

# THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

SCRIPTURAL STUDIES IN  
THE KINGDOM OF GOD

*By*

GEORGE ELDON LADD

Professor of Biblical Theology  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Pasadena, California

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## CHAPTER IV

### THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM

THE fourth chapter of Mark and the thirteenth chapter of Matthew contain a group of parables which set forth the "mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4: 11). A parable is a story drawn from the everyday experience of the people which is designed to illustrate the central truth of our Lord's message. This central truth is called "the mystery" of the Kingdom.

We must first establish the meaning of the term "mystery." A mystery in the Biblical sense is not something mysterious, nor deep, dark, profound and difficult. In modern English, the word may bear such connotations, but we cannot interpret the Bible by modern English. In Scripture, "mystery" is often a technical concept whose meaning is set forth in Romans 16: 25-26. Paul writes, "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations." Here is the Biblical idea of mystery: something which has been kept secret through times eternal but is now disclosed. It is a divine purpose which God has designed from eternity but has kept hidden from men. At last, however, in the course of His redemptive plan, God reveals this purpose, and by the Scriptures of the prophets makes it known to all men. A mystery is a divine purpose, hidden in the counsels of God for long ages but finally disclosed in a new revelation of God's redemptive work.

The parables set forth the mystery of the Kingdom—a new truth about the Kingdom of God which was not revealed in the Old Testament but which is at last disclosed in the earthly ministry of our Lord. What is this mystery?

To answer this question, we must go back into the Old Testa-

ment and look at a typical prophecy of the coming of God's Kingdom. In the second chapter of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar was given a vision of a great image which had a head of gold, a chest of silver, thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. Then he saw a stone, cut out without hands, which smote the image on the feet and ground it to powder. This dust was swept away by the wind "so that not a trace of them could be found." Then the stone which destroyed the image became a great mountain which filled the whole earth (Dan. 2: 31-35).

The interpretation is given to us in verses 44 and 45. The image represents the successive nations which were to dominate the course of world history. The meaning of the stone is given in these words: "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be hereafter."

Here is the Old Testament perspective of the prophetic future. The Prophets look forward to a glorious day when God's Kingdom will come, when God will set up His reign on the earth. You will remember that we have discovered that the basic meaning of the Kingdom of God is God's reign. In that day when God sets up HIS reign, it will displace all other reigns, all other kingdoms and authorities. It will break the proud sovereignty of man manifested in the rule of the nations which have dominated the scene of the earthly history. God's reign, God's Kingdom, God's rule will sweep away every opposing rule. God alone will be King in those days.

In the Old Testament perspective, the coming of God's Kingdom is viewed as a single great event: a mighty manifestation of God's power which would sweep away the wicked kingdoms of human sovereignty and would fill all the earth with righteousness.

We must now turn back to the Gospel of Matthew and relate this truth to our previous study. John the Baptist had announced

the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3: 2) by which he understood the coming of the Kingdom foretold in the Old Testament. The Coming One would bring a twofold baptism: Some would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and experience the Messianic salvation of the Kingdom of God, while others would be baptized with the fires of the final judgment (Matt. 3: 11). That this is John's meaning is clear from the next verse. Messiah's work will be one of sifting and the separation of men. As the farmer threshes and winnows his harvest, preserving the good grain and discarding the chaff, Messiah will cleanse his threshing floor, gathering the grain into his barn (salvation for the righteous) but sending the wicked into the fiery judgment (v. 12). The phrase "unquenchable fire" shows that this refers to no ordinary human experience but to the eschatological judgment.

From his prison, John sent messengers to Jesus to ask if He really was the Coming One, or if they were to look for another. John's doubt has often been interpreted as a loss of confidence in his own mission and divine call because of his imprisonment. However, Jesus' praise of John makes this unlikely. John was no reed shaken by the wind (Matt. 11: 7).

John's problem was created by the fact that Jesus was not acting like the Messiah whom John had announced. Where was the baptism of the Spirit? Where was the judgment of the wicked?

Jesus replied that He was indeed the Bearer of the Kingdom, that the signs of the Messianic Age of prophecy were being manifested. And yet Jesus said, "Blessed is he who takes no offence at me" (Matt. 11: 6). "Lord, are you He who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Why did John ask that question? Because the prophecy of Daniel did not seem to be in process of fulfilment. Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee. Roman legions marched through Jerusalem. Authority rested in the hands of a pagan Roman, Pilate. Idolatrous, polytheist, immoral Rome ruled the world with an iron hand. Although Rome exercised great wisdom and restraint in governing her subjects, granting to the Jews concessions because of their religious scruples, yet only God possessed the right to rule His people. Sovereignty belongs to God alone. Here was John's problem; and it was the problem

of every devout Jew, including Jesus' closest disciples, in their effort to understand and interpret Jesus' person and ministry. How could He be the bearer of the Kingdom while sin and sinful institutions remained unpunished?

Jesus answered, "Blessed is he who takes no offence at me." What Jesus meant is this. "Yes, the Kingdom of God is here. But there is a mystery—a new revelation about the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is here; but instead of destroying human sovereignty, it has attacked the sovereignty of Satan. The Kingdom of God is here; but instead of making changes in the external, political order of things, it is making changes in the spiritual order and in the lives of men and women."

This is the mystery of the Kingdom, the truth which God now discloses for the first time in redemptive history. God's Kingdom is to work among men in two different stages. The Kingdom *is* yet to come in the form prophesied by Daniel when every human sovereignty will be displaced by God's sovereignty. The world will yet behold the coming of God's Kingdom with power. But the mystery, the new revelation, is that this very Kingdom of God has now come to work among men but in an utterly unexpected way. It is not now destroying human rule; it is not now abolishing sin from the earth; it is not now bringing the baptism of fire that John had announced. It has come quietly, unobtrusively, secretly. It can work among men and never be recognized by the crowds. In the spiritual realm, the Kingdom now offers to men the blessings of God's rule, delivering them from the power of Satan and sin. The Kingdom of God is an offer, a gift which may be accepted or rejected. The Kingdom is now here with persuasion rather than with power.

Each of the parables in Matthew 13 illustrates this mystery of the Kingdom, that the Kingdom of God which is yet to come in power and great glory is actually present among men in advance in an unexpected form to bring to men in the present evil Age the blessings of The Age to Come.

The first parable of Matthew 13 is that of the four kinds of soil. The sower went out to sow. As he scattered the seed, some fell upon the path that ran through the field. This seed did not take root but, lying exposed, was soon picked up by the birds. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the earth was shallow because a

ledge of rock lay under the thin earth. This seed soon sprouted and started to grow; but when the hot, burning weather came, the ground quickly dried out and the sprouts died, for there was not enough depth of soil to hold moisture in hot weather. Still other seed fell in thorny places. The seed sprouted, but the thorns also sprang up and choked the growth so that it did not mature. Some seed fell upon soft, deep, clean ground where it was able to mature and ripen and produce a harvest.

The mystery of the Kingdom is this: The Kingdom of God is here but not with irresistible power. The Kingdom of God has come, but it is not like a stone grinding an image to powder. It is not now destroying wickedness. On the contrary, it is like a man sowing seed. It does not force itself upon men. Some, like the good soil, receive it; but there are many others who do not receive it. Some hear the word of the Kingdom but it never enters their heart. They hear the Gospel of the Kingdom but they do not understand the truth which they hear. Satan comes and snatches away the seed. There is no root, there is no life.

Others are shallow. They hear the Word of the Kingdom; they seem to receive it; they make a response. There is the semblance of life, but there is no depth. Perhaps the intellect or the emotions have been stirred but the will has not been moved. There is no real life. When trouble arises, when they find that the reception of the Gospel of the Kingdom does not deliver them from evil; indeed, when they meet persecution and evil for the very reason that they have received the message of the Kingdom, they wither and die because there is no life. Their profession is spurious.

Still others are like the thorny ground. They seem to receive the word of the Kingdom, they appear to believe and to evidence life. But they are not prepared to accept the humble form of God's Kingdom. The care of the age, the love of riches, the ambition, the ostentation, the pressure of conformity to This Age in which they still live choke the Word and it becomes unfruitful.

This is the mystery of the Kingdom: that the Kingdom of God has come among men and yet *men can reject it*. The Kingdom will not experience uniform success. Not all will receive it. This was

a staggering thing to one who knew only the Old Testament. When God's Kingdom comes, it will come with *power*. Who can resist it? Who can withstand God? But precisely this is the mystery of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is here, but it can be rejected. One day God will indeed manifest His mighty power to purge the earth of wickedness, sin and evil; but not now. God's Kingdom is working among men, but God will not compel them to bow before it. They must receive it; the response must come from a willing heart and a submissive will.

God is still dealing with us in this same way. God will not drive you into His Kingdom. It is not the business of those who are called to the ministry of the Word to speak with authoritarian compulsion. We speak as emissaries of God, but we plead and do not demand, we persuade and do not drive. We implore men to open their hearts that the Word of His Kingdom may have its fruitage in their lives. But man can reject it. They can spurn the Gospel of the Kingdom. They can scorn the preacher of the Word; and he is helpless.

The parable of the tares or weeds illustrates another facet of this same truth. A man sowed wheat in his field but his enemy sowed weeds. When the weeds were discovered the servants wanted to pull them out, but they were told to let both wheat and weeds grow until the harvest. Then the separation would take place. Until harvest time, weeds and wheat must grow together.

It is of utmost importance to note that "the field is the world" (v. 38). Where do we get the notion that the field is the Church? Jesus Himself said that the field is the world, not the Church. It is a misinterpretation of the Word of God to say that the parable teaches that in the Church the good and the bad, the regenerate and the unregenerate, are to grow together until the harvest and that we cannot exercise church discipline since it would disrupt the order of things. Our Lord said no such thing. He was not talking about the mixed character of the Church but about the world.

Furthermore, we read that "the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, . . . the harvest is the close of the age" (vv. 38-39). At the end of This Age, the angels will come and separate the wheat from the weeds.

There is to be a sure day of judgment bringing a final separation between the righteous and the wicked.

What is the point of this parable? In the book of Daniel when God's Kingdom comes, it will destroy sinners and sweep all wickedness and iniquity from the face of the earth. In this parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God has come already and is already at work in the world; but it is not destroying sin, it is not purging the earth of evil. The Kingdom of God is indeed here but in a different way from that which had ever been anticipated. The sons of the Kingdom—those who have received the Gospel of the Kingdom—and the sons of the evil one are to live together *in the world* until the end of the age. Only then will there occur the final separation. To one who knew only the Old Testament, this was an amazing announcement. When God's Kingdom comes, the wicked will be no more. But Jesus taught, "The Kingdom has come; it is here working among you. Yet wicked men still continue to live in your midst. The Kingdom has come, but the evil Age goes on. The Kingdom has come, but the wicked and the righteous must live together in a mixed society until the coming of the Son of Man."

The unforeseen character of the coming of the Kingdom among men is further illustrated in the third and fourth parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. In ancient Semitic idiom, the mustard seed was a proverbial symbol for that which is tiny and insignificant. The mustard was a plant which rapidly grew into a very large shrub. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matt. 13: 31-32).

This parable illustrates that the Kingdom of God is present among men but in a form not previously revealed. It is here as something tiny, as something insignificant, as something as small as a mustard seed. The important thing is that even though it is like a tiny seed, it is still the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, "Do not let its apparent insignificance deceive you. Do not be discouraged. The time will come when this same Kingdom of God, which now is here like the tiny seed, will be a great shrub, so



great that the birds of the heaven will come and lodge in its branches.”

The message of this parable is not the way in which the tiny seed becomes a tree. Many interpreters have placed great emphasis upon the element of growth and have used it to illustrate the gradual extension of the Church in the world. This is not the point of the parable. If our Lord had wished to teach slow growth and gradual expansion, the illustration of the mustard seed which quickly becomes a large shrub would not serve this purpose. The slow growth of the oak would have been far more suitable to illustrate the gradual growth of the Kingdom. Growth is not the truth in this parable. It has nothing to teach us about how the Kingdom will come in the future. We know from other Scriptures that the Kingdom of God will come in mighty power. It will possess the earth only when the Lord Himself returns in majesty and glory. The form of this future coming is not an element in this parable. One truth is set forth: the Kingdom of God which one day shall fill the earth is here among men but in a form which was never before expected. It is like an insignificant seed of mustard. This tiny thing is, however, God's Kingdom and is therefore not to be despised.

The parable of the leaven illustrates the same truth. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened” (Matt. 13: 33). The Hebrew housewife could not buy a yeast cake at the corner grocery. She had to take a piece of dough that already was leavened and put it in a batch of unleavened dough.

This parable is often interpreted in one of two directions. Many have taken it as a basic proof-text that the Gospel is destined to conquer all the earth by gradual influence. These interpreters emphasize that the way leaven works is by gradual, slow permeation and penetration. Others insist that leaven always symbolizes evil and that the parable teaches the apostasy of the Church.

At this point, we must turn aside for a moment to emphasize an all-important characteristic of parables. In the parabolic method of teaching, we are not to look for truth in every detail. A parable is a story drawn from the familiar experiences of everyday life, and many of the details of the parable are simply elements of

local colour. A parable is not a fabricated story. An allegory is a story created from the imagination and therefore capable of being so fashioned by its creator that every detail can convey some aspect of the truth being illustrated. A parable is not an allegory. Instead of a story fashioned by its author, it is an incident drawn from daily experience which necessarily contains details which do not convey spiritual truth and which therefore are not to be pressed in the interpretation.

This principle deserves illustration, for it is essential to avoid misinterpretation of the Kingdom parables. Jesus told a story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho which is called the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37). This story could have happened any day of the week. The parable answers one question: "Who is my neighbour?" (v. 29). Most of the details are merely picturesque background. Who is the traveller? Any man. What is Jerusalem? What is Jericho? Any two cities in the world. The questions become more difficult when we ask, Who are the robbers? How many were there? What spiritual truth is suggested by the donkey? What spiritual truth is represented by the coins which the Samaritan paid to the innkeeper? Why two coins? Who is the innkeeper? What does the hotel represent? What spiritual truth is embodied in the oil and wine? Where did the Samaritan go after leaving the inn? It is obvious that most of those details belong simply to the local colour of the parable.

This principle is even clearer in the parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16: 1-13). Here is a parable from Jesus' lips involving dishonesty. If we must find meaning in the details in the story, we must admit that Jesus taught that the end justifies the means. Dishonesty, sharp practice, is not wrong if good comes from it! This obviously is not what our Lord taught. A single truth is set forth in this parable: Men should be wise in the use of their substance. They should invest it so that it will help them in the day of (spiritual) need (v. 9). All else is local colour.

This principle is essential in understanding the parable of the leaven. The truth is not that of the gradual permeation of the world by the Kingdom. Scripture nowhere else teaches this. The truth is the same as that of the mustard seed. In its present

manifestation, the Kingdom of God is like a handful of leaven in a big bowl of dough. The dough swallows up the leaven so that one is hardly aware of its presence. It is almost unobservable; it can scarcely be seen. Instead of the glory of God shaking the earth, the Kingdom has come in One who is meek and lowly, who is destined to be put to death, who has only a handful of disciples.

Little wonder that Roman historians hardly mention the career of Jesus. From the world's point of view, His person and mission could be ignored. But one should not be deceived thereby; some day the whole earth will be filled with God's Kingdom even as the leavened dough fills the entire bowl. The means by which this end is accomplished is no element of the parable.

The other faulty interpretation is that leaven is a symbol of evil and that the parable pictures the professing Church which is to be so permeated by evil in the last days that the whole Church will become apostate and corrupted from a pure faith. It is indeed a fact that frequently, perhaps even in most places where leaven is used in Scripture, it is a symbol of evil. But this is not always true. The most important place where leaven was used in Biblical history was at the time of the Exodus. The Israelites were commanded to eat unleavened bread on this occasion but not because leaven was a symbol of evil and unleavened bread of purity. Exodus 12: 39 says, "And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and *could not tarry.*" Leaven is not here a symbol of evil; but unleavened bread was a symbol of *haste*. The Israelites could not take time for the leaven to work.

Again, in Leviticus 23, leavened bread was *commanded* in the celebration of the feast of Pentecost. At this feast, Israelites were to bring two loaves of leavened bread as a sacrifice to God. The feast of Pentecost was the feast of harvest, a time of rejoicing. An offering of thanksgiving was presented to God because He had granted the harvest. The sacrifice consisted of two loaves of ordinary leavened bread such as was used in the household, representing the firstfruits of the grain harvest. In the observance of this festival, the use of leaven was commanded of God's people as a symbol of rejoicing and thanksgiving. To see in this feast a type of the apostate church is uncontrolled allegorizing.

The parable of leaven involves no symbolism of evil. The interpretation that leaven is evil is faced with the problem of explaining how the true Kingdom of God, the realm of salvation, as well as the Kingdom in its so-called "mystery form" of the professing church, can become thoroughly permeated by evil. This parable is related in Luke 13: 20-21 where it has no relationship to the outward Davidic kingdom but to the spiritual kingdom. Leaven does not here refer to evil. It illustrates the truth that the Kingdom of God may sometimes seem to be a small, insignificant thing. The world may despise and ignore it. What could a Galilean carpenter and a dozen Jews accomplish? But do not be dismayed, the day will come when God's Kingdom will fill all the earth even as the leaven fills the whole bowl. God's purposes will not be frustrated.

The parables of the treasure and the costly pearl (Matt. 13: 44-46) logically follow those of the mustard seed and the leaven. The Kingdom of God is like a tiny seed of mustard, a tiny bit of leaven; but even though its form is insignificant, it *is* the Kingdom of God. Therefore it is of inestimable value. Even though it has come among men in a humble form, our Lord says that the Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure whose value transcends every other possession; it is like a pearl whose acquisition merits the loss of all other goods. Now again, the idea that this man *buys* the field or that the merchant *buys* the pearl has nothing to do with the basic truth of the parable. This parable does not tell us that we can buy salvation. Salvation is by faith, the free gift of God; and Matt. 20: 1-16 teaches that the Kingdom is a gift and not a reward which can be earned. Yet even though the Kingdom is a gracious gift, it is also costly. It may cost one his earthly possessions (Mark 10: 21), or his friends or the affections of his family or even his very life (Luke 14: 26). But cost what it may, the Kingdom of God is like a treasure or a costly pearl whose possession merits any cost.

The parable of the draw-net reaffirms the truth that though the Kingdom of God has come among men now in an unexpected manner, it will nevertheless issue in the final judgment and in the separation of the good from the wicked and the destruction of evil. The revelation of the coming of the Kingdom in the Old Testament emphasized this catastrophic, apocalyptic event. When

God brings His Kingdom, the society of wicked men will be displaced by the society of those who have submitted themselves to God's rule who will then enjoy the fulness of the divine blessings freed from all evil. Jesus taught that the redemptive purposes of God had brought His Kingdom to work among men in advance of the day of judgment. It is now like a drag-net which gathers within its influence men of various sorts, both good and bad. The separation between the good and the evil is not yet; the day of judgment belongs to the end of the age (Matt. 13: 49). Meanwhile, there will be within the circle of those who are caught up by the activity of God's Kingdom in the world not only those who are truly sons of the Kingdom; evil men will also be found in this movement.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds describes the character of the world at large; the good and the evil are to live side by side until the day of judgment. The structure of human society is not to be at this time disrupted by the final separation of men. The parable of the drag-net has a narrower reference and describes the circle of men who are influenced by the activity of God's Kingdom in the person of Christ. Evil men will find their way into that fellowship. This explains how there could be a Judas in the immediate circle of our Lord's disciples. It explains how perverse men can arise within the bosom of the Church (Acts 20: 29-30) who will turn men away from Christ. It helps us to understand how a modern church, however careful it may be in its efforts to preserve a Biblical purity of membership, will nevertheless find people in its midst who turn out to be alien to the interests of God's Kingdom.

We should include in this study of the mystery of the Kingdom an important parable found only in the Gospel of Mark. The Kingdom of God is "as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4: 26-29). This parable is similar to that of the mustard seed in that the element of growth is not the point of the story. The modern mind, coloured by an evolutionary point of view, sees in the idea of growth the concept of

gradualness and slow development. This, however, is a modern and not a Biblical idea. Paul can use the metaphor of growth to illustrate that which is utterly supernatural—the resurrection of the dead (I Cor. 15: 36–38).

The parable of the seed growing by itself sets forth a single basic truth: “the earth beareth fruit of itself.” The Kingdom of God is like a seed in this one point: a seed contains the principle of life within itself. There is nothing the farmer can add to the life in the seed. He cannot make it grow, he cannot cause it to produce life. His one task is to sow the seed. Then he may go about his other tasks. But while he is busy about other things, even while he is asleep, the life resident within the seed and the powers resident in the earth assert themselves and produce fruit.

The Kingdom of God is a miracle. It is the act of God. It is supernatural. Men cannot build the Kingdom, they cannot erect it. The Kingdom is the Kingdom of *God*; it is God’s reign, God’s rule. God has entrusted the Gospel of the Kingdom to men. It is our responsibility to proclaim the Good News about the Kingdom. But the actual working of the Kingdom is God’s working. The fruitage is produced not by human effort or skill but by the life of the Kingdom itself. It is God’s deed.

This is the mystery of the Kingdom: Before the day of harvest, before the end of the age, God has entered into history in the person of Christ to work among men, to bring to them the life and blessings of His Kingdom. It comes humbly, unobtrusively. It comes to men as a Galilean carpenter went throughout the cities of Palestine preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, delivering men from their bondage to the Devil. It comes to men as his disciples went throughout Galilean villages with the same message. It comes to men today as disciples of Jesus still take the Gospel of the Kingdom into all the world. It comes quietly, humbly, without fire from heaven, without a blaze of glory, without a rending of the mountains or a cleaving of the skies. It comes like seed sown in the earth. It can be rejected by hard hearts, it can be choked out, its life may sometimes seem to wither and die. But it *is* the Kingdom of God. It brings the miracle of the divine life among men. It introduces them into the blessings of the divine rule. It is to them the supernatural work of God’s

grace. And this same Kingdom, this same supernatural power of God will yet manifest itself at the end of the age, this time not quietly within the lives of those who receive it, but in power and great glory purging all sin and evil from the earth. Such is the Gospel of the Kingdom.