

The Growth of the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] One comes from Bishop Tom Frame in his book, *Losing My Religion*. Tom Frame was a bishop over the military for a number of years and he says this, Unless there is a turnaround in the fortunes of all community organisations by 2025, the Christian church will be a marginal player in Australian life with only a few remaining remnants.

Very hard words, aren't they? Anyway, one commentator that I read says that the conclusions that Tom Frame draws would appear to be backed up by the results of the last five yearly Australian census in 2011.

Such a census showed a remarkable increase of 30% in unbelief in Australia. In fact, five of the eight states and territories now have more unbelievers than believers.

In country areas, Christian churches are closing at a rapid rate and that is attributable to a number of factors including an ageing population.

I'm convinced that there are dark times coming for us in Australia. I think there are dark times ahead for Christian faith in America and in the United Kingdom. The signs of resistance to Christian faith, the demise of Christian values and the sidelining of a Christian worldview are growing.

[1 : 23] And as we face such things, what should we do? To where should we go? I think we should go to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, that is the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, he knew opposition and he spoke into the face of it.

And he did so a number of times. But one of them is Matthew 13. So let's listen to him today and see what he has to say to us. Let's draw some insight and courage from his words to us today for our situation here in Australia.

Let's begin by rehearsing the ministry of Jesus among God's people. You might remember that when Jesus was born, Matthew tells us that he came with impeccable credentials. He was of good Israelite stock.

He was a descendant of King David. His birth was accompanied by miraculous interventions by God. He would be called Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

He was the fulfillment of prophecies given to Isaiah that the virgin would conceive and give birth to a son who would be called Emmanuel, God with us. As a result, he was witnessed to and about by John the Baptist.

[2 : 28] He was heralded as he who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And God himself endorsed Jesus at his baptism. Remember, a voice came from heaven and said, this is my son whom I love.

With him, I am well pleased. You might remember that then Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and where Israel had crashed and failed in the wilderness.

He was victorious. He then healed the sick. He cast out demons. He preached magnificently in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded us, which most people would recognize as being sort of in the top 100, at least, if not the top 10 speeches in all of history.

He taught as one with authority. And yet, as we saw last year, the ministry of Jesus was not met largely, at least in its initial phases, with success.

In chapter 10 of Matthew, he and his disciples engaged in a mission to Israel. They declared that the kingdom of God was at hand. They healed the sick.

[3 : 34] They raised the dead. They cleansed those who had leprosy. They drove out demons. They freely gave to the people. Jesus warned them that their ministry would be met with resistance.

He told them before they even started that they'd be hated because of him of whom they preached. Israel did as Jesus expected. They did not respond positively to him or to his evangelists.

As Micah had foreseen, the message about him would turn a father against his son, a daughter against his mother, her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And so we saw in chapters 11 and 12, cities did not repent.

Religious leaders did become aggressive toward Jesus and his disciples. Eventually, they accused him of being sourced by Satan. And Israel's response, the response of Israel's leaders was largely hostile.

Israel. It's true that there were some responding positively. But it was very small stuff in these early days. Israel's leaders were not. And many of the people were not responding.

[4 : 42] Israel was not responding positively to Jesus. Why not? Because they were hard-hearted. And so Jesus begins to speak to them in the parables in chapter 13, the parables we are beginning to address or did begin to address last week.

And as we saw last week, the parable of the sower and the seeds picks up Israel's resistance. Let's see if we can summarize what we've learned so far from this parable. We learned that the parables of Jesus are not brain teasers.

That is, they are not intended to stump people. They are not hard to understand except if you are already hardened. If you are already hardened, as many in Israel were, then parables reinforce your hard-heartedness.

The reason Jesus taught in parables was not to prevent understanding. No, it was because they already did not understand. Chapter 13, verse 13. The separation of people does not occur because of parables.

No, it was already there before Jesus spoke in parables. Parables don't promote hard-heartedness. They simply confirm a present hard-heartedness.

[5 : 52] They simply make it easier to remain hard-hearted. The people outside, they have closed their eyes. They have shut their ears. They have refused to repent.

And as a result, they will get from Jesus only parables. These parables will confirm their blindness and their deafness. That interpretation is supported by verse 19.

Look at the interpretation of the parable of the sower and the seeds. Verse 19. It is only because a person does not understand the word of the kingdom that the evil one comes and snatches what has been sown.

It is not that the evil one snatches it before they get a chance to understand it. The point is that Israel did not embrace its Messiah because they were hard-hearted.

And that hard-heartedness has been around for a long, long time. In fact, since the very day they accepted a covenant with God, they have been like this.

[6 : 51] While God was giving the covenant tablets to Moses on the mountain in Exodus, Israel was breaking the first two commandments at the bottom of the mountain. And God said to them in Ezekiel 33 verse 5, tell the Israelites, you are a stiff-necked people.

Thus they were then. And thus they have been ever since until the ministry of Jesus. And thus they still largely are as the ministry of Jesus is being exercised.

Friends, these facts are very important to hear as we look at the parables. They sit behind the passage today. They explain what we will see and hear. Now, before we get underway, let me just show you how I think these passages are structured.

I think they have three parts. You can see it. I've got a little diagram. If you've got my outline there, just look at the flip side of it. Each part has one parable or more. Each part has a discussion of the parables.

And each part has an interpretation of a parable, if not more. Today we're going to look at the second part, that is verses 24 to 43. There's the first reason, though, for Israel's lack of response.

[8 : 00] They are hard-hearted. I want you to hear that. Remember it. Now let's turn to our passage for today. It has two ends to it. Verses 24 to 30, the parable itself.

And then verses 36 to 43, the interpretation of the parable. Now, let's look at the parable itself. Look at verses 24 to 30. First, we're told that it is addressed to them.

I presume this means the crowd. Verses 34 to 36 would seem to confirm this. Anyway, we start off in a similar way as we did in the previous parable. There's a sower sowing some seed.

The sower is sowing good seed. In the previous parable, there was an adversary, Satan, who snatched away the good seed of the gospel. Verse 19. And as we see, the good seed here does not appear to be the gospel.

Actually, it's something else. However, in the previous parable, there is an adversary, an enemy. And we meet him here as well.

[9 : 02] Verse 25. He's sneaky, stealthy, malicious. While everyone is sleeping, this enemy comes and sows weeds amongst the good seed of wheat.

Now, most of you know, as most of the hearers know, that weeds are not unusual in crops. But the words used here in the original language suggest a thorough distribution of seed, of bad seed amongst the wheat.

We're not told the identity of that seed, but it's probably bearded darnel, I'm told. Bearded darnel is botanically close to wheat. And it's difficult to distinguish from wheat when it is young.

But later on, it becomes obvious and identifiable. And so, in verse 27, the servants of the owner of the field see that it's different. And they come to him and they report on what has happened.

And the owner immediately realizes what has gone on. An enemy did this. Verse 28. However, the servants, he says, are not to go and try and root out the weeds now.

[10 : 05] No. They're to wait until harvest. Verse 30. Since harvest here appears to be a metaphor for the final judgment, that confirms that the good seed is not the gospel, but people.

The good seed are those who have responded rightly to the gospel. The weeds are those who have not and who are detrimental to the good seed. Now, this parable then has an interpretation.

Flip to the latter part of the chapter. Verse 36. The crowds have gone now and the disciples have come to Jesus and they want an interpretation of this parable of the weeds.

Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field, they ask. Verse 36. And Jesus does. 37 to 43. And what he does is he identifies the main players and the meaning.

The sower is the man, is the son of man. The field is the world. Now, it's very important we take note of that. The field is not the church. So don't go around applying this to the church.

[11 : 05] Apply it to the world. Okay. There's more to be identified. Verse 38. The good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the evil one.

The people of the evil one. The enemy who sows his people is the devil himself. This parable shows us that he works, as I said earlier, surreptitiously.

That is, he works under the cover of darkness while people sleep. But there is a harvest when all will be revealed. Verse 39. The harvest will come at the end of the age.

The harvesters will be angels. So there are the key players and the events identified. Now, look at verse 40 for further explanation as to what will happen. In the parable, the weeds are pulled up and they are burned in the fire.

And so, says Jesus, it will be at the end of the age. The son of man will send out his angels. They will weed out his kingdom from his kingdom.

[12 : 07] Everything that causes sin. They will weed out from his kingdom. All who do evil. It seems that everything that causes sin and all who do evil are the sons of the evil one.

They, like the weeds, are thrown into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Friends, the impact is very clear of this parable, isn't it? Jesus is the end time judge.

He takes on a role that God himself is said to have in the Old Testament. But the story doesn't finish with verse 42. Look at 43. 43. Jesus says, And then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father.

Whoever has ears, let him hear. You see, Jesus is alluding to Daniel 12 verse 3. These people of the kingdom. That is, those who have positively reacted to Jesus and believed in him.

Those elsewhere he's called the poor in spirit. The ones who are the light of the world. The people of the kingdom. They will now shine in the kingdom of their father.

[13 : 12] Friends, in the parable of the sower, we discovered a deep truth, didn't we? That truth was there are a variety of responses to Jesus. There were in his own day.

So early on in his ministry. There will be, and we ought to expect them in our day as well. However, what this parable tells us is that there's another reason for the responses we see as we meet people and look around the world.

You see, as we meet people day by day, at work, in the clubs and associations we belong to, shopping, we see and meet people who will be like people in this parable.

We've already had a preview of it in the parable of the sower. We saw that one response to the message of Jesus caused by the evil one who snatches away the word of the gospel. But that's not the only thing the evil one does.

This parable tells us that his wiles extend to much more than that. He sneaks around in the darkness and does his work. He plants his own. They are his children.

[14:22] The sons of the evil one. They live in the same world as the people of the kingdom of the father. And that explains a lot, doesn't it? You see, if we live in a world where there are those who are the children of God and those who are the children of the evil one, it will explain opposition, won't it?

It will explain persecution. It will explain the need for patience and long suffering. It will explain why vindication may have to wait till even the end of life.

For the ultimate vindication will happen at the end is what Jesus is saying. Friends, grasp these truths. You see, we live in a mixed world.

A world where the devil sneaks around and where he prowls around seeking people to deceive and devour. Where evil seeks to choke out good.

But the reality and the power of good will prevail. It will prevail because it is overseen by the son of man. And he will one day send out his angels and they will weed out evil and the doers of it.

[15:32] And only those who believe in Jesus as he's portrayed in scripture will survive that judgment. Now, friends, we've now looked at the beginning and the end of our passage for today. Let's now look in the middle at the two complementary parables in the middle.

Now, in my view, this parable also explains some things that were seen in the ministry of Jesus.

This parable of the mustard seed. It will also be seen wherever gospel ministry is exercised.

Take a look. 31 to 32. Only a short parable. Jesus told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of seed, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree.

So that the birds come in and perch in its branches. Now, let me tell you, there's some surprises in this little parable. First, the mustard seed is indeed a small seed.

And now there may be smaller seeds that we know of. The ones I know are bottle brush seeds.

Anyone ever had a look at bottle brush? These are the tiniest seeds you can ever, you know. But anyway, in the day of Jesus, the rabbis thought that the mustard seed was, well, it was proverbial for them for its smallness.

[16:44] And although the mustard tree is only about two or three meters in height. So, you know, from there to about here or so. That's not a huge tree.

Certainly not the seed of Lebanon. But it's substantial given where it came from. Does that make sense? Tiny seed, substantial tree. And that is small beginning, large end.

Such that it looks like the kingdom of God. You see, the kingdom of God in the Old Testament is presented as a tree that birds come and find and nest in. So it is with the ministry of Jesus. You see, at this time, not many are joining up.

There is Jesus. There is the 12. There are others. But most are rejecting the message of Jesus. But the point Jesus is making is don't look askance at this inglorious mustard seed ministry.

Rather, watch this space. For what is small and negligible now will be enormous eventually. In this sense, the ministry of Jesus looks hidden.

[17:48] It looks as though it lacks strength and lacks glory. Now, I need to say that Jesus is saying that it will be like the mustard seed.

Its glory and its grandeur will come as an enormous surprise from such trifling beginnings.

However, I wonder if there's a double entendre here, a double meaning.

After all, you see, a mustard seed, as I said, is hardly the cedar of Lebanon, known for its height and might. In fact, it's almost a caricature of the cedar.

One historian in the first century said it was like a weed growing out of control. It occupied everyone's gardens, as it were. And so there's a little bit of a jar here, you see.

How could something grand come from this weed that's relatively small as a tree? Perhaps that's what Jesus wanted, that double meaning. The image worked in multiple ways.

[18:49] Now, let's turn to the parable of the leaven. Now, just like the mustard seed and its tree, there's something strange in the leaven. After all, you see, in the Old Testament, leaven was a symbol of corruption.

And not a good thing. You see, similarly in the New. After all, later in his teaching, Jesus will say, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew 16, verses 6 and 11.

In Galatians 5, verse 9, Paul will talk of leaven as teaching that corrupts a whole congregation. So what's Jesus doing with leaven here?

Well, think about leavening agents. When you think of leavening agents, what do you think of?

Yeast. That's what we all think of, I think.

You know, little white granules of powder or whatever, or powder. But the leavening agent in the ancient world was often produced in this way. You kept back an old bit of dough that had been leavened.

[19 : 51] And you stored it in the right place. And you added a few extra things to it to promote the process of fermentation. And then you used it, when the fermentation had gone on, in a large batch of dough in order to ferment it.

That is, in order to give it lightness. However, imagine if your old bit of dough had become corrupted. It could corrupt everything else, couldn't it?

It could leaven the whole dough in an unsavory way. Or in a positive way. It's poison, though, if it was corrupt, would spread to the rest of the batch and infect every further batch.

It's poison would spread. And for this reason, leaven was a symbol of a corrupting, infectious influence. And I think there's a hint of that here with Jesus.

You see, so while it has the connotation of a small thing having a powerful influence, I think there's a double meaning again. It is as though Jesus is saying, the kingdom of heaven is like a virus.

[21 : 03] That is, it makes sense, doesn't it? You see, it's not the religious leaders who are entering it. You see, it's not the religious leaders who are entering the kingdom, is it? Who is it?

Tax collectors, fishermen, harlots, sinners, and so on. They're the people that are embracing the kingdom, not the religious leaders. They're the ones who are believing that Jesus is the Messiah. And yes, like leaven, the message of Jesus can look small and insignificant and produce great results. And we ought to expect that that will happen. However, just like leaven, it has the power to change whatever it touches while remaining like the original.

Can you hear what Jesus is saying? Can you hear the edge it has to it? He's saying that his teaching about the kingdom sets a positive, corrupting power loose in Israel and the world.

However, do you notice in your version there in front of you that the leaven is said to be taken and mixed?

[22 : 10] Well, actually, the word, the literal word is hidden. The point is strong. What is being said that the kingdom may seem invisible to unbelieving eyes? At the moment, that is, at this moment in the ministry of Jesus, it might seem hidden, but it changes people and it modifies the world and it alters everything it touches.

It invades the world in a hidden but powerful and transformative way. And such changes soon become visible. Oh, by the way, its power can be seen even here in the parable.

You see, the amount of flour is not trifling here. Do you know how much it is? 27 kilograms. You wouldn't like to need that, would you?

That's a lot of flour to need. Enough to feed about 100 people. There's that sense that this thing is going to grow. Now, let's turn to our last passage for today, 34 to 35.

Jesus discusses his use of parables again. And again, he gives scriptural citation in support. In verse 34, Matthew, I think, is basically saying that Jesus uses parables constantly and they are an essential part of his spoken ministry.

[23 : 28] Now, friends, you know that my area of expertise as a scholar is Old Testament. The one thing that I love about the Old Testament is that it takes events that have happened and constantly rehearses them again and again and again and adds little notes that you haven't seen before.

When it rehearses them, it finds new truths in old truths. And it reveals patterns that may not have been obvious to those who just read them, read them on the surface. I think Jesus is saying a similar thing about parables as he cites Psalm 78 here.

As he preaches, as he tells parables, they don't just conceal and confirm hardened hearts. No, they also open up to those who see eternal truths or to those who have ears to hear.

They reveal God's long hidden mysteries. Now, let me see if we can just summarize what we've learned today. First, we've been reminded that the word about Jesus, the gospel, draws varied responses from people.

Some resist it, some ignore it, some embrace it, some refuse it, some take it on only to throw it off. Second, we live in a mixed world, and we've learned that from this passage as well.

[24 : 42] A world in which there is a real devil. An adversary, a Satan, who sneaks around seeking people to devour, deceive, and generally seeking to oppose God and his purposes.

As outlined in Jesus in the gospel. But Jesus promises that this real spiritual world will be overcome by good.

This evil world will be overcome by good. The power of good will prevail. And it will prevail because it will be overseen by the Son of Man. And he will one day certainly send out his angels, and they will weed out evil and the doers of evil.

And only those who believe in Jesus as he's portrayed in scripture will survive the judgment. I say that because some Christians today don't believe what is portrayed in scripture.

The real Jesus is the Jesus portrayed in scripture. That's the one you need to believe in. Not the false one of false gospels.

[25 : 49] Friends, I hope you'll have ears to hear this, you see. And if you do, then you need to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, if you haven't done so already, and line up with him. What's the third thing we've learned? We've learned it from the mustard seed that we should not look askance at this rather inglorious mustard seed gospel ministry.

Rather, watch this space. For what is small and negligible now will be enormous eventually. And its glory and its grandeur and its splendor will come as an enormous surprise to this world because of its trifling beginnings.

And let me say, if I might, that I think we really need to hear this in our day. For I think, as I said right at the beginning, we are entering dark days for gospel ministry in our country. And in those days, the gospel will look small and trifling and stupid and unsuccessful and will be made to look like that by its enemies.

But do not be fooled. The gospel will do what it does in all the world. It will bear fruit and increase. For it is God's word. And God's word always accomplishes what he sends it out into the world to do. Or maybe it won't be as we'd like it to be. But it will be as God wants it to be. So watch this space and don't lose confidence in God and his word.

[27 : 16] What's the fourth thing we've learned? We've learned that in the gospel, God has set a positive corrupting power loose in the world. Positive corrupting power.

At times it may seem invisible. At times it may seem hidden. But it will change people. It will modify the world.

It will alter everything that it touches. And friends in this weekend draw some encouragement, I think. From the 50 dark years in China under anti-God forces.

For in those years, a positive virus spread. The gospel. People met in secret. They died in isolation, in prison.

Thirst for it though spread. And now around the world, Chinese people are embracing it. Now friends, be not ashamed of the gospel.

[28 : 18] Do not fear its demise. For it is the power of God for salvation for all who believe. For the Jew first and also for the Gentile. And it will bear fruit and increase.

Through it, God will do his work. Even though the devil works his way as well. But God will surely triumph. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the word of the gospel. The gospel of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you that though some people close their eyes to it.

Though Satan snatches the word from them. Though Satan sends opponents into the world. The last word will be yours.

And people, the gospel will do what you've said it does in all the world. It will bear fruit and increase. And on that last day, you will reap that harvest of those who are your own.

[29 : 25] Father, we pray that you'd help us to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel. Even as Jesus urged his disciples to be. Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.