

The Kingdom Goes Forward

Matthew 13:24-43

26 March 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Is Jesus' kingdom really making an impact on the world?

Big Idea: Jesus' kingdom might be rejected, but it'll never be defeated.

Introduction

Beware the danger of false expectations.

We all have expectations and often in life they're not met.

Whether it's buying a more expensive brand product with the expectation that it'll last longer, only to have it break down on you just after the warranty runs out.

Or something as big as applying for a job and expecting to get it because you've got the qualifications and the experience. You've even been acting in the role and yet the job's given to someone else.

Or something as small as having a bottle of milk go off before the "use by" date on the bottle.

When our expectations aren't met, we often feel hurt, frustrated and angry.

Sometimes, it's because the situation really is just downright unjust.

Often though, the problem is that our own expectations are unreasonable.

We don't have the perspective to see what's going on and so we misunderstand and misinterpret.

It's easy to snap that the person who turns up to late to a meeting when you don't know that they spent all of the night before at the hospital with a sick child, the battery in their car decided to give up the ghost and their train was evacuated because of a bomb-threat.

At this point in his ministry, Jesus' disciples are probably suffering from some seriously underwhelmed expectations.

Jesus' ministry began with a bold message:

Matthew 4:17b (NIV) "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

He came out the blocks racing, going around miraculously healing people from all kinds of illnesses, conditions and diseases.

Then he calls some fishermen to leave their nets and join the revolution:

Matthew 4:19 (NIV) ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Well, lots of people as it turns out.

As we worked through chapters eleven and twelve, again and again we saw people respond to Jesus by rejecting him.

Including many of the most religious, the most knowledgeable, most godly people they knew – the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Now the disciples have also read the fine-print of what they've signed up for.

Jesus demands a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees.

Being part of the kingdom means letting go of the things that offer us safety and security.

And followers of Jesus should expect to face persecution because of what they believe.

That's probably very different from their initial expectations.

The disciples were no doubt wondering what that meant for them.

You couldn't blame them if they were beginning to wonder if they'd bought a dud.

Were they really backing a winner?

Outline

We're in chapter thirteen of Matthew's gospel, which is a sermon made up of 7 parables.

You'll remember that a parable is a teaching illustration that draws a comparison between a natural or human experience and a moral or spiritual truth.

Jesus often spoke in parables.

In fact, in verse 34, we see that at this point in his ministry, whenever he spoke, he used parables.

That doesn't mean he only spoke parables – we know he said other things too – but he always used them to explain what he was saying.

Why?

Matthew tells us that it's because he was fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 78:2.

In that Psalm, Asaph uses parables to describe in a new way how a merciful God had been working for his rebellious people throughout history.

Here in Matthew 13, Jesus uses parables to describe something new about what God has done – *“things hidden since the beginning of the world.”*¹

In the next six parables, Jesus describes what the kingdom of heaven is like.

You'll see that they begin the same way as verse 24:

*Matthew 13:24 (NIV)*²⁴ *Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like...”*

And we see the same thing in verses 31, 33, 44 and 47.

The kingdom of heaven is unlike any other kingdom they know.

It's anywhere God rules.

We're going to be looking at three parables that would've been a great encouragement to the disciples.

And I hope they're also a great encouragement to everyone who follows him today as well as Jesus masterfully resets our expectations about what his kingdom is really like.

Who remembers Mr Whippy, the ice-cream company?

Their slogan was “often licked by never beaten.”

The big idea of these three parables is similar – Jesus' kingdom might be rejected, but it'll never be defeated.

Firstly, we'll look at a parable about Jesus' rule in the kingdom.

Then we'll look at two parables about the size of the kingdom.

1. One parable about Jesus' rule

The first failed expectation is that after a great start, Jesus doesn't seem to be having the influence that the disciples expected him to.

They expected Messiah to be a king sitting on the throne in Jerusalem.

Instead, they've given up their thriving fishing business to follow a bloke walking around beyond the black stump teaching, healing and getting persecuted.

There's been no spectacular entrance.

The Roman Caesar is still very much ruling the roost and that doesn't look like it's going to be changing any time soon.

Closer to home, there are people who are openly rejecting Jesus.

There are even people actively plotting to do away with him – 12:14.

If they're not on the side of the angels, why do they seem to be getting away with it?

Is Jesus really in charge?

Why is Jesus allowing all these people to oppose his rule?

It's no wonder they were confused. I would've been.

Jesus tells them another parable.

It's still the same large crowd standing on the edge of Lake Galilee as Jesus speaks to them from his little dinghy out on the water.

This parable has a very familiar ring to it – it sounds very similar to the one from last week – but it's completely different.

A wealthy man has some wheat planted in his paddock.

All the planting gets done and everything's hunky dory until in the dead of night – probably soon after – someone comes along while everyone's asleep.

Under the cover of darkness, he sows some of his own seed in amongst the crop that's been planted.

No one else has a clue about the weeds.

The seed sprouts and everything looks fine until a month or two later, one of the eagle-eyed servants notices that something's not quite right.

Some of the plants have broader leaves than others and he works out that there are weeds growing amongst the wheat.

The weed – or tare, depending on how old your Bible translation is – in this parable is almost definitely a weed called darnel (*Iolium temulentum*).

It's poisonous, so you really don't want to mistake it for wheat.

Now, I don't do plants – I'll leave that to our resident wheat expert – but I'm reliably told that darnel and wheat are notoriously difficult to tell apart when the plants are small.

But when they get more mature they're much easier to tell apart because the darnel stays up straight while wheat droops.

So, a few of the servant go to the boss and ask, "You know that seed that we planted in the top forty?"

You didn't just buy it from some bloke on the side of the road, did you?

I presume that you got premium grade seed from the produce store?

"Yes, of course," the boss replies.

"Then where did the darnel come from?" the servants wonder.

The problem wasn't bad seed or cross-contamination from the GMO farm next door.

The farmer immediately recognises this for exactly what it is: industrial sabotage.

Verse 28:

Matthew 13:28 (NIV)²⁸ " 'An enemy did this,' he replied.

The servant must've been short of cash, because if you've ever chipped a paddock of weeds before you'd know that no one in their right mind would volunteer to go and fix the problem by pulling all the weeds out.

The bloke who owns the paddock tells them to hold their horses.

He doesn't want them to do that because he knows it's too late.

Darnel is nasty stuff and even today the only really effective way of getting rid of it is preventing it in the first place.

It puts down roots that're bigger and stronger than wheat and the root of the two plants intertwine.

The farmer knows that it'll be impossible pull out the darnel without pulling some of the wheat out with it.

Instead, the whole lot needs to be dealt with when the wheat's mature.

Otherwise, some of the wheat will accidentally be pulled up.

Let the whole lot grow and then harvest them together.

Then the weeds can get sorted in one pile, ready to be burned, and the wheat can get brought into the barn to be stored.

As Jesus was telling this story to the crowds, you've got to wonder what they were thinking.

What, exactly, did they think Jesus was trying to teach?

You don't get the sense that they thought he was a bit cuckoo or were upset by him.

Did they stand around looking knowledgeable, saying, "Mmm, weeds, very deep, very profound?"

We don't know.

What we do know is that only the disciples asked Jesus for an explanation.

Verse 36:

Matthew 13:36b (NIV) His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

It's not like Jesus told the parable and the lights suddenly came on for the disciples and not for anyone else.

They're just as confused as the next person.

What makes them different to the crowds is that they're after an explanation.

Those without ears to hear continue to show their rejection of his message, but his disciples want to know what it means.

Jesus happily gives an explanation to those who ask, beginning in verse 37.

It's important to notice that there's not a standard "code" for parables.

The sower was never identified in the parable of the surfaces, but in this one we're told that the sower is the Son of Man – that is Jesus.

The good seed is the people of the kingdom here, rather than the Word in the last parable.

The weeds were worry and wealth last time.

This time, they are the people of the evil one – the children of the devil.

If you know anything about this parable, you probably know that the most controversial question is what the soil is.

In the parable of the surfaces, the soil described the people who heard the gospel, but here people disagree about whether it's the world or the church.

Is Jesus describing the world or the church?

For most of church history, people have understood it as describing the church.

That's how the early church fathers understood it and an important bloke named Augustine made it a well-known when he was arguing against a group of people called the Donatists who were fanatical about keeping the church pure.

It was also the view of some of the early Reformers like John Calvin.

Verse 41 is the main reason for thinking that Jesus is talking about the church.

We know that not everyone in the church has a saving faith in Jesus.

It seems that the angels will take the weeds out of the kingdom, suggesting that they were in the kingdom to begin with.

Matthew 13:41 (NIV)⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

The problem with it is that some people have used this parable to argue that therefore we shouldn't hold people to any standard of holiness in the church.

Since we don't know who's a Christian and who's not – we can't know whether they'll be converted – and so we mustn't have any form of accountability or church discipline, they argue.

Which is the very opposite of what Jesus teaches in chapter eighteen, so that can't be where we end up.

If the parable is about the church, it doesn't mean that.

When we read the Bible, though we should always start with what's clear and then use that to help us understand what's less clear.

In verse 38, Jesus tells us what the paddock is:

Matthew 13:38 (NIV)³⁸ The field is the world

That seems clear to me that this parable is about the world, not about the church.

Jesus is saying that there will be a mixture of believers and unbelievers in the world.

You might think, “Well, der?”

But that wasn’t the disciples’ expectations.

They were expecting that Messiah would come and deal with unrighteous people immediately.

Instead, Jesus is teaching that for now the world will be mixed – there will be some who live under his rule and others who live under the rule of the devil.

But there will be a day of reckoning – the day of harvest in the parable – but it just won’t come yet.

On that day, the angels will separate out the wheat from the weeds so that they’re no longer mixed.

That’s what’s meant by “*they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil*”.

It doesn’t mean that those following the devil were part of the kingdom, but that while the saved live alongside the unsaved for now, they will be separated out.

And the fate of the weeds isn’t good: they’ll be thrown into the furnace.

Fire is often used in the Bible to describe the kind of judgement that waits for anyone who follows the evil one – for example Isaiah 17:5; Joel 3:13; Revelation 14:14-20.

In case it isn’t clear, Jesus also describes it as the place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That’s a phrase often used in Matthew’s gospel to describe the outer darkness – the place we’d call ‘hell’.

This parable is a warning to anyone who hasn’t placed their trust in Jesus about where they will end up.

Why doesn’t Jesus just get rid of the weeds now? Why doesn’t he deal with them today as the disciples expected?

Why does he wait?

For the same reason that the weeds couldn’t be pulled up – not all the wheat is mature.

The God of the Bible is merciful and patient.

He's giving people time to repent – to recognise their sin and turn to him for the forgiveness that he offers.

In the words of Peter:

2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

What about the wheat – those who trust in Jesus? Where will they end up?

Verse 43:

Matthew 13:43a (NIV)⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

That's a quote from Daniel 12:3.

The good seed will enjoy the glory of living in God's kingdom, under his rule forever.

Jesus is saying that for now, the world is going to be shared by people who are in the kingdom and those who aren't.

Everyone living under God's rule – those who are part of the kingdom – are mixed in the world amongst those who follow the evil one.

You and I can't tell who's who as we walk down the street.

But don't misunderstand, at harvest time all will be revealed.

Even though it's mightn't always look like it, there's a real war going on between good and evil for the hearts and minds of men, woman and children.

An epic battle that the makers of books and movies can only begin to imagine.

The victory is guaranteed – it was won by Jesus on the cross.

Satan is defeated, but for now the battle rages on and at times it even looks like the Devil has the upper hand.

This parable should be a great encouragement for us too.

Like the disciples, we look around and see the unbridled effects of sin in the world: the hurt, injustice, greed, and hatred.

If Jesus really has been raised from the dead, if he's ruling from heaven, then why is the world such a messed up place?

If everything the Bible says really is true, then why is it that sometimes it doesn't seem to make any difference?

In turn, we might be tempted to ask why we should keep believing in him? Why keep trusting in him?

Especially in a world that is growing more and more hostile to Jesus and those who follow him.

Our culture has passed through a phase where Christianity was sidelined, into a phase of almost complete apathy with a thin veneer of rejection.

We've gone from tolerable to slightly on-the-nose.

And for some, it's even payback time.

In the last few weeks, we've seen what this looks like.

As part of their "Keeping it Light" campaign celebrating 200 years of the Bible Society in Australia, a video was released of a conversation between two MPs – Andrew Hastie and Tim Wilson.

They're both members of the Liberal Party. Andrew Hastie is a Christian. Tim Wilson is openly gay.

In the video, they very respectfully discussed same-sex marriage

So respectfully, I might add, that the moderator even got them to make arguments for each other – graciously putting forward their opponent's best argument, even though they disagree.

In the video, they were drinking Coopers Platinum Light beer because as part of the birthday celebrations, Coopers had partnered with the Bible Society to produce some limited edition cans with Bible verses printed on them.

Coopers weren't even directly involved in the making of this video, but the backlash they received was huge.

Pubs stopped serving their beer and there was a social media storm.

The end result was that Coopers put out three videos in one day – one supporting it, then one distancing themselves from it and then a third one actively supporting the marriage equality movement.

That's the brave, "tolerant" new world we live in where even if someone civilly disagrees with the Zeitgeist, their words are branded as hate-speech.

As the cultural tide turns, many of us feel like we're caught off-guard.

We might wonder, "Is Jesus really in control?"

Yes! He hasn't been caught off-guard, even if we have.

The problem is our expectations.

This parable reminds us what God is up to.

The gospel hasn't failed.

We can't measure Jesus' rule by what we see because his people are currently mixed in with the people of the Devil.

But there will be a day when he makes all things right.

It's coming, but right now is the day of repentance.

2. Two Parables about Size

The second false expectation that Jesus addresses is about the size of the kingdom.

Jesus uses two parables – both making the same point – to reset the disciples' expectations.

If the disciples measured the effectiveness of the kingdom by the number of people following Jesus, then the future really doesn't look all that bright.

After a great start, the kingdom looks like it's lost traction.

Instead of seeing a flood of people joining Team Jesus, there only seems to be a trickle.

Jesus uses these two parables to show that while the kingdom might have small beginnings it has a big and bright future.

Firstly, Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed.

I can't remember having ever seen a mustard seed in the flesh.

They really are small though, just 1-2mm in diameter.

Jesus describes it as the "smallest of all seeds".²

We need to take a brief detour because this verse teaches us something important about the way we read the Bible.

We must read the Bible literally, but not literalistically.

The plain reading of the text here can lead us astray into thinking that Jesus thinks the mustard seed is the “smallest of all seeds”.

How could the creator of the universe not know that there are smaller seeds?

Some people – quite seriously – see that as a reason that we can’t trust Jesus’ words because we know that there are seeds that are smaller.

That’s the danger of reading the Bible literalistically.

We need to take the Bible seriously and read it literally and not allegorically or figuratively.

That means asking, “What did Jesus mean when he said that?”

He’s not giving a scientific evaluation of the world.

The mustard seed was the smallest seed commonly planted in the ancient world and in rabbinical writing, mustard seeds were used as a metaphor for smallest of something.

Jesus wants to describe the kingdom by comparing it to the smallest seed known at the time.

It might seem obvious, but we can understand Jesus’ words literally in this way, without it undermining the authority of Scripture or our trust in him.

That’s not the point of the parable though.

Jesus is pointing out that even though a mustard seed is tiny, it will grow into a massive tree.

In fact, a tree so big that the ancients advised planting it in your garden.

And the birds – notice that they’re not a symbol for demons this time – will perch in the branches.

A large tree was a common Old Testament illustration to describe the refuge found in God’s kingdom.³

Jesus subverts the disciples expectations even further in the third parable where he compares the kingdom to leaven.

Leaven is often, but not always, used as a metaphor for evil.

Here it's being used to describe the kingdom!

This woman means business – she's baking 27kg of flour.

That's serious amount of flour without a mechanical mixer to help her.

She would've taken a little bit of the dough from the last time she baked and added it to the flour.

Then by mixing it through the flour, slowly, over time, that tiny bit of yeast will have a massive effect.

It will grow and cause all that flour to balloon up and rise.

In the words of Paul Kelly, "From little things, big things grow."

It's interesting, isn't it, that there's no explanation given for these parables?

Presumably that's because the message is clear.

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven will start small, but it will grow and grow and grow.

Don't lose heart.

Even though the kingdom didn't have the cataclysmic beginning the disciples were expecting – and it's greatness won't be fully seen until it's fully mature – that doesn't mean that the kingdom will fail.

That would've been a great encouragement to the disciples in the first century.

They were tiny and insignificant minority – tiny fish in a big pond.

Out of all the religions in the then known world, Jews were a small cluster.

And amongst them there were relatively few responding to Jesus by recognising him as the Christ.

But 2000 years later, where are most of those other religions?

Most of them have died out and we haven't even heard of them.

But the Christian gospel continues to grow and is having a massive impact, spreading all around the world.

There are far too many groups of people who haven't heard the gospel, but the number of unreached people groups is slowly decreasing.

Christians started out as a very tiny blip on the map, but now we make up something like a third of the world's population.

And even if only 10% of those who call themselves Christians have a saving faith, that's still a lot of people.

God's kingdom might not be growing in number everywhere, but the kingdom is growing on a the power of the gospel charges on.

Closer to home, over my lifetime, the church landscape in Brisbane has changed dramatically.

There are probably less churches in our city now, compared to thirty years ago.

But from my own experience and what other have told me, there are more churches preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ now than there were before.

We praise God for that.

We suffer from an all too small view of what God's doing. Our expectations are too small.

It's all too easy to get caught up in our own lives and we fail to appreciate what God is doing.

Sometimes, like the disciples, we need to see the big picture.

That's what these parables do. They push us to understand that God's kingdom is growing.

I'd suggest that one way to counter that is to get missionary prayer letters.

Many of you know that I dabble in a certain language and I'm concerned for the gospel in that part of the world.

So, I get the prayer letter of an Aussie who's working in that part of the world that you probably think is Christian but is very post-Christian.

This guy's a machine.

He's the principal of the only evangelical Bible college in his state which is home to 15 million people.

In his spare time, he runs a program in his church training young men and women for full-time gospel service.

On top of all that, he's also involved in evangelising Muslim refugees.

It gets me excited to hear that many of them are coming to Christ.

Genuinely, not just for a visa.

I know that because he then has to care for them when they get beaten up by other refugees because of their new faith.

Hearing that stokes my faith.

Jesus' kingdom started small, but it's growing.

Often, our expectations and our understanding of what God's doing are too small.

The gospel is going out and it'll continue to grow until Jesus comes back.

Conclusion

These three parables teach us that Jesus' kingdom might be rejected, but it'll never be defeated.

Matthew 13:43b (NIV) Whoever has ears, let them hear.

¹ Matthew 13:35

² Matthew 13:32

³ Ezekiel 17:22-24; 31:3-14.

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Introduction

1. In what ways did Jesus' kingdom fail to live up to the disciples' expectations?
2. What can we learn from comparing the parable of the surfaces with the parable of the weeds?
3. What are the reasons for and against understanding the field as the world or the church?
4. How does the first parable help us make sense of what we see in the world around us?
5. In the parable of the weeds, the reason the weeds weren't pulled up is "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them." (Matthew 13:29) What was Jesus teaching by saying that?
6. As our culture becomes more hostile to the gospel, how does this parable help us to think about how we relate to the world as Christians?
7. Why do you think Jesus doesn't need to explain the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast?
8. What are some things you could do to help reset your vision of how Jesus' kingdom is growing?
9. How do you think these parables relate to the big theme of how people respond to Jesus in chapters 11-13?