

Rules of Engagement

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

You and I have been hearing the gospel story so long and so often than we think we know all of the twists and turns of what Jesus said. We think we know all the rules – we know who is in and who is out – we know all the rules of engagement for kingdom living – or do we? In our scripture Jesus used some pretty unusual objects and situations to describe the kingdom of heaven! Probably not the ones we would choose. Jesus used mustard seeds and yeast, a thief and a merchant to talk about the rules of engagement in kingdom living.

We are struck by the shady, subversive, corrupted presenting character of these parables, especially in contrast to the portrayal, in the other parts of chapter 13, and in our minds, more correct behaviors and scenarios of fruitfulness, separating weeds from wheat, and judgment that sorts the true disciples from the others.

Mustard (v. 31) is a weed a farmer would pull from a field. No one would plant a mustard seed; it would be like planting a dandelion. Forget the fact that many people now eat mustard greens, which was not the case in Jesus' time when it was only seen as a weed. But Jesus here said God's empire is compared to the mustard seed, starting very small but growing into a shrub. Once they got over Jesus using the metaphor of a mustard seed, something we find undesirable, we understand that it does have some good qualities: it can grow into plant ten to twelve feet tall, large enough for birds to perch in its branches or in its shade.

Then Jesus described the kingdom of heaven like yeast (or leaven, v. 33). It is the agent that bloats and rots corpses and what a woman would clean from her house in preparation for Passover. In Jesus society everyone knew yeast normally symbolized evil. Jesus here points out a positive quality: God is fermenting the

empire of the heavens within the world, like the woman who mixes—or spoils—flour with yeast. The leaven in the parable is not the same as the yeast used in modern kitchens. In the culture of Scripture, leaven is almost universally understood as something evil or unclean. The leavening agent of the time was created by setting aside a portion of leftover bread to spoil, in order to create leaven used in future baking, a batch for sourdough bread. Not spoiled enough, it is worthless and cannot cause the new batter to rise. Allowed to spoil too long, it not only ruins the bread but can result in food poisoning. Leaven can be fatal. Only a small portion—like a mustard seed—is needed to leaven flour. The "three measures of meal" with which the woman mixes the leaven would produce enough bread for a wedding feast. What his society saw a negative, Jesus says can be very good and demonstrate the growth of kingdom living.

Finding the empire or kingdom of the heavens is compared to a man who finds a treasure (v. 44) in someone else's field and then liquidates all his assets to buy the field without telling the owner about the treasure. We wonder what was the man doing digging around in someone else's field in the first place? Were his actions those of a theft? This is worth a closer look. Under rabbinic law if a workman came on a treasure in a field and lifted it out, it would belong to his master, the field's owner; but this man was careful not to lift the treasure out till he had bought the field. When the man buys the field at such sacrifice, he possesses far more than the price paid. The kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure lies joyfully abandon everything else to secure it. Kingdom living is always worth the sacrifice!

Merchants (v. 45) were held in the public esteem about as highly as our culture values used-car salespersons. Their motives and scruples were suspect. This merchant, however, in effect puts himself out of business by selling everything to make an ultimate purchase. Once one has sacrificed everything to make the

ultimate purchase, there is nothing left to buy and sell. Although he is an expert in pearls, this single find so far surpasses any other pearl the merchant has ever seen that he considers it a fair exchange for everything else he owns. Jesus is saying that the person whose whole life has been bound up with “pearls” – on comprehending the true value of the kingdom as Jesus presents it, gladly exchanges all else to follow him.

Whether we have found the gift of the kingdom by accident or as the result of a long search, we have found in the gospel something of such supreme value that it has been worth our having given up everything else to make it our own.

These parables elevate convention-subverting persons and items to describe discipleship in the empire of the heavens. Whatever else they mean, these parables hint that the rules of engagement in God's empire—and therefore the rules of engagement for good citizenship in God's realm—is fundamentally different from that of our society.

These parables present a radical challenge to Christianity in the United States, where the Christian faith is predominantly a middle-class, convention-supporting religion. These words from Matthew press us to consider the nature of discipleship. Ask most people which institution in society gives primary support to middle-class morality, good citizenship (think sanctuary, Christian flag positioned stage right), and personal responsibility; most people would say, "The church."

True, mainline churches no longer occupy the social position they once did; they are no longer "the mainline" in the way they were from the early 1900s through the late 1950s. However, the mentality of mainline lingers, along with the powerful affinity between "mainline" and "conventional." These parables challenge our mentality by asking what it means to prepare to be a disciple fit for the empire, for the kingdom of the heavens. If a society is basically healthy (in the sense of *shalom*, health flowing from the springs of peace and justice), one can imagine the

church working in sync with society. The church should help people to be well adjusted and balanced.

What if a society resembles the empire of Rome or our society, much more closely than it does the empire of heaven, expressing in its policies and budget the values of social inequality and redemptive violence? Helping persons to *adjust* or *be balanced* to fit into a sick society is not the work of the gospel. As Warren Carter writes in commenting on the parable of the woman who leavens the flour, "if a person is well adjusted in a sick society, corrupting is the only path to wholeness." The church's work in every age, more so in some ages and places than in others, is to form disciples who value the contemporary equivalents of weeds, yeast, thieves, and merchants.

Jesus is not asking us to throw out what we have learned from other scriptures about kingdom living. He does say we are like "scribes" who interpret the Old Testament teachings (Torah), trained for the empire of the heavens and have a revised and more extensive treasure upon which to draw, one that includes the Scriptures, a tradition of interpretation, and added to that the teachings of Jesus. To bring out the old is to take the witness of tradition—the Hebrew Scriptures and the tradition of commentary thereon—seriously. To bring out the new is to engage in conversation, to keep continuity at points, and to change how we receive tradition, based on the teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus are themselves of two kinds: the teachings as received through traditions, and the teachings of the living Lord speaking to the community through contemporary scribes trained for the empire of the heavens. **Gary Peluso-Verdend**

Jesus here emphasizes the surprising growth of something small and worthless into something that provides a place of shelter and nurture; he likens this to God's activity. The lesson of the prior parable is strengthened by pointing to what is ultimately of value to God's kingdom, when others would have deemed it junk.

Matthew punctuates the message that the kingdom is embraced by the marginalized, the unclean, and the left out; demonstrates that the rules of ritual (as in regard to leaven), the rules of engagement are different in the kingdom of heaven. Those who have ears to hear listen and understand. **J. David Waugh**

The story is told of a man who had been on the outs with the church ever since his adolescent days. The church, he said, was too concerned about the rules, so he left and said he was finished with it. His father worked on him, begging him to give the church another chance, and finally the man agreed that he would. He got up the nerve one Sunday and wandered into a church. The congregation was in the middle of the prayer of confession. "We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us."

The man heard that and smiled to himself. "Good!" he said. "This sounds like my kind of crowd." **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

This last week I had coaching training. The main tool I took away is that you can always learn to see the positive. Jesus didn't say the objects of his parables were positive, but they had positive qualities. Jesus can also change the negative in us to positives. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people. Once we were in sin, and through God's grace and mercy, we have redemption and salvation. You see, the rules of engagement in the kingdom of heaven bring peace and joy beyond measure.