

# Within Christianity There Is Great Mixture

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*Jesus teaches that within Christianity, there is a great mixture of good and bad, and that we need spiritual understanding to discern what is of the Lord and what is not.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:31

**Topics:** "Discernment", "The Nature of the Kingdom"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the complexities within Christianity, using the parable of the mustard seed to illustrate how the Kingdom of Heaven, while starting small, has grown to encompass a mixture of good and evil. He warns that many who hear the teachings of Jesus may not grasp their deeper meanings, leading to misinterpretations of the parables. Sparks highlights the importance of discernment among believers, as the presence of 'birds'--representing evil--within the 'tree' of Christianity can lead to confusion and disappointment. He encourages Christians to seek understanding and not be surprised by the mixture of good and bad within the faith community, as Jesus foretold these challenges. Ultimately, he reassures that God will separate the good from the bad at the end of the age.

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## Transcript

We are coming back to Matthew's Gospel, and this evening we are going to be occupied with Matthew 13:31 and 32, "Another parable set He forth before 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 less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof.'" You note that what is in this chapter has two names. One name is "the parables of the Kingdom." Jesus called them "the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven." Whether you call them parables or mysteries, the meaning is the same. The meaning is that something is being said which has a deeper meaning than the ordinary mind of man can recognize. Anybody can read what is said, and everybody may think that they do understand. But the very meaning of the parables and mysteries is that you may read and not understand. It is not what you read that is important, it is what you understand.

We are told that great multitudes gathered to hear what Jesus had to say. The great multitudes heard Him and went away with the story but without the meaning. Only a very few of those who heard got the meaning. We must remember that, because that is the governing thing all the way through of what we have to say.

Now before we come to the meaning and the message, let us look at these parables in a general way. We have seen that there are seven parables in this chapter, and they are divided.

Firstly, they are divided between those which were spoken to the multitude, that is from verse eleven to verse thirty-five. The parables spoken to the multitude were the parables of the sower, the darnel (the tares), the mustard seed, and the leaven. So that four parables were spoken to the multitudes. And then it says Jesus left the multitudes, and went into the house. And He gave three more parables to the disciples alone, from verse thirty-six to verse fifty-two. The parable of the treasure hid in the field, the parable of great price, and the great net let down into the sea. The first two parables were explained by Jesus. The next four were not explained.

Now it is very important for us to recognize one or two general truths. First of all, we must recognize the law of consistency. When Jesus used any symbols more than once, He always meant the same thing. If He spoke of the sower, He always meant the same person, He meant the Son of Man. If He speaks of the field more than once, He always means the same thing, which is the world. In the first place, He is not speaking of the Church, He is speaking about the world. If He speaks about the birds of the air, and in the parable of the sower, He says the birds of the air were the evil one; then, when He says that the birds of the air find a place in the great tree, He means the same thing. The same words mean the same thing every time.

Perhaps you wonder why I say that. It does not sound very interesting or very important, but it is very important, because these parables have been misinterpreted. You will see what I mean as we go along. Jesus never did confuse people's minds by using the same thing for two opposite purposes. If He spoke of birds, He always meant something evil. In one parable, He speaks of the birds and He says that is evil. In another parable, He speaks of the birds, but He does not say they are not evil, but He means the same. So the law of consistency is important, and you have to notice that through these parables.

Now let us look at some of the overall facts. The first overall fact is what He calls the "Kingdom of Heaven," and we have already seen that the meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven is the Sovereign Rule of Heaven over all things. It does not mean that the Kingdom of Heaven has a lot of wicked things in it - the Kingdom of Heaven has a lot of evil birds in it - the Kingdom of Heaven has the darnel (the tares) in it. It simply means that over all these things is the Sovereign Rule of Heaven, and all these things come under that Rule. Good things and bad things come under the Rule of Heaven. That is one of the great truths in these parables.

The second general thing is this: These parables are intended to show what will come into this world under the Rule of Heaven. What the Rule of Heaven will allow and what the Rule of Heaven will do with it. Is that quite clear to you? There are a lot of things here that have got to be dealt with in judgment by the Rule of Heaven. And there are a lot of things here that would come under the blessing of the Rule of Heaven. So the great overall truth is that the Rule of Heaven takes account of everything. And the Rule of Heaven deals with every thing according to what it is, whether good or bad. Jesus is doing two things with these parables. As you notice, first of all, He is speaking to the unbelieving nation. He says of that nation that they are blind. Their blindness is due to their unbelief. They had not believed the prophets, and as Isaiah is quoted here, "blindness came upon them because of unbelief."

Now Jesus in the first place is speaking to this unbelieving nation in order to find out whether there are any people there who want to believe. Do they want to see, or do they not want to see? Will any of these

people forsake the ground of their blindness and take the ground of faith?

You will remember that on several occasions, Jesus gave sight to blind people, but He only gave sight to blind people who came to Him to have their sight. They cried out, "Jesus, Master," and He said, 'What do you want Me to do?' They said, 'Lord, that we may receive our sight,' and He gave sight to those people. So, He is testing the unbelieving nation to see if there are any people in it who want to see. All these people heard the parables, most of them went away. They only heard the words, but there were a few who said, 'Now we do not understand what He means, but we are going to find out.' They were not satisfied with the parable, they wanted the meaning. He was testing the faith of these people by speaking mysteries to them.

You remember that is always a principle of teaching. You have a lot of teaching, what are you going to do with it? Are you going to say, 'Well, I do not understand what he is talking about,' and you go home. You seem to say, 'I do not understand,' and that is the end of it. Will you go with the multitude, or are you going to say, 'I believe that he has something that I do not see. He has seen something that I do not see, but I am going to find out what he has seen.' It is always a law of teaching. It is a test as to what our reaction will be. If you go back to the parable of the sower, that is exactly what Jesus meant by the ground, He meant an honest and good heart. The honest and good heart ground brought forth thirty, sixty, and hundredfold. All the others said, 'Well, we do not understand so we are going away.' It is just a matter of whether you really want to see. So in the first place, the Lord Jesus was testing these people as to whether they had an honest and good heart; and, as to whether if they did not understand, they would not give up until they did understand.

Now Jesus was doing a second thing. He was instructing and warning and preparing His own disciples for what was going to come into Christianity. He was preparing them for what they might expect in the future. It is always a very good thing for us to be able to say, 'Well, it is exactly what He said would come.' You see, quite a lot of people just forget what He has said. Jesus said, "Through much tribulation we must enter into the Kingdom, or in the world you shall have tribulation." Well, the tribulation came, they knew the tribulation in the world. They were able to say, 'This is just exactly what Jesus told us would happen.' So they were prepared and fortified. They were not surprised. And that is exactly what Jesus was doing with His disciples, He was preparing them for what was coming.

Did you notice that in the first four parables, He shows the things which are against the Kingdom of Heaven? Here are many antagonistic elements to the Kingdom of Heaven. Go back to the first parable again, the parable of the sower. A sower goes forth to sow, and the first three parts of his work falls by the way side, on the stony ground, and amongst thorns. Well, the apostles had to go out with the seed of the Word of God. Jesus had already taught them that a lot of their work would be in vain. There were the birds of the air that would be carrying away the seed. There will be evil things against their work, and a lot of their work would be destroyed by the devil. It is well to note that He was warning them that it would be like that.

Then the parable of the darnel (the tares): The Lord has sown His true children in the world, but the enemy comes in and sows false children. The Lord says that would go on right to the end of the age. Do not be surprised if all those who professed to be Christians turn out not to be true Christians. A lot of them will take the name of Christian and prove to be false. The apostles met that sort of thing later on. The Lord had already warned them that it would be like that.

Well, He is saying on the one side, there are a lot of evil things that you have to meet which are against the Kingdom of Heaven. That brings us to our present parable, the parable of the mustard seed. Another parable is just like this: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed, which a man sows." It is like the mustard seed, and the mustard seed is amongst the smallest of all seeds. But the mustard seed can grow, and it can be cultivated until it becomes something very big, and the birds of the air lodge in it.

All right, what are you going to make of that? Now this is where the parable has been wrongly interpreted; and this is where our law of consistency comes in. This parable has been interpreted as meaning the Kingdom has a small beginning, but it grows and grows until you can find anything and everything in the Kingdom. It is going to become so big that it will embrace everything. THAT IS A FALSE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE. Jesus was not meaning that. He is not using birds here as good things when He called birds bad things before. The birds mentioned by Him, are always bad things. It is quite true that the beginnings were small. It is quite true that things grow and spread over the world. The Church did expand and it has become something big. But not this: The mustard seed does not naturally become a tree. Naturally it is not a tree. It only becomes a tree when men take hold of it and cultivate and develop it themselves. So the mustard seed was developed for commercial purposes. If you really want to get money for your fruit, you will have the biggest fruit you can get. The very commercial element in it must make it as big as possible. So by all kinds of artificial means you make it big, but that is not its true nature. You have done something with it! You have put your hands on it! And now it represents the work of man, rather than the true work of its own nature.

Now Jesus is saying that is what is going to happen between the time that I am speaking to you, and the time which is the end of the age. Men will take hold of the things of the Kingdom of Heaven, and make them something bigger than they are by nature. There will be an artificial and abnormal developing of Christianity. And because men do that with Christianity, Christianity becomes like a tree with every kind of bird lodging in it. Can you count all the birds that are in Christianity now? Do you know all the kinds of birds that call themselves Christians now? Christianity, as we know it, can just cover anything; and Jesus is saying that is not good. He says that is bad, this is evil work. And it has come about in history, just as Jesus said it would. This thing would be developed by man's hands until it would cover anything you like. I am not going to try to name all the things that are embraced by the word, "Christianity"; but there are many many things which go by the name of Christianity which are not Christianity at all.

Now do we have anything in the Word which proves that we are right in this interpretation? Well, let us look at this matter of the birds. We can go back in the Old Testament. God came to Abraham once, and God was going to make a covenant with Abraham about His seed. He was going to tell Abraham that his seed would become a nation, and that that nation would go into bondage and be in bondage for four hundred years. Then God would deliver those people, and bring them into the land of promise. God said, 'I make a covenant about this and these are the terms of the covenant. You take a sacrifice, and you divide it in two, you put one part there, and you put the other part here. That part is you; this part is Me. We are going to be joined in a covenant.' So Abraham took the sacrifice. He divided it down the middle. He put one half there, and the other half here, then he waited. What happened? The fowls of the air came down, and tried to devour the sacrifice before the covenant could be completed. But Abraham drove off the fowls of the air, and he kept on doing that until the sun went down. Then when the sun went down, a light appeared. The natural light had gone, a Heavenly Light came in; and God completed the covenant.

Well, we know the story that Israel went into captivity for four hundred years, and then God delivered them and took them into the land of promise. But the point is this: Those fowls of the air represented the evil

powers who want to destroy the covenant. I say this to show that these birds of the air are evil things. Now we come over to the parable of the sower, and Jesus says that the birds of the air are the devil, who comes to snatch away the seed in order to destroy the work of Christ.

However, we can go on further in the New Testament. In Ephesians, chapter two, the apostle says to these Ephesians, "We all had our conduct according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air." He says, 'Our former life, before we came to the Lord, was according to the prince of the power of the air.' That is only another way of saying, according to the evil power that is all around. Note that this is the beginning of the Letter of the Ephesians.

Now when we come to the end of that letter, in chapter six, we have this: "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of the wicked spirits" (ASV). Now I want you to notice something. At the beginning of that letter, Paul speaks about the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. You would remember the words: "The exceeding greatness of God's power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His Own right hand, far above all rule, and authority, and principality, and power." JESUS IS ENTHRONED OVER ALL THE FORCES IN HEAVEN AND IN HELL AND ON THE EARTH. But although that is true, and the apostle has said that, he goes on to say, our warfare is with principalities and powers and hosts of the wicked spirits.

The fact that Jesus is Exalted far above all, does not mean that our warfare is at an end. In this world, we are still wrestling with principalities and powers, with hosts of the wicked spirits, in other words, the birds of the air, the prince of the power of the air. And this big tree called "Christianity" is the place in which we meet many of those evil powers.

Now this is a very difficult thing to say, but it is quite true that many Christians find their real enemies amongst Christians. The world does not treat you as badly as Christians do sometimes. That is a terrible thing to say, but it is true, oh it is so true. It is within this big tree called "Christianity" that we find so much that is not of the Lord. In this parable of the mustard seed becoming a great tree, that is what Jesus is saying to His disciples. You will find the evil powers working in the world. They will turn the world against you. You will be persecuted by the world; but always remember that you will also find a great many of your difficulties in Christianity.

I think I need not enlarge upon that. Some of us have to say the greatest sorrows and sufferings that we have met have been amongst Christians. The most disappointing and discouraging things that we have met are inside of Christianity. Yes, those birds of the air have gotten into this tree. Jesus said to His disciples, in effect, do not be surprised if it is like that. I am preparing you for that. When it comes, do not be perplexed; I have told you that is how it should be.

Now one last word, we come right back to where we started when we began this parable. The great need is that we have to be able to discern between the good and the bad, not only in the world, but in Christianity. This Christianity has become such a big tree, and there are so many kinds of birds in it. Very often, we just do not know what to make of this or that. What kind of a bird is this? Is this a good one or is it a bad one? How we need spiritual understanding in Christianity, that we may be able to discern what is of the Lord, and what is not of the Lord, even in Christianity. You notice how the Lord concludes all this. He says, at the end of the age He would send forth His angels, and note this - be very careful to note this - and He will take out of His Kingdom all things that offend. So within this Sovereign Rule of Heaven, there

are a lot of things that offend, a lot of things, to use His Own words, "which make people stumble." Within that range of the Sovereign Rule of Heaven, there are many things like that. But in the end, He will send His angels, and He will take out everything that offends.

Do not be surprised, therefore, if you find things in Christianity and amongst Christians that are not good. If you realize that the Lord Jesus said it would be like that, it will save you from some trouble. I have met some Christians, and some young Christians, who have gone away from the Lord. They are no longer walking with the Lord. And when I asked them why, they have said, 'Oh, I saw a certain Christian who was so bad that I felt that I did not want anything to do with Christianity. A certain Christian treated me so badly that I am giving up Christianity.' That sometimes, of course, is an excuse. But sometimes they are made to stumble by Christians. If they realized that Jesus said it will be like that, they would not be surprised. Then they would say, 'Well, Jesus told me that it would be like this, and they would be saved.' That is the message of the parable: Within Christianity there is a great mixture. There is good and bad in the branches of the tree. It has become something so big. Almost anything can get into it.

But, beloved, Jesus knows what is the right and what is the wrong. And the Holy Spirit in us will teach us what is the right, and what is the wrong. We leave it there for the time being, we may have something more to say on this at another time.

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