herbs" are an entirely different specie from trees. That which distinguished them is that their stems never develop woody tissue, but live only long enough for the development of flowers and seeds. But this "herb" became a "tree;" that is to say, it developed into something entirely foreign to its very nature and constitution. How strange that sober men should have deemed this unnatural growth, this abnormal production, a fitting symbol of the saints of God in their corporate form!

Some tell us that the soil of Palestine is a most congenial one for the growth of mustard, and that it is quite common for it to develop into goodly-sized shrubs. But cannot the very ones who advance this as an objection to the pre-millennial interpretation of this parable see that it forms an argument against what they contend for? Clearly the "field," all through Matthew 13, is the world. Is, then, "the world" a favorable place for the growth of that kingdom which Christ solemnly and expressly said was "not of this world" (John 18:36)?

Is this world, where the flesh and the Devil unite in opposing all that concerns Christ and His interests, a congenial soil for Christianity? Either the world must cease to be what it is--"the enemy of God"--or the Seed must change its character, before the one will be favorable to the other. And this is just what our parable does teach: the "herb" becomes a "tree." Fourth, the "birds" lodging in the branches of this tree makes altogether against the current interpretation. If Scripture be compared with Scripture it will be found that these "birds" symbolize Satan and his agents.

Let not the reader be turned aside by the fact that the "dove," and in some passages the "eagle," represents that which is good. That which we must now attempt to define is the actual word "birds," or better, "fowls"--as the Greek word is rendered in verse 4. In Genesis 15:11 we are told that the "fowls came down upon the carcasses" (the bodies of the sacrifices) and that "Abram drove them away." Here, beyond doubt, they prefigure the efforts of Satan to render null and void the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus; but this, the Father (foreshadowed in Abraham) has prevented.

Again, in Deuteronomy 28, where we have the curses which were to come upon Israel for their disobedience, we are told, "And thy carcass shall be meat unto all fowls of the air" (v. 26). The last time the term occurs in Scripture is in Revelation 18:2, where we are told that fallen Babylon becomes the "habitation of demons, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." But we do not have to go outside of Matthew 13 itself to discover what Christ referred to under the figure of these "birds."

The Greek word in verse 32 is precisely the same as that which is rendered "fowls" in verse 4, which are explained in verse 19 as "the wicked." How, then, can this great "tree" represent the true Church of Christ, while its branches afford shelter for the Devil and his emissaries? Coming now to the positive side, if we let Scripture interpret Scripture, the great "tree" is easily identified. In Daniel 4:10-12 we read, "I saw, and behold a tree was in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great.

The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the ends of all the earth: The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heavens dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it." Who cannot fail to see that we have in this vision of Nebuchadnezzar the key to our parable? In Daniel 4:20-22 we have the inspired interpretation of the vision: "The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong . . . it is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong, for thy greatness is grown, and reaches unto heaven, and thy dominion to the ends of the earth."

Thus, the "tree" was a figure of a mighty earthly kingdom or empire. Again, in Ezekiel 31 we have the same figure used: "Behold the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs. The waters made him great, the deep set him up on high with her rivers running round about his plants, and sent out her little rivers unto all the trees of the field. Therefore, his height was exalted above all the trees of the field, and his boughs

were multiplied, and his branches became long because of the multitude of waters, when he shot forth.

All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs, and under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, and under his shadow dwelt all great nations" (vv. 3-6). Thus a "tree," whose wide-spreading branches afforded lodgment for birds, was a familiar Old Testament figure for a mighty kingdom which gave shelter to the nations. So it is in our parable. The "tree" symbolizes earthly greatness, worldly prominence, giving shelter to the nations. The history of Christendom clearly confirms this.

At the beginning, those who bore the name of Christ were but a despised handful. Judged by worldly standards, Christianity was unimportant and unworthy of serious consideration. Speaking generally, its adherents were not men of renown, culture, or worldly influence. There were few among the Lord's "little flock" of outstanding genius or social prominence; for the most part, they were unlettered, obscure, and poor. For, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, and things which are not, to bring to nought the things that are; that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

Nevertheless, though at first the cause of Christ on earth was so un-influential and insignificant, it was an object of intense hatred to Satan. Against Christianity he vented the full force of his fiendish malignity. Every weapon in his arsenal was employed in the effort to exterminate it. He stirred up men in authority and moved emperors to issue cruel edicts. Property was confiscated, Christians captured, imprisoned, fined, tortured, slain. Mercilessly and ceaselessly did the Devil seek to blot out the name of Christ from the earth.

But the more it was persecuted, the more Christianity flourished. As one of the early "fathers" put it, "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church." Finding that force was of no avail, the Enemy changed his tactics. Failing to intimidate as the roaring lion, he now sought to insinuate as the subtle serpent. Ceasing to attack from without, he now worked from within. In the first parable the assault was from without--the fowls of the air catching away the Seed. In the second parable his activities were from within--he sowed his tares among the wheat.

In the third parable we are shown the effects of this. Satan now moved worldly men to seek membership in the churches of God. These soon caused the Truth to be watered down, discipline to be relaxed, that which repelled the world to be kept in the background, and what would appeal to the carnal mind to be made prominent. Instead of affections being set upon things above, they were fixed on things below. Soon Christianity ceased to be hated by the unregenerate: the gulf between the world and the "Church" was bridged.

Persecution ceased, and the professed cause of the despised and rejected Savior became popular. The distinctive truths of Christianity were abandoned, the Gospel was adulterated, the pilgrim character of professing saints ceased. More and more the wise and great of this world were attracted. By the fourth century the heads of the Roman Empire, instead of hating Christianity, perceived that it was a power for moral good in the governing of men, and so espoused it. In the days of Constantine the so-called Church and the State united, and became a vast political-religious system.

Mind you, the courts of Caesar had not changed their character, nor become like the little "upper room" in Jerusalem, where the lowly church of Christ, small as a grain of mustard, first assembled. It was professing Christianity which had changed. The lowly upper room had long been forsaken, and the honors

of kings' courts coveted. And God granted their fleshly desire--just as long before He had given Saul to apostate Israel when they forsook the path of separation and wished to be like the surrounding nations.

Under these changed circumstances professing Christianity soon became great in the earth. Caves and caverns as places of worship gave place to costly church-houses and ornate cathedrals. The ritual was celebrated with a corresponding pomp. Its gorgeous vestments, its imposing ceremonies, its pompous priesthood, all lured the unregenerate; and multitudes applied for baptism. More and more the leaders sought after temporal power, and more and more were their longings gratified.

In consequence, worldly-minded men were the ones who sought after and secured the highest offices. Hence we find the "birds," the agents of Satan, lodging in the branches of the "tree;" they secured the positions of power and directed the activities of Christendom. Thus we may discern in the first three parables of Matthew 13 a striking and sad forecast of the development of evil. In the first, the Devil caught away part of the good Seed. In the second, he is seen engaged in the work of imitation. Here, in the third, we are shown a corrupted Christianity affording him shelter. N. B.--Several thoughts and expressions in this chapter have been borrowed from one by the late F. W. Grant.

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