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# The Seed and the Soil

*Matthew 13:1–23*

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

One of my daughters has been singing a song about Jesus that contains the line “Jesus was a story-tellin’ man.” When I first heard that line it seemed a bit flip, as so many contemporary Christian songs are. But as I thought about it I realized that it contains a real truth: though Jesus was much more than a storyteller, He was at

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least that, and as a result the people of His day flocked to Him and heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37).

Christ's words were always picturesque. He spoke of camels creeping through the hole in a needle (Matt. 19:24), of people trying to remove specks from another's eye when a plank was in their own (Matt. 7:5). He referred to a house divided against itself, destined to fall down (Mark 3:25), to tossing children's bread to dogs (Mark 7:27). He warned against the "yeast" of the Pharisees (Mark 8:15 NIV). Strictly speaking, however, those are not stories. The stories Jesus told fall into a particular category of story known as parable. A parable is a story taken from real life (or a real-life situation) from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. Examples are many: the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), the wedding banquet (Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24), the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46), and others, including the parables of the kingdom that will occupy our attention in this first set of studies. By my count there are about twenty-seven parables, though some are closely related and may simply be different versions of the same story.

Parables differ from fables in that a fable is not a real situation. An example of a fable is any of Aesop's stories, in which animals talk. In those stories the animals are simply people in disguise. Parables also differ from allegories, since in an allegory each or nearly each detail has meaning. C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* are essentially allegories. In the parables of Jesus not every detail has meaning. Indeed, to try to force meaning into each one can produce strange and even demonstrably false doctrines. Parables are merely real-life stories from which one or possibly a few basic truths are drawn.

## PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

If a person were to begin reading the New Testament at page one (Matt. 1:1) and read consecutively, he would read quite a while

before encountering this important element of our Lord's teaching. In fact, he would have to read one-fourth of Matthew's gospel, chapters 1–12, before coming upon even the first of the parables. But with chapter 13 that suddenly changes—here, not one but seven parables are recorded. They have one theme, the kingdom of God, and so are called the “parables of the kingdom.”

It is no accident that these are the first parables encountered. It is sometimes said that Matthew's gospel presents the Lord Jesus Christ as “king of Israel,” just as Mark presents Him as the “Son of Man” and Luke as the “servant.” But whether we give Matthew that thematic emphasis or not, there is no doubt that Christ's proclamation of the kingdom is a major theme of Matthew's gospel. The very first verse introduces Jesus as “the son of David,” Israel's great king. Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, is said to have come preaching “the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 3:2). Jesus Himself made that the first theme of His itinerant ministry (Matt. 4:17). Some regard the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) as the ethics of the kingdom; the miracles of chapters 8–12 demonstrate the kingdom's power. Since this is Matthew's early emphasis, we should not be surprised that the first parables develop this theme.

It is also no accident that the parables are presented in the order in which we have them, although methods of relating the seven stories differ. The most obvious division is into two sets of four and three respectively. In the first four (the sower and the seed, the enemy who sows tares, the mustard seed, and the yeast) Jesus speaks before the multitudes. The last three (the parables of the hidden treasure, the fine pearl, and the dragnet) are spoken before the disciples only. Some have grouped the parables by twos: (1) the parables involving planting and harvesting, (2) the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, (3) parables that stress the kingdom's value—the treasure and the pearl, and (4) the parable of the dragnet.

Both of these classifications suggest a development, but I prefer a third system of classification. To my mind the first parable stands

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alone, since it deals with the origin of the kingdom. The next three belong together, since (as I hope to demonstrate) they picture Satan's desire to thwart the kingdom's growth. Parables five and six go together and show the attitude of those who vigorously seek the kingdom despite Satan's wiles. The last parable, the dragnet, shows the kingdom's consummation. Taken together the stories show the nature, origin, hindrances to, and victory of Christ's work of spreading His gospel through His messengers between the days of His first coming and His coming again.

### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The first parable is an ideal one with which to begin, since (obviously enough) it deals with the beginnings or origins of the kingdom. Here it is compared to a farmer sowing seed. "A farmer went out to sow his seed . . ." (Matt. 13:3 niv). Not all of Christ's parables are explained. In fact, most are not. But this one is (vv. 18–23), and the explanation that Jesus gives is our starting point. The seed is the gospel of the kingdom, and the soil is the human heart (v. 19). The emphasis is on the various kinds of hearts and how they reject or receive Christ's message.

The first type of soil represents the *hard heart*, of which there are many today as well as in Christ's time. It is described as soil along the path (v. 4). Such ground has been trampled down by the many feet that have passed that way over scores of years. Because the soil is hard, the seed that falls there merely lies on the path and does not sink in, and the birds (which Christ compares to the devil or the devil's workers) soon snatch it away. What is it that makes the human heart hard? There can be only one answer: sin. Sin hardens the heart, and the heart that is hardened sins even more.

That type of person is described in the first chapter of Romans. He or she begins by suppressing the truth about God that may be known from nature (vv. 18–20), plunges inevitably into spiritual ignorance

and moral degradation (vv. 21–31), and eventually comes not only to practice the sins of the heathen but to *approve* them as well (v. 32). Here we see both halves of the circle; sin leads to a rejection of God and God’s truth, and the rejection of God’s truth leads to even greater sin. What is it that leads such a person to reject the truth of God in the first place? According to Paul, it is a determined opposition to the nature of God Himself, which the apostle describes as human “ungodliness and unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18).

Virtually all of God’s attributes—whether sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, immutability, or even the divine love—are offensive to the natural man, if properly understood. So rather than repent of sin and turn for mercy to a God who is altogether sovereign, holy, knowing, and unchangeable, men and women suppress what knowledge they have and refuse to seek out that additional knowledge that could be the salvation of their souls.

Recently I heard a conversation between two women in which one asked, “Why is America in such a declining moral state today?”

Her friend replied, “Because the people love sin.” I cannot think of anything more profound than that. That is the message of Romans 1 in five words. *People love sin*. Sin hardens their hearts. Therefore, they will not receive the gospel of the kingdom of God when it is preached to them.

The opposition of the unregenerate heart to God’s sovereignty is particularly evident in these kingdom parables, for kingdom means rule, and rule is the same as sovereignty. When Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, He came preaching God’s right to rule over the minds and hearts of all people. But that is precisely what the people involved did not want. Adam did not want it. He had great freedom, but he was offended by God’s unreasonable and arbitrary (so he judged) restriction in the case of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If God exercised His sovereignty at that point, it was here that Adam would rebel. So he did—and fell, carrying the race with him. That spirit of rebellion against the sovereign God works itself out in history

until eventually the Lord Jesus Christ Himself comes to earth and the response of His people is: “We will not have this man to rule over us.”

So it is also today. That is probably the greatest reason for the rejection of the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ at this or any other time in history. I heard of a man who said, “I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for sinners. But I guess I just don’t want to give Him my life. I want to make my own decisions.”

The second type of soil stands for the *shallow heart*. Jesus described it as soil covering rocky ground. When the seed fell there it sank in, but only to a very shallow depth. It sprang up quickly, but it also faded quickly in the sun’s heat because it had no root. Jesus later described that person: “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (vv. 20–21).

Many people fit that description. We see them in our thriving evangelical churches. Their shallow hearts are attracted to the joy and excitement of a church where much is happening. They hear the gospel and seem to fit in. Many even make a profession of faith. But then some difficulty comes—loss of a job, misunderstandings with other Christians, sickness, even a bad romance—and just as suddenly as they once seemed to embrace the faith, they fall away, because they were really never born again.

Not long ago I noticed an extreme case. The newspapers reported the arrest in Lakeland, Florida, of a man named Joseph Paul Franklin. He was wanted for questioning about a year-long series of shootings in Salt Lake City, Johnstown (Pennsylvania), Fort Wayne, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Oklahoma City. He had grown up in a bad home, had dropped out of school at seventeen, and began getting into trouble, with several arrests for carrying concealed weapons and disorderly conduct. But then, as one magazine went on to say in tracing his early life, “he became an Evangelical Christian.”<sup>1</sup> After

that he became a Nazi and then a Ku Klux Klansman. At one point he told friends he was going to join Ian Smith's Rhodesian army.

I had been reading that news item with only minimal interest, but when I came to the line about his being an "Evangelical Christian" my attention picked up. I wondered why that had been slipped in and whether it was just one more attempt to discredit genuine Christianity. I do not think it was; Franklin had actually gone through Christianity as one stage in his warped development, and the magazine was simply reporting that fact fairly. The tragedy is not that such a thing is reported but that there are far too many in Franklin's category within our churches. Just being in church, mouthing the things you hear other people say, does not make you a Christian. Yours may be the shallow heart. Yours may be the rocky soil.

The third type of soil stands for the *strangled heart*, strangled by things. The Lord describes those things as thorns, and says, "As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (v. 22). I do not need to point out how many lives are choked by riches today. It was true even in Jesus' day; we know that because of our Lord's many warnings against riches: "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23); "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25); "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:24).

On one occasion a rich young man turned away from Jesus sorrowfully because Jesus had told him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, and he was unwilling to do it (Luke 18:23). But if that was true in Jesus' day among people whom we would regard for the most part as very, very poor, how much truer it is in ours. How much more choked we are with riches—we who have cars and houses and boats and bank accounts and all the modern gadgets of our materialistic culture.



There is this point, too: riches do not choke a person all at once. It is a gradual process. Like the weeds in Christ's parable, riches grow up gradually. Slowly, very slowly, they strangle the buddings of spiritual life within. Beware of that if you either have possessions or are on your merry way to acquiring them. Above all, beware if you are saying, "I need to provide for myself now. I'll think about spiritual things when I'm older." Jesus warned against that in another story about a man whose fields produced such a good crop that he tore down his barns and built bigger ones, saying to himself, "You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Jesus' words were, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:16–21).

The last type of soil is the one to which the entire parable has been heading. It is the *open heart*, the heart that receives the gospel like good soil receives seed. This soil produces a good crop, "yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matt. 13:23 NIV). Here many minor points might be made. We could show that only a portion (in the parable, one-fourth) of the preaching of the gospel bears fruit—in Christ's or any other age. We could show that the only sure evidence of a genuine reception of the Word of God in a person's life is the bringing forth of spiritual fruit. We could show that the presence of fruit is the important thing, not the amount (at least in most cases). But those points are less important than the main one: it is only the open heart that receives the benefit of the preaching of the gospel and is saved.

Is your heart an open heart? Are you receptive to God's truth? Do you allow it to settle down into your life and thinking so that it turns you from sin, directs your faith to Jesus, and produces the Holy Spirit's fruit? You may say, "I'm afraid not. I wish my heart was like that, but I'm afraid it is hard or shallow or strangled by this world's goods. What can I do?"

The answer is that you can do nothing, any more than soil can change its nature. But although you can do nothing, there is one who

can—the divine Gardener. He can break up the hard ground, uproot the rocks, and remove the thorns. That is your hope—not you, but the Gardener. Notice what He says through the prophet Ezekiel, who wrote to the hard-hearted of his day. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:25–27).

I think of that rich young man who turned away from Jesus sorrowfully. After Jesus had remarked how difficult it was for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples asked, “Then who can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). They recognized the dimensions of the problem.

Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (v. 27). In other words, “With God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). And so they are! They are possible for *you*. Come to Christ and allow Him to give you a heart that will receive the gospel.

# The Work of the Enemy

*Matthew 13:24–43*

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

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He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

Nothing good has ever come into the world without opposition, and that is especially true in spiritual matters. Here we face not only the hostility and opposition of mere people like ourselves, but satanic or demonic opposition as well. That is why the Bible wants us to be on our guard against the devil who, we are told, “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). The Scripture alerts us to the devil’s “schemes” (2 Cor. 2:11 NIV). He must not be able to outwit us.

Since we have an enemy who is so fiercely opposed to the extension of God’s rule on earth, we should not be surprised to find the Lord warning us against his devices in the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13. Jesus does this quite clearly in the second parable, showing how the devil, like an enemy of a certain farmer, sows weeds in God’s field—that is, scatters his unbelievers among God’s believers. Jesus also does this in the third and fourth parables, in my judgment, though He speaks there without explanation. He tells of a mustard seed that grew up to be a great tree and of yeast that a woman mixed into a large amount of dough. These parables alert us to strategies Satan has been using to hinder the work of God in this seed-sowing age between the time of Christ’s first coming and His coming again.

### PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

The first of these parables is the easiest to interpret (though it does have some difficult parts), both because much of it is self-evident, and because the Lord explains it. The details of the parable itself are given in verses 24–30 of Matthew 13.

In discussing this passage some have made much of a detail in

Christ's explanation, found in verse 38. In the previous verse Jesus had explained that "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man" (v. 37)—an explanation that no doubt applies to the first parable as well and shows that all the parables are somewhat linked. Then He goes on to say, "The field is the world" (v. 38). Some have stressed that point, arguing that if the field is the world, it cannot be the church. Therefore, Christ's prohibition against trying to separate the weeds from the grain before the final judgment does not apply to church discipline. So the church, in spite of Christ's warning, should try to be as pure as possible.

The concern that leads to that interpretation is a valid one, namely, that the church should strive to maintain purity. Other passages in the New Testament call upon us to work for that goal. But to argue for that idea gets the interpretation of the parable off track. For one thing, it is impossible here to make a rigid distinction between the world and the church, because a little further on Jesus speaks of the angels weeding out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil (v. 41). God's kingdom is not the world in general, so any interpretation that builds exclusively on the phrase "the field is the world" is suspect.

Again, what is the point of the devil's planting children "in the world" in a general way, if all it means is that the devil's children and God's children live side by side? At best that is self-evident. Besides, if that is what Jesus means, the parable is not even stating the situation in the best way. If the field is the world apart from the church, it would be more correct to say that the devil's children are in the world already and that it is Jesus, rather than Satan, who plants His seed among the seed that is already growing. It would be Jesus who does the new thing, not Satan. He is planting seed that is to grow up into spiritual fruit in the lives of His people. But as Jesus tells the story, He stresses what Satan is doing, and that must be after Jesus has already sown His seed. The devil is mixing counterfeit Christians in among true Christians to hinder God's work.

So that is the real message. Whether the field is the world or the church is actually irrelevant. The point is simply that the devil is going to bring forward people (whether in the church or out of it) so much like true Christians, yet not Christians, that even the servants of God will not be able to tell them apart. Consequently, although we want a pure church and will certainly exercise church discipline to the best of our ability in clear cases, we must not think that we will achieve our full desire in this age. Even in our exercise of valid church discipline we must be extremely careful not to discourage or damage some for whom Christ died.

I find the following applications of this parable.

1. *If the devil is mixing his people in among true Christians, then we should be alert to that fact.* We should be on our guard not to be taken in, and we should not be surprised if the devil's people show up in strange places or eventually show their true colors by abandoning Christianity entirely. In 2 Corinthians, Paul gives just such a warning, pointing out that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" and that "it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:14–15). "Servants of righteousness" means "ministers." Thus the old proverb, "When you look for the devil don't forget to look in the pulpit." Again, we are not to be surprised if some like this eventually repudiate the faith and leave Christian fellowship. John also wrote of such, saying, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19).

2. *The mixed nature of the Christian assembly should not be an excuse for unbelievers to refuse to come to Christ.* Jesus did not pretend (nor should we) that the Christian church is perfect. Sometimes unbelievers say, "I'm not a Christian because the church is filled with hypocrites." But that is itself a hypocritical statement. It implies that the one making it is better than those whom he rejects. At best it is not the whole truth—there are deeper reasons why people will not

become Christians. But the real problem is that if the objection were to be met (that is, if hypocrisy and other sins were to be eliminated entirely among the people of God), then there would be no place for the objector! He or she would not fit in. There is a place for him or her only because Jesus came “not to call the righteous, but sinners” to repentance (Matt. 9:13).

3. *No one should take comfort in sin.* The church is impure; we cannot always distinguish between the wheat and tares in this age. But a day is coming when that distinction will be made. The harvest will come. The wheat will be gathered into God’s barn, and the tares will be burned. As a result, we should examine ourselves as to whether we are true children of God or not. And we should be careful to “confirm [our] calling and election,” as Peter indicates (2 Pet. 1:10).

## THE MUSTARD SEED AND YEAST

The next two of Christ’s parables (vv. 31–33) belong together. Each should help us to understand the other, but of all the parables Christ told, none has produced such diametrically opposed interpretations as these two. What are those diverse interpretations? On the one hand, some teachers see these as parables of the kingdom’s expansion and growth, so that in time it actually comes to fill the whole world. An example is William M. Taylor, who has left us an excellent book on the parables. He writes of the story of the mustard seed:

*A great result from a small beginning*, a large growth from a little germ—that is the one thought of the parable, and of that the Lord declares that the kingdom of heaven upon the earth is an instance.

He writes of the yeast,

The great truth here illustrated, then, is that the Lord Jesus Christ, by his coming and work, introduced into humanity an element

which works a change on it, that shall continue to operate until the whole is transformed—therein resembling leaven, hidden by a woman in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened.<sup>1</sup>

Most postmillennialists and many amillennialists take this view since it fits their eschatology to have a parable that tells of the kingdom's triumph in the world before Christ's return.

The other viewpoint is represented by a man like Arno C. Gaebelien, who sees the parables as teaching an abnormal and harmful bureaucratic expansion of the church and the devil's work of undermining it by the infusion of sin, represented by the yeast. He writes, "All these parables show the growth of evil, and are prophecies extending over the entire age in which we live."<sup>2</sup>

What are normal people to think about these two interpretations?

We should say first that, whatever our interpretation of the parables might be, there is nevertheless much more theological agreement between people who take these two sides than the interpretations themselves would indicate. To be sure, there is a profound disagreement as to whether the kingdom of God is going to be victorious in this age. Postmillennialists would say yes. Premillennialists would say no. But even here there is a measure of agreement. Both acknowledge that Christians are sent out into the whole world with the gospel—the essence of the Great Commission. Both would agree that there has certainly been an effective and striking growth of Christianity from its small beginnings at the time of Christ's death to its position as a dominant world religion today.

Again, to look at the parable of the yeast, each side would acknowledge that the devil has certainly been effective in working evil into the visible church, greatly harming its effectiveness. So we may begin by realizing that—with the sole exception of whether the church is to be victorious in the world or only affect a part of it—most of the points any one interpreter would insist on would be accepted by the other side.



But we do have to think of the stories one way or the other. Since I have already indicated that I lump them together with the parable that tells of the devil's work, let me give my reasons for seeing them as I do.

First, the growth of a mustard seed into a tree is abnormal. That is, a mustard seed does not grow into a tree; it grows into a shrub. Anyone to whom Christ spoke would know that. So when He spoke of the great and unusual growth of this seed, His hearers would immediately have been alerted to the fact that something was wrong. If Jesus had wanted to stress the "victorious church" view, He should have referred to an acorn growing up to be an oak or a cedar seed growing up to be one of the mighty trees of Lebanon.

Second, in the context of Matthew 13, the birds, who (in this parable) rest in the mustard tree's branches (v. 32), have already (in parable one) been identified as the devil or the devil's messengers (v. 19). It is true that an element of one parable need not necessarily carry the same meaning if it is used in the next, but it surely would be strange if an element that symbolized such evil at the start of the chapter carried a totally different meaning just thirteen verses later. Who are the birds who roost in the church's branches if not those whom the devil has sown among the organized church? If they are not Satan's people, then who they are is left unexplained. On the other hand, if the birds are the devil's followers, then there is an immediate and obvious carry over into the parable of the yeast, for the yeast would represent the same thing as the birds do in verse 32. The parable of the yeast would just add the thought that the presence of evil is pervasive.

Third, in nearly all cases in the Old Testament (and in Jewish life today) yeast is a symbol of evil. In the sacrificial laws of Israel it was excluded from every offering to the Lord made by fire. At the time of the feast of unleavened bread, every faithful Jew was to search his home for any trace of yeast and then get rid of it. That is done today by orthodox Jews and symbolizes for them, as it did earlier,

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the putting away of sin. Jesus spoke of the leaven (or yeast) of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and Herod, in each case meaning their evil influence (Matt. 16:12; Mark 8:15). Paul described deviation from the truth of the gospel as Satan's persuasion, adding that believers should beware since "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Gal. 5:9 NIV; cf. 1 Cor. 5:6). Some have argued that yeast is not always a symbol of evil, and that is true. Sometimes it is simply yeast. But when it has a symbolic meaning it is nearly always used of something evil rather than something good. It is difficult to see how an important and thoroughly understood symbol of evil could be used by Jesus to represent the exact opposite, namely, the blessed impact of His gospel on the world.

Finally, it is significant that these two parables are bracketed by that of the devil's work in sowing tares among the wheat (vv. 24–30), and Christ's explanation of that parable (vv. 36–43). This structure suggests they should be taken not as teaching something entirely different from the parable of the tares, but as expanding it.

## THE SECULAR CHURCH

As Christians, we must be on guard against Satan's tactics. We are warned not only against his infusion of his own people into the Christian community, but also against the visible church's bureaucratic growth (which confuses size and structure with spiritual fruit) and against the infusion of evil into the lives even of believing people (which confuses a loving and forgiving spirit with treason to Christ's cause). In other words, we are to beware of the secular church and evangelical secularism as well.

The secular church is one dominated by the world, as much of the contemporary church is. It is characterized by the world's wisdom, the world's theology, the world's agenda, and the world's methods. The evangelical church, when it is secular, is one that seeks to do God's work but in the world's way. It looks to the media and money

rather than to God and His power, which is unleashed through prayer.

What can the evangelical church do if it finds that it has been permeated by the “yeast” of Satan’s strategies? Under normal circumstances, yeast that has begun to work cannot be eradicated. That is why it is such a good picture of the evil that will be in the church and world until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. But although in baking we would have little success in ridding dough of leaven, in the spiritual realm we can have successes—at least where we ourselves (and perhaps our immediate families and churches) are concerned. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch” (1 Cor. 5:7 NIV). In Galatians, where he has been talking about the yeast of legalism, he says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

Satan is active. The yeast of the Pharisees will work. But “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). In the next parables we are going to see the divinely imparted character of those who seize the kingdom and achieve that victory.