

Commencement Speech 2006
Some Sobering Thoughts on the Kingdom
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Ladies and Gentlemen, we are here this morning to celebrate the graduation of these 97 men and women of the class of 2006 from Biblical Seminary. As you are aware, though this ceremony marks the end of several years of hard work, it is nevertheless called “commencement” because it marks the beginning of their labors as seminary graduates in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will join with him in God’s mission – bringing people from every tribe, tongue and nation to find forgiveness, peace, and fulfillment in knowing God as their creator, redeemer, and best friend.

As they and we think about what this will mean, it is appropriate that we look at a rather extensive passage in Matthew chapter 13, where Jesus sketches for us the progress of the Gospel, a passage of some 50 verses which I have labeled “Some Sobering Thoughts on the Kingdom.” You may already be sobered to hear that I am going to be speaking on 50 verses, especially if you have heard preachers spend half an hour on one verse. But this will be a flying overview, rather like W. A. Criswell’s single sermon which covered the whole Bible in a few hours. I promise to keep this somewhat shorter.

We have in this passage seven parables of Jesus, usually called the “parables of the kingdom.” These are the parables of the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the dragnet. It would take too much time for me to develop the arguments for how I think these parables connect with one another, but let me say that they appear to be a sketch of how the gospel will typically fare at various times and different cultures throughout the history of Christianity. In this sense, they will give all of us, but our graduates this morning especially, a feel for what to expect as we go out to spread God’s message wherever in the world he leads us.

The Parable of the Sower

Matt 13:3-9 (NIV) Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."

The first parable is that of the sower. Using a picture his original audience would know well, Jesus sketches for us a fellow planting wheat seed in the usual way it was done back then. The fellow walks through the field with a bag of grain slung over his shoulder, reaching into it with one hand and pulling out a handful of grain, which he then scatters on the ground by flinging it abroad. We get our word “broadcasting” from this method,

though that word has now changed its meaning a good deal. As it happens when wheat is planted this way, some of the seed falls on the hard-packed paths bordering the field, some falls on thin soil with bedrock just beneath, some on deep soil but with competing weeds, and some on soil that is just right.

Jesus tells us that this is a picture of how the Gospel will be received. Although our message is one of great good news – what, after all, could be better than knowing that God will accept us as his friends, that he will forgive our misdeeds, that he will repair us so we will naturally be what we ought to be, and he will give us an eternal life of joy and peace beyond imagination? Yet, in spite of this, not everyone will jump on the bandwagon. And even among those who do, some will jump off again.

So, as we go out to live out and speak out the Gospel to those God will bring across our path, we should not expect an enormous response. Of course, should God give us an enormous response we shouldn't turn it down in unbelief – but we should not expect it as what we will normally get.

Instead, some will hear the good news but make no response. Like the seed falling on hard ground, the message will not sink in. Satan may even see to it that they don't remember having heard it. Others will get excited and receive the message with joy. But once it appears that it is going to cost them too much, that they may face trouble or persecution just because they are following Jesus, they will bail out. Others, particularly in such places as here in the US today, may not face persecution, but they will succumb to the enormous number of distractions from wealth and worry they encounter. They too will fall by the wayside.

But, praise God, there will be some people who really will hear, and understand, and obey God's message. They will turn their lives over to him and find that he will change them. By the time they die, they will have lived a life worth living, one that will count for something thousands of years after they have lived it. To have even a handful of such people respond to our message will make it all worthwhile.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

Matt 13:24-30 (NIV) Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. 27 "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 28 "'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29 "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

The second parable is that of the wheat and the weeds. It assumes that a landowner has already planted a field of wheat, but now an enemy comes along, and to spite the landowner he secretly scatters a great deal of weed-seed on top of the newly sown field. Since both the wheat and the weeds are grasses, the enemy's scheme does not become apparent until the grasses put on their seeds, some time before the crop is ripe. Though the owner's servants want to pull up the weeds, he forbids them lest they pull up the good wheat as well. Instead, the harvesters will separate the two crops when they are reaped.

Jesus here tells us that coming along behind the spreading of God's good news is Satan, who will spread his own messages and produce his own converts. Adding this to the already distressing fact that many who hear the message will not respond properly, we now see that there will be other messages appearing, and fake Christians who will help discredit the gospel – as if real Christians aren't good enough at discrediting it already! Our own reaction to this will naturally be to want to get rid of these false teachers by casting them out of the church (or worse). As Paul and John indicate in their letters, some sort of church discipline is necessary. But Jesus assures us that this will not work as well as we would like, that real believers will get torn up with the false ones, and that this problem will not really be solved until the great harvest at Jesus' return.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matt 13:31-32 (NIV) He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

Now comes the parable of a farmer planting a mustard seed, a very tiny seed indeed, but this one grows into a large plant, even becoming a small tree, so that birds come and perch in its branches.

Jesus is telling us that, despite the difficulties sketched in the first two parables, the church will typically grow in the society where it comes. Typically, not invariably; sometimes the church has been wiped out of a particular culture. In the better cases, however, it will grow and become very large, transforming the society into which it comes.

But what are we to make of the birds nesting in the branches here? Jesus doesn't tell us. The symbolic use of birds in the parable of the sower to represent Satan snatching away the message, and the birds in the Egyptian baker's dream interpreted by Joseph to represent the baker's death, don't sound promising. In the Old Testament, the symbolism of tree and birds is sometimes used to picture an empire and its dependents. Perhaps we see the church becoming a little empire as it has done in a number of places in Europe and the West. We might even suggest that the birds represent outsiders entering the church without actually being born again, as has so frequently happened when Christianity becomes dominant in a culture.

The Parable of the Leaven

Matt 13:33 (NIV) He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

With the rise of modern technology, fewer and fewer people have much idea how bread is made, though the appearance of home bread-making machines may have reversed this trend for some. I remember my mother making rolls by using a cake of yeast and warm water, which was later added to the dough. But back at the time of Jesus' ministry, bread was often made at home using the sour dough method. A little bit of dough left over from the previous batch of bread (which by now was leavened, and so sour) was set aside and then added to the new dough for the next batch. After a bit, the new batch would puff up due to the leaven in the sour dough, and this would become the dough for a new baking. This is what Jesus pictures in this parable, how the woman puts the sour dough into the new batch, and the leaven from the sour dough eventually works through the whole batch.

What does Jesus intend us to understand here? Unfortunately, he doesn't tell us, and interpreters have gone off in two very different directions. Most think the dough is the world and the leaven is the church or the gospel, which spreads throughout the world. A few think the dough is the church and the leaven is heresy or unbelief, which spreads to corrupt the church.

I think the latter group is right, though I doubt I can convince you in a couple of sentences. I see in this group of seven parables the planting of the good and the planting of the bad, the growth of the good and the growth of the bad, and the harvest of the good and the harvest of the bad, so the leaven would be the growth of the bad. Besides, although leaven makes bread taste better for me and for most people, its symbolic significance in the Bible is generally bad.

I suggest our lesson here is that typically, when the gospel has permeated a whole society (as in the mustard seed) and become big enough to attract the birds, unbelief of various sorts begins to permeate the church. You may take my interpretation or leave it, as you wish, but it is noteworthy that this tendency to corruption in triumphant churches is a standard refrain in church history. It reminds us that Satan does not throw in the towel just because he has lost a round.

The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl

Matt 13:44-46 (NIV) "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

Among these seven parables of the kingdom, a number of them seem to be in pairs. The first two parables are about the planting of the good and the bad. The third and fourth are about the growth of the good and bad (if we are right), and in any case, the parable of the wheat and the weeds sketches for us the planting, growth and harvest of both good and bad. The last parable (the dragnet) and the second (the wheat and weeds) picture the harvest of good and bad. And here, the parables of the treasure and the pearl also seem clearly parallel, whatever they may mean.

In both someone finds a treasure. In both, the finder gives up everything in order to be able to own that treasure. In both, it appears, the finder recognizes the value of what has been found, and feels he has gotten a great bargain in spite of the price paid. We suggest that the treasure or pearl is Jesus (or the gospel), the finder is a seeker, and the cost is not telling us that we can earn our salvation, but that we must be ready (and may be called upon) to give up everything in order to have and keep Jesus.

There are differences between the two parables. The first fellow is probably a day laborer or tenant farmer who stumbles across the treasure, probably while plowing. If he shows up in the village with the treasure there will be questions, and the owner of the property on which it was found will get the treasure. So he hides the treasure and buys the field, though it costs him everything, in order to have clear title to the field. Then he can “find” the treasure and it will be rightfully his.

In the second parable, the seeker is a pearl merchant. He knows what he is looking for and, like a collector of antiques or rare books, he knows value when he sees it. He is glad to give up everything to get that once-in-a-lifetime bargain.

The gospel is like that. Some have been looking for something like this all their lives. Others happen to run into it even though they weren't really looking. And in a society where Satan has planted many other gospels, finding the true one is sometimes like looking for a needle in a haystack, especially if the leaven has done its work thoroughly.

The Parable of the Dragnet

Matt 13:47-50 (NIV) "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The last parable, like the end of the second parable, is a parable of harvest, but this time it is fish rather than plants. Dragnets are still in use today. A dragnet is a long, narrow rectangular net whose width is just a few feet, about the depth of the water one is fishing in, and whose length may run to hundreds of feet. One long edge of the net has floats attached to it, the other has sinkers. When the net is laid out, the one side drags on the bottom, the other floats on the surface. The net is set out in the water and then the two

ends are brought to the shore. As these ends are dragged further and further on shore, the fish inside are trapped and brought on shore with it. The fishermen then sort the fish into those that can be sold and those that are worthless.

As in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, so here, Jesus reminds us that a judgment is coming. Whether the end of the age comes in just a few more years or not for a thousand, for each of us individually the end of our age comes when we die, which might be today or not for many years, but probably well under a hundred.

Notice that this judgment does not seem to involve many shades of gray, but is quite black or white, accepted or rejected. How can this be? It sounds very unreasonable in our age of diversity and political correctness, but of course there was plenty of diversity in the Greco-Roman world (and even the Jewish world) when Jesus spoke these words.

The explanation turns on what the Bible tells us about what humans are like, what God is like, and what he has done to bring us to himself. All you graduates know about this, but perhaps some in the audience do not, so I give a quick sketch.

The bad news of the good news is what we call sin. None of us are near as good as we ought to be, or as we were designed to be, and it's at least partly our fault. Though all of us try to ignore this most of the time, it is as obvious as our daily newspaper, and as near as our innermost thoughts. We don't need a special message from God to tell us this, though in his mercy God does remind us in the Bible. All of us humans are sinners, all are in rebellion against God in the sense that we don't want anyone telling us what to do. That's what humans are like.

Now God is good. He is so good that we can't even imagine how good he is. He also is the one who made us, by whatever method he may have used to do so and however long it took. You don't really think this enormously complex and finely-tuned universe just happened by itself, do you? So God is our owner and maker, and he presumably has a purpose for our life.

Now, let's try to look at this purpose from God's point of view. Suppose you have just bought a used car. Your purpose is to have reliable transportation. You come out one morning, and the car won't start. Do you think the car deserves a break today? No, you want the car to start!

So with us. We humans were designed to love God with our whole heart and to love each other as we love ourselves. But we don't feel like it. We don't do it. What is God going to do? Just as we have two choices with the car, so does God with us. We can either junk the car or repair it. These are our two judgments. So too with God's judgments. If we turn to God and ask him, he will repair us. If we reject that alternative, we have no other choice but to become part of the junkyard of the universe.

Conclusions

Let's pull this all together: Jesus told us two thousand years ago that our message will receive very diverse reactions: some won't respond at all; some will respond and then bail out; some will respond but never go anywhere because there is too much else going on in their lives. But we can be encouraged that some will be transformed, and that will help make all our efforts worthwhile.

Jesus also predicted that Satan will have counterfeit gospels and counterfeit believers, and this will make our work as followers of Jesus much harder than it otherwise would be. But we can be encouraged in this: that God knows who are his, and they will be recognized one day.

Jesus tells us that the church will grow, and it has! From a few followers in AD 30 to a worldwide movement counting over a billion people today. Yet the church's numerical success has often been a prelude to its spiritual defeat, and that should sober us up.

Yet no matter how obscured the gospel sometimes seems to be, there will be seekers and finders. And they will recognize (truly!) that having Jesus is a bargain worth far more than anything they can possibly give in return, even though it costs them their lives. May the Lord help us to keep this perspective as we go out from here to serve him.

And let us never forget, that we live in a universe which was created and is upheld and overseen by the true and living God, who sees and knows everything, even the most secret thought of our hearts. One day, each of us will be seen to be either the junk of the universe or its repaired, recycled ones. May it be the latter for each of us here!

So, may our Lord grant us a new vision to go out to serve him in the strength he provides, knowing both the difficulty and the importance of the work set before us, knowing both sadness and joy as we (with Jesus) set before those we meet the choice of life and death. For God has sent us out to be his messengers and his ambassadors to our generation.