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The Parables of the Kingdom

by T. Austin-Sparks

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In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel by Matthew, which we may have open before us by way of reminder, we find the operation of the Kingdom illustrated in a sevenfold way.

The Parables of the Kingdom

I do not propose to attempt an exposition of that sevenfold way, but will simply lift out from the chapter the salient features of the operation of the sovereign rule of God. We have here that operation illustrated, in what have come to be called 'the parables of the Kingdom'. That is the title which men have given to them, but it is well to remember that the title which the Lord Jesus gave to them was 'the mysteries of the Kingdom'.

The Key to the Parables

These parables, or mysteries, of the Kingdom of Heaven are really impossible of understanding, except in the light of the definition of the Kingdom which we have just given - that is, as the sovereign rule of God. If you interpret them as indicating primarily a realm or nature, then you have gone beyond their warrant, and you will most certainly get into confusion. Few parts of the New Testament have been more subject to controversy than these parables. The various interpretations that have been given to them have divided students and teachers into irreconcilable schools. We

shall see something of that as we go along. It is therefore necessary to discover the key to the parables, in order to be saved from this confusion and contradiction; and that key undoubtedly lies in the definition of the Kingdom as *the sovereign rule of God*. Let me repeat: I am not embarking upon an exposition of these parables, but seeking to get at something of very great importance and value to ourselves at this time.

The Parable of the Sower

The first is what is called the parable of the sower (vv. 18-23). The Lord Jesus said that the seed is the word of the Kingdom. "When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom", He said. Now re-translate that as 'the word of the sovereign rule'. The word of the sovereign rule has gone forth. What is the result? Very largely failure. The success in the positive sense is very limited, comparatively - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. You see how impossible it is to impart to the Kingdom the idea of a realm or a nature. That would imply that within the realm where God rules you have very largely failure. But that is not the teaching of the parable. The teaching of the parable is this. The word of the sovereign rule is sent forth, like seed; and, no matter if there is a large failure in response and reaction to that word, God is successful in the end with a body that is productive of that which is implicit in the Word.

Yes, man may fail. He may receive apparently with gladness, and then it may all come to nothing. He may respond in a way, and seem to be going to turn out all right - and then, because of difficulties and adversities, just fade out. But let there be failure, disappointment, breakdown: no matter - God gets something in His sovereignty. There is something that this sovereign government of God secures. You see, this is a tremendous word of the sovereignty for labourers. You labour, you scatter, you give, you work, you travail; but, if it is the word of the sovereign rule in very truth, it cannot ultimately fail. There may be much disappointment, but there will be an issue which answers to the intention of the One who gave it. Very simple: but you see how important it is to recognise the all-governing law of the sovereign rule which cannot, fully and finally, ultimately be defeated. A great deal may seem to argue that the labour is in vain; but the Lord is saying here in this parable: 'No! When it is a word of the rule of God, it cannot ultimately return wholly void; there will be something resulting from it.' The sovereignty is governing.

The Wheat and the Tares

The next is that commonly called the parable of the wheat and the tares - the darnel (vv. 23-30). Here from the word the thought passes to persons. It is not the word that is now sown - it is persons that are sown. Children of the Kingdom are sown in the earth, and then by night the enemy comes and sows his own children, children of his kingdom. They are the children of the Devil. His method is suitable to his object. His object being completely to nullify what is of God, his method is to imitate it. That is a wile of that evil wisdom of Satan - imitation children of God mixed in with the true children of God in order to nullify. The workers are represented as coming to the owner of the field and telling him what they have found there, and he says, 'Ah, an enemy has done this.' And they say, 'What would you have us do? Shall we pluck up this other thing?'

He replies: 'No - let the sovereignty have its way! Let them both grow together, and the sovereignty, the rule of Heaven, will progressively make very clear which is which, and the end will be an easy and a safe course. If you start doing that now, you have not got the wisdom of Heaven to discriminate. It is not your business, and you have not the faculty or capacity, to disentangle this

deep work of the Devil, by trying to mark out what is true and what is an imitation. That is not your job, and you are not qualified to do it. Only Heaven can do that. So let it go on, and the sovereign rule will make manifest what is of itself, and what is otherwise.'

It is the sovereign rule that is going to solve and settle this whole problem. You cannot say that the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God is like that which is pictured in this parable - an awful mixture. It is not. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is one thing, and only the sovereign rule of God can bring out into clearness what is of God.

But that will happen as we go on. We can trust the sovereign rule. That is very practical: it works like this. There are those who are truly of God, of Heaven; and then there are those who come in - who perhaps sing the hymns, use the phraseology, carry on the same way, associate with those of the Kingdom; but there is a difference. Deep down, they are really "not of us". They are just imitations; they are not real, not the genuine thing. We may discern, as these men discerned, that there is something here that is not the same thing, something that is foreign, that is alien and strange. What are we going to do? Had we better turn them out, tell them to go?

No, no! Go on long enough, and they will go of themselves. The two things will be self-manifested, and it will be quite easy in the long run. "They went out from us", said John, "...that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). This is a heavenly principle, you see - there is a manifestation. It is difficult to endure patiently those people who you sense have not, as we say, the root of the matter in them - who are just camp-followers. But, as with the mixed multitude that left Egypt with Israel, time and testing will find them out. This is the way if the Kingdom, the sovereignty, operates, and it calls for much faith, and much patience.

The Mustard Seed

The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 31, 32) is one of the most difficult of all, and one that has perhaps been the occasion of some of the worst interpretations and teachings. "*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches.*" Do you really believe, in the light of all these other parables and of His whole teaching, that the Lord Jesus said, 'This is the Kingdom of Heaven - the Kingdom of Heaven is like that'? If the common and popular interpretation is to be accepted, then we are involved in some real difficulties. Admittedly, the parable does seem to mean that Christianity, or "the kingdom of heaven", has very small beginnings and then grows to very great dimensions. There may be an element of truth in that. The beginnings in Jerusalem *WERE* small, and in the course of the centuries Christianity has become worldwide. But is that just what the Lord meant by the parable?

There are at least three things that would pull us up and make us think again, and think more energetically.

One is that at other times the Lord definitely used terms of strict and severe limitation in relation to salvation, the way and the issue. So much was this so, that His disciples were startled into ejaculating: "Lord, are there few that be saved?" (Luke 12:23). He spoke of the way to life being straitened, and few finding or accepting it: of the gate being narrow, and few entering thereby (Matt. 7:13,14). He called His disciples (representatives of His Church) the "little flock" to whom it would be

the Father's good pleasure to give *the Kingdom* (Luke 12:32). There are contrasting ideas between "wide" and "narrow", "broad" and "straitened", big and little, popular and unpopular. All this does not agree with the usual superficial interpretation of this parable.

Then what about the "fowls of the air"? Did He use this metaphor in a contradictory way? In the parable of the sower He had spoken of these in a bad sense: is He employing the same terms in a right and proper sense here? This violates the principle of consistency in inspiration.

Thirdly, is it *commonly* true that the "mustard seed", the smallest of all, grows into a tree so great as is here depicted? No, it is positively not true. If our Lord saw such a thing - and He may have done - and drew attention to it, He was drawing attention to something abnormal and not natural. It was sufficiently abnormal and unnatural to attract attention.

This brings us to the factor that is common to *all* the parables and all the teaching of Jesus, and of the Apostles subsequently. In all these parables there is a selective, discriminating, contrasting, comparative, good-and-bad element. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that: the sovereign rule is all-comprehending, but it is very particular, selective, and judicial. Consistency in every direction demands that we interpret this "tree" of Christianity as an abnormal, unnatural development, capable of housing many things that are not in keeping with the true *nature* of the Kingdom. These "fowls" are *not* the born-from-above people who alone can see or enter the kingdom (John 3). They are all the accretions, the camp-followers, the parasites, the various kinds of people and things that take advantages of Christianity, and use its cover, but are not of its nature.

The Lord was letting His disciples know that this is what would happen, and that the sovereignty took all this in its stride. It is as well that we should know that the Lord has foreseen the developments of Christianity and its abnormalities, but it is to great detriment that His spirit of discernment and discrimination does not have a way with so many Christians.

Does the New Testament, to begin with, indicate that there is any such thing as abnormality, or this kind of abnormal development, about the true work of God? It rather indicates that, although ultimately the sum of many, many centuries will be 'a great multitude which no man can number', there will be, as we get nearer and nearer to the end, a tremendous sifting out and falling away. It is definitely stated that that day will not come before there is a great falling away (2 Thess. 2:3), and that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). Well, then, if this is right - a great falling away - the Bible contradicts itself. As we have said, the teaching of the Lord seemed to be so clear to the disciples on this matter that they exclaimed: "Are there few that be saved?" What is all this about the broad and the narrow way? The broad way - many go by it; the narrow way - few find it. The Bible does not contradict itself; but it says that God takes account of these things, and God in His sovereignty permits them. He does not come out and destroy this freakish thing popularly called 'Christianity'. That may be there, but God in His sovereignty is pursuing His own course to secure what He is after. Though all this may be quite true, the sovereign rule of God goes on, the sovereignty is preserved.

The Parable of the Leaven

The same principle is implicit in the next parable.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened" (v. 33).

(a) The Leaven

The popular interpretation is that the leaven is Christianity: Christianity being taken by the Church and put into the world until the whole lump is leavened - the whole world is 'leavened' with Christianity. It is suggested that we shall see the world saved by the deep, silent movement of Christianity, working strongly and deeply and hiddenly, like leaven. It is easy to say that sort of thing, but it is superficial reasoning. In the light of history, and in the light of the Word of God, it is very difficult to believe.

Look again. The world-population is vastly more in excess of the Christian population than at any time in the dispensation. After these almost twenty centuries of Christianity, an immense number over a very great part of the world have never heard the Gospel yet. Look at this - 1,200 million out of the 2,000 million people of the earth are still without the knowledge of Christ. Then what of the unspeakable revelation of iniquity in countries which have had the Gospel for centuries? We could make an immense build-up of facts which would shatter this interpretation of the leaven beyond reconstruction.

What, then, is the meaning of the leaven? I do not believe that leaven here stands in a different category from leaven anywhere else in the Bible. Consistency of Scripture demands that we interpret leaven always as the same thing, in the same light: and everywhere else in Scripture leaven is evil - something that has to be purged out. In the old economy they had to light their lamp on the eve of the Passover, and search the house high and low, nook and cranny, for any leaven and purge it out. The Passover could not be eaten till it was certain that there was no vestige or trace of leaven anywhere. They had to eat unleavened bread in the Passover. The Lord Jesus spoke of "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6) and "the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). And Paul spoke of 'purging out the old leaven' (1 Cor. 5:7). Everywhere it is something evil. The function or effect of leaven is to disintegrate, to break up, to tear apart - every housewife knows that. And it is not different here: still it is leaven and still it is evil. If you say that the Kingdom of Heaven, as a realm, is like that, you are in trouble. But the sovereign rule of God knows all about this deep, secret movement of disintegration, of evil, that has come into the realm of Divine things. It is not the Kingdom of Heaven that is like an alcoholic fermentation, disintegration, putrefaction.

(b) The Woman

It is only necessary to look at such passages of Scripture as Revelation 2:20-23 ("the woman Jezebel"), and Revelation 17 ("the great harlot") to realise that a "woman" so often in the Bible is the symbol of a system. Again and again it has been a woman, either personally or symbolically, who has corrupted Divine things, or brought corruption into relationship with them. See Samson; see Solomon; see later kings for examples. In the message to Thyatira, this insinuation of evil and corruption into the House of God is the occasion of the severest judgment - for it is called "the deep things of Satan" (Rev. 2:24). What foreknowledge and foresight our Lord had in these parables! But let us go on.

(c) Three Measures

Three measures. Remember that three is the number of Divine Persons and Divine things. Evil has spread even through the Church, so that within Christianity itself the very Divine Persons have been subjected to questions and doubts. God Himself - the Son, the Spirit - has been misrepresented. With many other things of God, evil has come in to break them up - to destroy their effectiveness and power by destroying their solidity. What are you going to do about it?

The sovereign rule of God takes account of it - the working of evil, the working of falsehood, the working of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the things of God. History is just full of it, as we know. We hate using terms and labels, but is it not just that which has happened in the last hundred years in the realm called 'Modernism' or 'Liberalism'? Is it not the leaven disintegrating Divine things? The very Person of Jesus Christ is stripped of His Deity; the very Word of God is denied its authority and its finality; the very Holy Spirit is degraded from His dignity as a Divine Person; and so on. The Lord Jesus discerned the future, saw the way things would go, and spoke like this. He was saying. 'This very generation will not be out before all sorts of heresies and errors will come into the realm of Divine things' - which they did.

But the sovereign rule of God goes on. This does not spell God's confusion and God's defeat. His sovereignty is greater than all this. It is the only way really to be consistent both with the teaching of Scripture and with history itself. Surely it must be sheer blindness that reads history in any other way. As I said, I am not expounding these parables, but lifting out the point that is common to them all. From various angles, for various and differing causes, in differing situations, right down the age: whatever may be permitted by that sovereignty, that sovereignty is equal to it all, and will be fully vindicated in the end.

The Parable of the Drag-net

We reach the last parable, that of the great dragnet let down into the sea - the sea always speaking of humanity - and gathering a great multitude of fishes. Yes, the sovereignty of God does that: in comes the net, with its multitude of fishes of all sorts, and then sovereignty gets to work and separates the good from the bad, and in the end God has what He was after from the beginning. He has got it at last. That is how the sovereignty works. There is much instruction here for Christians and for Christian workers. If we had our way, we would go to work to see to it that we always and only have the thing that is absolutely and certainly and positively according to God's mind: we would select that, and put a hedge round it, and set up walls about it, and we would protect it and keep it, as an exclusive company. But these parables say, No! The sovereignty of Heaven does not do that sort of thing. The sovereignty of Heaven permits and tolerates very much that will ultimately be found to be not according to Heaven. Yes, it takes account of much; but it is driving its own course, and, in the end, through all, God will have what He set His heart upon.

The Comprehensiveness of the Rule of God

To sum up - see how comprehensive is this rule of God. The sovereignty of God is one of the most problematic and perplexing things to Christians, in relation to what God will allow even in association with His own work. We would not do that at all. We would be very, very particular. But see how comprehensive God is. He allows a very great deal. He not only allows it - He even uses very much that perhaps we would never use, or about which we would have a question. He comes through things in His sovereignty to get His ends. It is *His end* that is the great testimony to His sovereignty. We say: How could God get anything out of this, or out of that? Well, He does, that is all.

How could God get anything in that way? He just does! Look at this, look at that, look at all these things: is anything possible for God? The verdict at the end is that God sovereignly did get something.

You see, this is the great heart and core of this whole teaching and revelation of the Kingdom of God. It does not mean that you and I need not be sensitive to the Lord - that is another thing altogether. We may come to that later, when we say something about the Kingdom and the Church. It does not mean that, because we see that God's sovereignty reaches His ends in spite of everything, we are just to be careless and insensitive to the mind of the Spirit; to do all sorts of things that God, if He could have His way, would not sanction. But it does mean that this sovereignty of God is going to cover a lot of ground: it is going to get its end through many, many ways and means which in themselves, intrinsically, are not of Him. It is this rule of the heavens that is, so to speak, 'getting on with its job'.

We, left to ourselves, are so fussy, so particular, that we would not leave room for the sovereignty of God. The great appeal here is: Leave plenty of room for God. That is what it amounts to. Never despair over any situation as being finally and utterly hopeless. In the presence of the spread of this evil thing, this leaven - the expansion of this abnormal, 'freak' Christianity, with its contradictions and disappointments - we are forbidden by this sovereignty to give up and say it is a hopeless thing. We have to come to the place where we say and believe and take our stand: 'That looks a pretty hopeless situation, but God can get something out of it, and He will.'

That is the good news of the Kingdom, the Gospel of the Kingdom. I know that many of you who read these words can bear this out. You have known the most awful and impossible situations of mixture and hopelessness. You have despaired - and then you have seen God do something. What a strength and force that gives to the remainder of the statement! "This gospel of the kingdom shall be proclaimed... for a testimony unto all the nations". In His sovereignty, God can turn the most unpropitious and unpromising situation, the most hopeless state of things, into a glorious testimony. Yes, He allows so much, but He governs all. And He makes use of all manner of agencies - even the Devil himself. That must be sovereignty! "An enemy hath done this." Very well: we will use the enemy to show what is right and what is wrong, to make all the more manifest what is of God and what is not. The work of the Devil shall be employed to that end. That is the rule of Heaven.

All this is borne out in the later New Testament. "The things which befell me", writes Paul (Phil. 1:12) - what were they? They were the Devil's work. Again - "We would fain have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). Strange, mysterious statement! Yes, the Devil is busy; "a messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7) - he is very active. And what is the verdict at the end? "The things which befell me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel"! Under the sovereignty of God the very works of the Devil are being used to reach God's end.

Perhaps that is common knowledge, so often said. But we must come more definitely to this settled position, that *God and Christ are on the throne*. This Kingdom is a present reality. There are many things which contradict it and work against it. God does not consume and annihilate them: He permits them, and then takes hold of them; and the end is that His throne is established and it is made manifest that "his kingdom ruleth over all" (Ps. 103:19).

What these parables say to us is this - that God faces facts and has no illusions. He faces the fact that a large proportion of the sowing of the word of the Kingdom will fail. He faces the fact that

Christianity will become an abnormal conglomeration, without any distinctiveness of testimony. He recognises that there will be a secret hidden working of error, of evil, of falsehood, all to disintegrate. He faces it all - all the work of the Devil, all the work of evil, all the failure of man - and then He declares His sovereignty over it all. That is what arises here. Let us ask for strength to believe it.

God's Judicial Work

I have not said much about another aspect of these parables: namely, that there is a judicial, discriminatory work going on all the time. Do not fail to see that. All through these parables, He is cutting a line, He is discriminating, He is acting judicially. God is not just saying, 'Everything is all right - do not worry. Sit in your armchairs, ye Christian men; sit down, the Kingdom is coming.' No; rather - 'Rise up, ye men of God!' God is not passive, indifferent, careless, saying, 'Oh, it will be all right, this is all right; do not worry about it.' He is not like that. He is acting, and will act, judicially. He is really putting things in their place, and dividing between, as He does with the churches in the Revelation. He is discriminating. He is putting this here and that there, and saying that they belong to two different realms. That is a part of His sovereignty.

But our chief point is this: The operation of the Kingdom, or the rule, of God is to bring in at last the triumph of that rule. Whatever else may come in, it means the triumph of that rule. The rule of Heaven, the rule of God, comes out in the end triumphant.