

PARABLES  
of the KINGDOM

---

by P. L. Read

From an address  
by P. L. READ,  
well-known manufacturer,  
delivered before a  
number of Bible Study groups  
in the United States, Canada,  
and the British Isles

# PARABLES of the KINGDOM

I PROPOSE to discuss that little group of parables recorded in the 13th chapter of Matthew. These parables are seven in number and, for reasons which will appear as we proceed, are very generally termed "Parables of the Kingdom."

They were spoken by the Master in Galilee and, if I understand them correctly, they contain not only an abundant supply of general ethical instruction, practical applications of the principles of truth and righteousness to one's everyday life — teaching which mankind in general could and would appreciate — but they were uttered also for another purpose, namely, to forewarn his followers of, and thus to forearm them

against, the dangers which would be their continual portion throughout the entire Gospel Age. The primary purpose of these parables, in my view, was prediction — not *general ethical* teaching for the *masses* of mankind, but *special, prophetic* instruction for his *footstep followers*. Here, in these parables, the Master, for the benefit of those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, and for them only, foretells things to come. He foreshadows the varying conditions which would obtain throughout the Gospel Age, between his first and second advents. He unfolds the conditions under which those who shall hereafter reign with him would be developed and fitted for so high and honorable a calling. And what he foretells for these is not exactly a bed of roses! For them, to use a phrase of Churchill's, he predicts nothing but "blood, sweat, and tears." And the main lesson of these parables, the one which underlies them all, was the identical lesson which the risen, ascended, and glorified Lord confirmed from heaven some sixty years later when, to the beloved Apostle John, he sent his angel with a sevenfold message to the Church — which John has recorded for us in chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation.

And what was that main lesson? It was this: That whatever may be the glories of the Age to come, the Church, during the Gospel Age, would be continually liable to become clogged and cor-

rupted by admixtures of evil; that it would be interpenetrated, surrounded, and even altogether concealed by a far greater multitude who would profess to belong to it, while being, in reality, the children of the Wicked One.

Now the whole of this great mixed multitude of Christendom is, for the time being, called the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of the Heavens, because it would hold within it — and so entangled that none but God could separate them — the true heirs of the Kingdom. Hence, each of the seven parables appears to portray some characteristic of the nominal church especially prominent at a particular time. And these parables seem to be arranged in chronological order; for, to pass by details which I hope to touch on a little later, they begin with the sowing, or first preaching of the Word of the Kingdom, and end with separation of good and evil at the close of the Age. Let us now proceed to examine them separately.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

First comes the great Parable of the Sower. This parable was discussed at some length on a previous occasion. For this reason I will not linger on it now, except to remind you that there has never been any other method of becoming an heir of the Kingdom, but in this one way, namely, by acceptance of the Kingdom message

— with all that that implies of repentance, faith, and consecration to the Lord, even unto death. From the chronological viewpoint, it is not difficult to see that this first of the Kingdom Parables had reference to the earliest stage of the Church's history, when first our Lord, and then his chosen Apostles, began to preach repentance and the Gospel of the Kingdom. (Matt. 4:17, 23.) In general, it covered the Ephesus epoch of Church history — the Apostolic Age.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

Next in order comes the Parable of the Tares. Here, too, there is a sower of good seed, but he is followed by an enemy who sows tares amongst the wheat. This parable, like the preceding one, is interpreted by our Lord himself, who explains that the enemy who sowed the tares is the Devil. However, the meaning of the seed is not the same as in the first parable. It no longer signifies doctrine — the pure message or Word of God respecting the Kingdom. Instead, it represents people. Not the seed sown, but the crop resulting from the sowing is in evidence here. The good seed are the children of the Kingdom; that is to say, the effect of the message in the hearts of those who receive it would be to transform their hearts and lives, and thus make them heirs.

The tares are the children of the Wicked One. Tares are people who are not really Christians,

whatever they may profess, but who mingle with Christians and who, whether by deliberate intention or otherwise, further the deep-laid and sinister designs of the Adversary by spreading corruption in doctrine or conduct, or both.

Many such men crept into the Church even in the Apostolic Age, but it is in the second and third centuries, in the Age of Pagan persecution, when the primitive purity of the Church began to decline; it is here that we find the most complete proof of our Lord's unerring ability to forecast coming events. It is the Smyrna epoch that is to be seen here. During that Smyrna period, multitudes of grievous wolves entered stealthily into the fold not sparing the flock, just as St. Paul said would be the case after his departure, and many more arose, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Everywhere the Church became corrupt, and the effect, or influence, of this oversowing of the wheat field with tares has continued, even to the end of the Age, that is to say, even to our own times.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

There is a well-known saying, "One thing leads to another." Notice this principle of cause and effect running through all these parables. Mark how the oversowing of wheat with tares in the second epoch of the Church's history was that which led to the conditions which charac-

terized the third epoch, the Pergamos period, as unfolded by our Lord in the third parable, that of the Mustard Seed.

To begin with, the mustard is a plant which, strictly speaking, is not a tree at all. It is properly classified as a potherb or a garden vegetable. Nevertheless, in this parable, as also often in nature, it actually does grow into a tree. There is evidently something wrong here; for, from the account of creation in Genesis, we have learned that God would have every seed to develop after its kind.

In becoming a tree, the mustard plant throws out great branches. And as a result, note what happens. The birds of the air, which in the first parable sought to devour the good seed, are now able to come and lodge in its branches!

What is the prominent characteristic of this Pergamos epoch, paralleled here in the Parable of the Mustard Seed? Ah! it is the epoch characterized by a further decline into worldliness. The paganism of the Smyrna period has not been able to entirely obliterate the heirs of the Kingdom, notwithstanding its fierce onslaughts, so the Adversary tries another method. Under his malign influence, Christianity is adopted by the emperor and his successors.

Now, as everyone knows, a ship is safe as long as it is in the ocean; but as soon as the ocean gets into the ship, the ship is in real dan-



ger. And precisely *that* is what was taking place.

The grain of mustard seed represented the principles of the Church as they were sown by Christ; the description of its unnatural growth—from an herb to a tree—signified that those principles would be abandoned as the Gospel Age rolled on, a prediction by our Lord which was very manifestly fulfilled. The wheat field of the first parable has become, in this third epoch of the Church, the Pergamos period, almost, but thank God, not quite, a tare field. Christ's Kingdom, which the great Head of the Church, when he witnessed his good confession before Pilate, declared was "not of this world," is now seen by him, in this third parable, as having become a vast world kingdom!

#### THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN HIDDEN IN THE MEAL

The fourth parable, that of a woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened, shows the result of this rank, worldly prosperity of the Church. It becomes completely corrupted in life and doctrine.

The interpretation of this fourth parable depends, of course, on the meaning to be given to leaven. I am aware that it is quite generally taught throughout Christendom that leaven signifies the gradual penetration and influence of the Gospel message which shall eventuate in

the complete transformation of the whole world of mankind. However, against this view must be urged, besides many other objections, this most important one, namely, that, if adopted, it would give a meaning to the word "leaven" directly opposite to the meaning invariably assigned to it elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Comparing scripture with scripture, which is the only proper method of interpreting difficult texts, it seems clear that this parable of the leaven symbolizes the apostate church which did corrupt the earth with her fornications (Rev. 19:2), and does not symbolize true Christianity transforming the whole earth by the Gospel.

And if this is so, if the fourth parable signifies the corruption of the whole nominal church by the leaven of paganized Christianity, then history has provided a perfect confirmation of the prophetic forecast of our Lord; for as with the fourth message to the Church in Revelation, that to Thyatira, so here, in the fourth parable, the rise of Romanism and of the Antichrist comes plainly into view. As in the one, a woman is seen hiding leaven in the meal, so in the other, is pictured that woman Jezebel teaching and seducing Christ's followers to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols; or, in plain English, the Papacy, disseminating false doctrine in the Church, adulterated its worship with pagan rites and ceremonies.

## FIRST FOUR PARABLES REVIEWED

We have now reached the end of the series of parables delivered to the multitudes gathered near the Sea of Galilee. If we glance back once more at the disclosures made therein, respecting the nature and growth of the Kingdom of Heaven, they arrange themselves in the following order:

The first and second parables, the Sower and the Tares, set forth the manner in which the Kingdom of Heaven was even then being founded by our Lord and the obstacles it must encounter. The sphere from which both parables are taken is well suited to bring out the radical distinction between the manner in which *this* Kingdom was to be founded and the manner in which all other kingdoms are established. *They* were in every case founded by the sword; *this one*, by the Word. Not force, but persuasion, was to be the weapon. Accordingly there is placed before the minds of the disciples, not a warrior hastening to battle, but a farmer sowing seed. The field is the world—the world of human hearts—and the seed is the Word of the Kingdom. It is good seed and, therefore, it ought to be welcome; but there are serious obstacles in the way.

The first parable set forth the obstacles encountered in the soil itself. Some of the soil is

hard, some shallow, some overcharged with other things. Only the good soil yields a satisfactory crop.

There are, however, other obstacles than those found in the nature of the soil. There is the diligence of the enemy and the impossibility of getting rid of those who have come under his influence, as set forth in the second parable—the Parable of the Tares.

The third and fourth parables, those of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, continue to indicate the trend which this evil influence will take.

We have seen, too, that these four parables parallel, in their teaching, that of the first four messages to the Churches in The Revelation. And we have had little difficulty in tracing a chronological fulfillment. The Parable of the Sower and the message to Ephesus represented the Apostolic Age; the Parable of the Tares and the message to Smyrna found their fulfillment in the decline from the primitive purity of the Church which came about as the result of the pagan persecutions; the Parable of the Mustard Seed coincided with the message to Pergamos, when the Church joined hands with the world in the Age of Constantine and his successors; and the Parable of the Leaven hidden in the three measures of meal found confirmation in the message to Thyatira, and chronological ful-

fillment in the rise of Romanism and the Antichrist.

The four parables we have been considering were uttered, as already noted, in the presence of the multitude. There is now a pause in our Lord's discourse. He leaves the multitude, enters the house, and the remaining three parables are spoken to the disciples alone.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

The first of the three, or the fifth in the series of seven, was the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Let us see if we can discover its chronological fulfillment.

Following the rise of Romanism and the Antichrist came that period which, by common consent, is known as the Dark Ages. It was the fifth stage in the history of the Church, ending just before the great Protestant Reformation, and seems to be represented in the Sardis epoch.

To the Church at Sardis the Revelator was instructed to write: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (Rev. 3:1.) There is, perhaps, no worse condition for a church to get into than is here described. This Church is represented as "dead"—that is, simply professing the name (Christian) but exerting no measure of influence whatever, either in the lives of its members or in proclaim-

ing the Gospel to others. The great majority of the Church had a form of godliness but denied its power; they had a name that they lived, but as a matter of fact they were dead—spiritually.

Nevertheless, even in Sardis, there were a “few names” that had not defiled their garments, and these the Lord had not failed to notice. But the combined influence of these few was not sufficient to recover the Church from its apostate condition. All that these few could do was to comply with the Master’s exhortation: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain.” (Rev. 3:2.) And this they did, in the confidence that if they continued faithful to the end, the Lord would confess their names before his Father. Living in the midst of a cold and spiritually dead generation, they nevertheless remained true to the One who had died for them. And they did this regardless of consequences. And in return, his promise was that he would meet them, when the trial should be over, with the gracious acknowledgment: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” He will present them to his Father as his own, as those whom he has chosen to reign with him in glory.—Rev. 3:5.

This identical lesson appears to be taught in the fifth parable. There the Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto treasure hid in a field. The treasure, in the parable, corresponds to the “few names” in Sardis. Those “few names” were the

Lord's "peculiar treasure." (Exod. 19:5; Psa. 125:4.) So also in the parable. In the field, where the prospective heirs of the Kingdom have been so stubbornly resisted and thwarted by the Adversary, that treasure was, in the Dark Ages, especially just before the Reformation, completely hidden from sight—buried beneath the clods of superstition, human ordinances, and ceremonies. These dear saints were worn out, as Daniel puts it (7:25) and, certainly as far as any collective public testimony was concerned, they were reduced to silence.

Thank God for the "few names" that were left in Sardis—those same dear saints that are represented in the parable as hidden treasure. Who can doubt it was to these, under the leadership of the Master, that we of today are indebted for the preservation of the faith!

#### THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

If we are correct in our belief that the Parable of the Hidden Treasure found its chronological fulfillment in the period just prior to the Reformation, then the sixth parable, that of the Pearl of Great Price, is to be located during the period of the Reformation itself.

The sixth Church of The Revelation, namely, Philadelphia, which has long been held by expositors of widely differing schools of interpre-

tation to be the Church of the Reformation period, has this as its distinctive honor: "Thou . . . hast kept my word." (Rev. 3:8.) By the hand of such as Wycliffe, Luther, Tyndale, who heard the command of God: "Buy the truth, and sell it not" (Prov. 23:23), the priceless pearl of the Holy Scriptures and, in particular, that pearl of pearls, the doctrine of justification by faith, long hidden from the people under the rubbish of the apostasy, was again brought to light and held forth, at what countless cost of life and substance, but also amid what exultant rejoicing.

#### THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

The seventh and last of the Kingdom parables is that of the Dragnet. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered [fish] of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away."—Matt. 13:47, 48.

Is anyone puzzled as to where, on the stream of time, the chronological fulfillment of this parable is to be found? Such need be puzzled no longer, for the answer is given by our Lord himself. In verse 49 he says: "So shall it be at the end of the world."

It will thus be seen that just as the first parable, that of the Sower, touches our Lord's first



advent, so this seventh parable touches his second advent. And it is reasonable to conclude, since seven is the number of completeness, that the other five parables span the entire intervening period.

The teaching of the Parable of the Dragnet is anticipated in the Parable of the Tares. However, in that parable, although the harvest of the Age is in evidence, the harvest is not the only feature. Indeed, it may be questioned if, in the Parable of the Tares, the harvest is the main point. The main point, as I understand it, was to forewarn the disciples of the tare-sowing enemy. Here, however, in the Parable of the Dragnet, the consummation of the Age is the *only* point. The *one* lesson in *this* parable is, that the mixed state of affairs which would obtain throughout the Gospel Age would not be allowed to continue forever; that there would eventually come a time of separation, when those in whose hearts Christ reigns would be gathered to him, and when all others would be rejected.

In the message to Laodicea, the teaching of our Lord in this parable is confirmed. The message to Laodicea, as all are aware, covers the period of the decline and fall of Protestantism at the close of the Age. In the Laodicean epoch the Lord is represented as standing *outside* the Church—the Church, be it remembered, which

he redeemed with his own precious blood; the Church in which, by every right, he should be recognized as the hub and center. *This Church* he rejects in words that admit of no possible misunderstanding: "Because thou art lukewarm . . . I will spue thee out of my mouth."—Rev. 3:16.

But while the Church as a whole is rejected, Christ is not unmindful of the few who may yet remain loyal to him. And so the message closes with the pathetic picture of the Master standing outside the Church, making known his presence by knocking, tarrying awhile, if perchance anyone may awake to his knock, hear his voice, and open the door. To all such, his gracious promise was, *and is*: "I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."—Rev. 3:20.

#### SUMMARY

The Parable of the Dragnet closes the list of seven Kingdom Parables, as the message to Laodicea closes the list of what might well be termed the Kingdom messages. As I have endeavored to show, in addition to containing a wealth of ethical teaching, instruction on which I have scarcely touched, they constitute two prophecies, each setting before us seven successive phases, or characteristic epochs, of the Church which embrace the whole of her career on earth. At the beginning of the Age, our Lord sowed the good seed, but the bad soil of human

hearts rendered it, for the most part, unfruitful. Where it does grow well, an enemy causes disastrous confusion by stealthily introducing disguised children of the Wicked One among the children of the Kingdom. Changed by this evil admixture, the professing church casts off her humility and, ceasing to wait for her Lord from heaven, strives to establish herself upon earth. Throwing aside the cross, she desires to say: "I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow." (Rev. 18:7.) And, in order to gratify her ambition, she enters into a shameful alliance with the great ones of earth, and suffers the very ones who had previously sought her destruction to take refuge in her branches. With such counselors and helpers she organizes herself and so corrupts the whole Word of God by pernicious doctrines of men and demons, that it can be no more recovered, any more than can fine flour be again purified from that which has once leavened it. For a while the Word lies hidden in the earth—only a "few names" remaining. These receive the Word with joy, such as one might experience who happens upon a great treasure buried in a field; although, in order to obtain it, he must needs sell all that he has and buy the whole field. After a while there comes a period of partial revival. The agitated and threatening state of the world moves some to search earnestly for divine revelation and truth;

and these do find the pearl of great price and, if they are willing to give up all else, may possess and enjoy it. At the close of this period the Lord returns. He passes in review the whole of Christendom—all who have professed to be his. At once he begins a separating work, which his servants had not been permitted to attempt, and the secret purpose of the Age is brought to a completion. The mystery [secret] of God is finished.—Rev. 10:7.

Who can thoughtfully consider these parables and fail to admit their striking fulfillment, thus far, in the history of the professing church, together with the grave inference that the days of this dispensation are numbered? But while I think these epochs were foretold as destined to occur in the order I have given, and though the accuracy of the prediction has since been confirmed on the pages of history, we are not to understand that the period of one parable, or one of the messages to the seven churches in The Revelation, was completely ended before the next commenced. On the contrary, it may overlap, or be contemporaneous with that which follows it, or even extend its influence, in a greater or lesser degree, to the end of the Age. He that hath an ear, therefore, should give heed, not alone to what the spirit saith to Laodicea, nor yet to what the spirit saith to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, or Phila-

delphia only. Rather he should give heed to all seven parables; to the messages to all seven Churches. This is clearly indicated in the exhortation, seven times repeated, with which this discussion may appropriately close: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."—Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

---

#### NOTE TO THE READER:

While freely admitting that the parables herein discussed contain a wealth of ethical teaching, I have confined my remarks to their prophetic application. This, in my view, was their primary purpose.

My indebtedness to Charles T. Russell, author of *The Divine Plan of the Ages* and other works, is gladly acknowledged. Acknowledgments are due also to R. E. Streeter (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*—2 vols.), A. J. Gordon (*Ecce Venit*), and G. H. Pember (*The Great Prophecies Concerning the Gentiles, the Jews, and the Church of God*). To the latter I am indebted not only for some of the thoughts (especially those elucidating the Parables of the Hidden

Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price) but also for some of the expressions used. Unfortunately, the expositions of Gordon and Pember are out of print. Most of the books by Russell and Streeter are still available. For particulars write to Pastoral Bible Institute, Inc., 177 Prospect Place, Brooklyn 38, New York.

Additional copies of this booklet may be obtained without charge by writing to the same address.