

THE DOCTRINE OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 13*

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The message of the kingdom, preached by John, Jesus, and the disciples, included both the need for repentance and the announcement of the imminent coming of the kingdom. The former prepares individuals for the latter. Whereas in Luke 8:11 the message is called "the word of God," Matthew appropriately referred to it as "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19), that is, the good news of the kingdom. While the message of the kingdom cannot be limited to the gospel, it must at least include it, as the various gospel contexts affirm. The good news is that God acted in Jesus Christ to provide redemption for humanity and to defeat all who would stand in the way of His being recognized as King.

RECEPTION OF THE WORD

The reception of "the word of the kingdom" produces varying degrees of growth in the lives of those who hear it. Maximum reception with a good and honest heart is shown to be God's goal for every hearer of the Word of God (13:23). The right response to the message includes hearing, understanding, and doing (v. 23). Obedience is a critical concern in several of Matthew's kingdom parables. The blessing of God is seen in the fruitfulness of one's life. The degree of fruitfulness is not the same even among those responding rightly to the message of the kingdom. Each individual is unique in his or her heart response and understanding, and so the extent of fruitfulness also varies. That not all grow at the same rate is an encouragement not to judge one person by the benchmark of another. The differing rates of growth are also a

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growth are also a warning that failure to produce fruit may indicate a problem in discipleship commitment that needs to be addressed. Hearing, understanding, obedience, and a commitment that holds fast even under pressure are prerequisites for maximum fruitfulness. Receptivity enhances productivity.

REJECTION OF THE WORD

Those who preach or teach the message of the kingdom need to realize that not all will respond as they ought. Three obstacles to the effective appropriation of the message of the kingdom include satanic activity, external pressures from those unsympathetic to God's purposes, and the lack of internal spirituality within the hearers themselves (in which worry, the desire for riches, and being overly attached to this present world keep the Word of God from producing His desired results, vv. 19-22). The first obstacle is Satan, who seeks to snatch the word of the kingdom from the hearts of those who hear it but have not yet responded to it. The second obstacle is affliction and persecution from others when initial interest has been shown by a prospective hearer. The third distraction is personal desires that can choke out any possibility of a fruitful response. "The main aim of the parables is to describe the activity of God in Jesus, more particularly so that men may trust in it and become disciples, or else be offended at it."¹

OPPOSITION TO THE WORD OF GOD

Two spiritual leaders are revealed in Matthew 13 as competing for influence in the world: the Son of Man and Satan. The devil, as the enemy (vv. 25, 28, 39) of Christ and believers, uses various strategies in seeking to carry out his objectives. One is to snatch away the word of the kingdom from those who have not yet adequately welcomed it, in order to keep it from taking root and producing fruit in people's lives. Another strategy of the enemy of the Son of Man is placing his "sons" (tares) into the world to masquerade as sons of the kingdom. This counterfeiting activity introduces into the world a hypocritical substitution of "sons of the evil one" to imitate those who are the real "sons of the kingdom" (v. 38). Thus the righteous and the wicked are defined by their family relationship. Each person is either a son of the kingdom that belongs to God or a son of the devil, whose desire is to deceive and to destroy God's work. The fact that it is often difficult to dis-

¹ John J. Vincent, *Secular Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 113.

tinguish the sons of the evil one from the sons of the kingdom supports the fact of satanic deceitfulness mentioned throughout Scripture. Such masquerading religiosity has always been one of the enemy's tactics. A third strategy of Satanic opposition is more subtle. Some individuals are classified as "stumbling blocks" (v. 41). These will be judged at the end of the age along with the rest of the wicked. Therefore the kingdom is under attack by Satan and those he uses as his representatives.

In spite of this hostility the kingdom of heaven will survive and succeed. The judgment at the end of the age will reveal the true identity of those wicked individuals who are allied with Satan and his attempts to frustrate God's kingdom purposes. A professed allegiance or a superficial response is inadequate for a relationship with Christ and participation in His kingdom.

THE TIMING OF THE KINGDOM

The parables of Matthew 13 reveal three phases of the kingdom. The aorist tense of several verbs in the parable of the tares (vv. 24–28) suggests a previous history for the kingdom. This would pertain to the revelation and development of God's kingdom purposes in the Old Testament. The parable of the tares also speaks of a future phase of the kingdom referred to as "His [i.e., Christ's] kingdom" (v. 41) and "the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43), referents to the Messiah's future earthly reign. By far the most dominant phase of the kingdom in these parables is the present interadvent age. This period is portrayed as having a beginning (planting), phenomenal growth and extension, and a culminating judgment. This present phase began with the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. Jesus is seen as having an active and personal role in the planting phase of the kingdom (vv. 3–4). This will be an extended period of time leading to the end of the age with its climactic events.

What began with hardly any perceptible presence will reach a level of international proportions. The world continues in this era to be the stage for conflict between Satan and the Son of Man and between those they strategically place in the world to carry on their influence and purposes. The present ("mystery") form of the kingdom is broader than but includes the church age. At the culmination of this interadvent phase of God's kingdom angels will accompany Jesus and will separate (vv. 39, 41, 49) the wicked from the righteous. The righteous then will shine as the sun in the Lord's kingdom (v. 43).

THE KINGDOM AS A PRESENT REALITY

The parables in Matthew 13 focus on the phase of God's kingdom program that extends from the time of Israel's rejection of Jesus in His earthly ministry to the time of judgment at His second coming. Both the beginning (planting) and expansion (growth) of the interadvent phase of the kingdom are noted. The world is portrayed as the stage for the ongoing conflict between the work of the Son of Man and Satan, between the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one. The various responses to the kingdom message and the continuing conflict of the kingdom messengers (sons of the kingdom) in the first two parables are portrayed as initial stages that will progress to the time of harvest.

The mustard seed and the leavening process depict the successful growth of the kingdom in the present age. While not intended necessarily to trace the growth itself, the small beginning and extensive expansion to the end argue for an indefinite period of time between these two points. These parables signal coming judgment for those of Israel who were rejecting the message of Jesus. These parables also encourage believers to remember that what God is doing during the present phase of the kingdom will enjoy a successful growth. And, in contrast to what was thought by some to be only a Jewish hope, the kingdom of God in the present age, starting with almost imperceptible beginnings, will survive and even expand to international proportions, bringing light to the nations before the end of the age.

What Jesus is doing in the present age is consistent with what God has designed for the future phase of the kingdom. This includes the international ministry to the Gentiles and their participation in the kingdom of God. While the institutional structures through which God works in each age differ, they all emphasize His concern for the world. The humble beginning and seemingly small results in Jesus' ministry are not inconsistent with the future manifestation of the kingdom of God in which His absolute worldwide sovereignty will be recognized and consummated. The growth of the kingdom in its interadvent phase does not result from external religious activity. Instead the growth comes by means of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is the invisible yet effective Agent of transforming growth.

THE SONS OF THE KINGDOM

The people placed by the Son of Man in the world to represent Him are called the sons of the kingdom. The citizens (sons) of the kingdom may seem indistinguishable from those who are not

sons of the kingdom. However, as sons of the kingdom they are related to Christ as God's children by means of their obedient faith. The metaphor of wheat shows them to be the desired harvest from the earth. They are contrasted with the sons of the evil one who, pictured by the tares, will be rejected by the Son of Man when He returns to earth.

The Lord's servants are to resist the temptation to prejudge the people of this world, for two reasons. One is the danger of mistaking the character of those being evaluated (v. 29), and another is that the right of judgment is reserved for the Son of Man. He alone has the ability to discern the true character of those He will judge.

DISCIPLESHIP AND THE KINGDOM

Since Jesus interpreted the first two and the last four parables for the disciples in private, it follows that these parables suggest principles by which the disciples should live and minister. The disciples are presented in Matthew as the privileged recipients of the mysteries, since they are credited with a responsive heart of understanding (vv. 11-12, 51). Fruitfulness results from such a response. Implied also is the ongoing need to have an honest heart if future insight and fruitfulness are to be realized.

Disciples are prohibited from being the agents of judgment during the present phase of the kingdom (v. 30). As stated earlier, the reasons are that they would be prone to misjudge because of their inability to distinguish the sons of the kingdom from the sons of the evil one, and the role of judge has been delegated to the Son of Man along with his "collection agents," the angels.

The disciples can be confident that though the kingdom with which they aligned themselves may have a small beginning, its future will be glorious and international through the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit. What may seem invisible in its beginnings and even in its process and progress will have dramatic results in God's timing.

Those who are disciples of Jesus and His kingdom must be prepared to give up everything that would stand in the way of wholehearted commitment to the priority of the kingdom of God, as emphasized in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl merchant. Whether one realizes its value or not, whether one was looking for it or not (vv. 44-46), the kingdom is so valuable it is worth giving up all for it. These are reasons for participating in the kingdom; it is valuable, and its benefits bring joy. Therefore whatever is given up for the pursuit of the kingdom is not really a loss. God's kingdom should be the highest priority in one's life. The theme of total commitment for those who would be disciples of

the kingdom is a well-recognized theme in the Synoptic Gospels.

THE MISSION OF THE KINGDOM

The mission of the kingdom includes both evangelism and edification, both worldwide proclamation and comprehensive teaching. The international mission of the kingdom has been designed to reach people of "every kind" (v. 47), that is, people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. The disciples of the kingdom are to invite everyone to come in. Separation of the good from the bad (the righteous from the wicked) will be the future responsibility of the Son of Man and His angels (vv. 41, 49-50).

Teaching both the new and old truths of the kingdom is the burden of the final parable in verses 51-52. Referring to the "new" before mentioning the "old" places the focus on the mysteries of the kingdom—the parables of this chapter and probably the others Jesus taught in His ministry. The "old" would include what had already been communicated in the Old Testament about the kingdom and its future fulfillment.

THE JUDGMENT AT THE END OF THE AGE

The judgment that will separate the wicked from the righteous will not occur until the end of the age. This final judgment is depicted by the images of harvesttime and the close of a fishing day (vv. 30, 48-50). This judgment will divide humanity, not along racial or religious lines as supposed by many of Israel's leaders but according to the character of people's lives, which will reveal their relationship and response to Jesus. The wicked will be confined to eternal punishment and the righteous will remain to enter into the kingdom of the Father (vv. 41-43, 49-50).

The agents of that judgment are said to be the angels, while the Son of Man is portrayed as the Judge who has the right to determine the destiny of both the righteous and the wicked. The punitive judgment is said to include all who are stumbling blocks and all who are guilty of wickedness (v. 41). This speaks not only of their personal character but also of their negative influence on others. Those so judged will experience weeping and gnashing of teeth (vv. 42, 50), which connotes the anguish and anger the condemned will experience in their eternal separation from God. The righteous, on the other hand, will enjoy the kingdom of the Father (v. 43), sharing in His glory.

The parables clearly support a premillennial perspective on eschatology. After the judgment at the end of the age the righteous will become a community of believers who are said to be like light

in the kingdom of the Father (v. 43). The judgment that determines who will enter this future phase of the kingdom will take place on earth; no translation of saints to heaven is mentioned in Matthew 13. Therefore the future phase of the kingdom must also be on earth, and will follow the judgment of the wicked and the righteous that will occur when the Son of Man returns to earth.

THE SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS AS KING OF THE KINGDOM

One of the most controversial subjects in the study of the Gospels pertains to Jesus' self-understanding. Therefore it is only natural to ask what the parables of Matthew 13 contribute to that subject. Jesus' boldness in teaching about His right to share the privileges of God argues strongly for His deity as well as His right to rule as the messianic King.² The parables themselves contain some of the boldest references by Jesus about Himself. As Blomberg observes, "Never did such individuals [other prophets or spokesmen of God] apply symbols for God to themselves so consistently as did Jesus, and none ever claimed that he was doing precisely what the Scriptures said God himself would do. Yet in the parables Jesus claims to forgive sin, usher in the kingdom, sow his word in human hearts, graciously welcome undeserving sinners into God's presence, seek out and rescue his lost sheep, oversee the final judgment, and distinguish those who will and those who will not enter the kingdom."³

In the parable of the tares Jesus is identified as "the Son of Man" (vv. 37, 41). This title speaks of His humanity and deity in His incarnation, earthly ministry, and coming judgment. This title is loaded with implications for the kingdom.⁴ Jesus has the authority to send angels to gather humanity for the great separation at the end of the age. He is not indifferent to the evil that exists in the world, as a delay of judgment might lead some to conclude. As the One who can give directions to the angels and who will preside over the judgment, only Jesus has the authority to judge. As seen in the parable of the tares, even the servants of the Son of Man are not allowed to judge (vv. 29-30). The fact that the

² For an extended discussion of this observation see Philip Barton Payne, "Jesus" Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *Trinity Journal* 2 (Winter 1981): 2-23.

³ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 320.

⁴ Daniel 7:13-14 especially speaks of the expectation of the coming kingdom and the reign of the saints with the Son of Man.

kingdom is said to be His (v. 41) reveals He has the right to be the King. He is the One who determines the eternal punishment for the wicked and the entrance of the righteous into the kingdom of the Father. In the parable of the tares Jesus is seen as present at both the beginning of the planting process and the harvest at the end of the age. These facts clearly show that Jesus understood that He is the coming divine King.

APPLICATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Several applicational principles can be gleaned from the intended appeals of the parables in Matthew 13.

1. Not everyone will respond to the message of the kingdom, and not all who do respond are equally fruitful.
2. Satan is personally active in seeking to prevent people from receiving the message of God's kingdom.
3. Both external pressures and internal distractions hinder the proper appropriation of the Word of God.
4. God desires that people hear, understand, and apply the truth of His Word in order to be fruitful for Him.
5. The hearers of the Word are at least partially responsible for the level of productivity in their lives.
6. Jesus' followers should realize that Satan sends his representatives into the world to masquerade as sons of the kingdom to disrupt and hinder the work of Christ.
7. Believers need to be realistic about the presence of hypocrites, but believers should not assume the role reserved for Jesus by seeking to judge others.
8. Servants of the Lord need to wait patiently for Jesus to judge and separate the wicked from the righteous.
9. People should decide to be followers of Christ in light of the impending judgment which will determine their eternal destiny.
10. God has promised the righteous a glorious future in the shared reign of the Son and the Father in the next phase of the kingdom, Jesus' rule on earth.

11. The success of God's work cannot be fully evaluated until the time of the judgment.
12. Messiah has come in humility and will one day reign in sovereignty.
13. The work of the Spirit authenticates the ministry of Jesus Christ.
14. Jesus' disciples need to depend on the invisible yet powerfully transforming work of the Holy Spirit.
15. The kingdom of heaven should be the highest priority of anyone who finds it.
16. No sacrifice is too great in light of the value of the kingdom.
17. The joy of participating in the kingdom should motivate Jesus' followers to make whatever sacrifice is necessary.
18. Discipleship calls for wholehearted dedication to God's kingdom purposes.
19. Participation in God's kingdom is not restricted to any single race.
20. Jesus places a high priority on evangelism to all classes and cultures.
21. The need to evangelize the world is motivated by the reality of future judgment.
22. God's judgment will be based on inner character rather than cultural backgrounds.

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