

# **POSSIBILITY PARABLES: How Much Faith Do You Have?**

March 20, 2022

**Overarching Theme:** 2022 – *The Year of the Lord's Favor* (Luke 4:19)

## **Instructions:**

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

## **Core Point:**

As the world awakens from 2 years of pandemic stupor, the words of Jesus proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor" is a message whose time has come. This passage from Luke 4 harkens back to the 'year of jubilee' of Leviticus 25 and Isaiah 61, a year of a fresh start, a clean slate and reset for everyone who can envision new *possibilities* with God this Lenten season and always.

## **Matthew:**

Traditionally it is understood that the Gospel according to Matthew was written by the apostle Matthew (Levi), a Jewish tax collector who became one of Jesus' disciples. However, there are those in biblical scholarship who consider the Gospel to be written by an unknown Christian teacher who prepared it during the second half of the first century using as one of his sources a collection of Jesus' sayings that the apostle Matthew, according to second-century writers, is said to have drawn up and that in time a title containing Matthew's name, and signifying apostolic authority, came to identify the whole. This Gospel forms the connecting link between the Old and New Testament because of its emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy. All the Gospel writers cite Old Testament prophecies that they regard as having been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus, but Matthew includes nine additional such prophetic proof-texts that would make a special appeal to readers having a Jewish background. A key verse of this Gospel is: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (5:17). Also, all the Gospels mention Jesus' Davidic lineage, but Matthew emphasizes this relationship by referring to it more often than the other Evangelists. So the special aim of Matthew is to show that Jesus is the legitimate heir to the royal house of David. Some of the special features of this Gospel are: Matthew is filled with Messianic language ('Son of David' is used throughout) and Old Testament references (53 quotes and 76 other references); this Gospel was

not written as a chronological account but that its purpose was to present the clear evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior. The accounts of what Jesus said or did are grouped by common subject matter and the five discourses of Jesus, Matthew's collection of teachings on specific themes, are a noteworthy feature of the Gospel and they are: chs. 5-7 the Sermon on the Mount, ch. 10 instructions for missionary disciples, ch. 13 the parables of the kingdom of Heaven, ch. 18 on sincere discipleship, and chs. 24-25 on the end of the present age. The author seems to have deliberately built his gospel around these five great discourses as though his objective was specially to show the fullness of Jesus' teaching.

- Adapted from The New Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 1 NT and Life Application Bible, p. 1636

### **Reflect on this Scripture:**

Matthew 13:31-32 NRSV

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the 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."

### **Commentary:**

In the Gospel according to Matthew, conflict arises between the religious leaders, i.e. the scribes and the Pharisees, and Jesus with his disciples due to the hostility of the kingdom of Satan against the kingdom of heaven come in Jesus and this results in him pronouncing solemn judgment, his disciples becoming a separate community and finally his death and resurrection which is not the seeming triumph but the defeat of Satan's kingdom. But the consummation of the kingdom of heaven is still in the future when Jesus will return to make it manifest to all the world and to make all things new. Therefore, the future aspect of the kingdom points out that although it is already come with Jesus' coming, yet it is not complete but will be done, not by the disciples of Jesus but by Jesus himself when he returns. This means that the kingdom of heaven is not a static concept, but a symbol of a dynamic process that moves through history from creation to the end times. As God's saving action, the kingdom of heaven cannot be located temporally but has eternal aspects – past, present, and future.

Since the kingdom of heaven is not an abstract concept or a territory, it is spoken of in a number of ways and therefore in the Gospel the dynamism of the kingdom is communicated by Jesus in parables and narratives so as to explain what the kingdom is like and Matthew relates it closely to justice and righteousness. Each parable in its original setting in the message of Jesus communicated the kingdom

to be both 'already' and 'not yet' and is a simile or metaphor drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. In Jesus' preaching, parables were not vivid decorations of a moralistic point but were stories that challenged the assumptions by which the hearers habitually lived and this is why they were so disturbing then and remain so now giving a new vision of how things are, a vision that disrupts our secure world. Therefore, Matthew has located the 'parable discourse' in the midst of the conflict in which Jesus is being rejected by the leaders of Israel and the new community is being formed who do God's will and so are Jesus' family and are separate from the crowds (ch. 12) as this speaks directly to the experience and history of Christians in the Matthean church at the time when this Gospel was written. In this context in Matthew's Gospel, the people as a whole are challenged to believe and receive the kingdom of heaven come in Jesus by understanding the meaning of the parables. Since judgment is at the heart of Matthew's view of the kingdom, this means that for Matthew parables of the kingdom means parables of the coming judgment. For Matthew, to know God's plan for history culminating in the judgment of the Son of Man is to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew gives in ch. 13 the 'parable discourse' of Jesus to the disciples and the crowds and it consists of the Parable of the Sower and then seven other parables, the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, the Yeast, the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, the Net, and Treasures New and Old. The meaning of the parables of the Sower, the Weeds, and the Net are explained to the disciples along with the reason for Jesus speaking in parables and the need for his hearers to understand them. To understand the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the modern reader needs to recognize that in the land of Palestine in Jesus' time the mustard plant was an annual herb and its seed was the smallest among other seeds. Therefore elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus again refers to the mustard seed when speaking of the amount of faith that is required from his disciples for the impossible to occur (17:20). Moreover, from this tiny seed would grow a plant normally from two to six feet in height (in extraordinary cases, nine to ten feet), but does not produce a tree of any kind. Matthew mentions in his version of this parable the idea that the plant grows into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree and this image of a tree from the smallest of seeds is to reveal what the kingdom of heaven will finally become at the end of time. This surprising, imagination-stretching tree imagery is given despite its inappropriateness as the final result of the mustard seed. The challenging feature is that the future tree-like glory is in continuity with the present smallness and ordinariness of the mustard plant. The presence of the hoped-for kingdom in Jesus, his works and his disciples, is no more obvious than a garden herb—but the kingdom will come in God's power and glory nevertheless. A king who operates in meekness and rides a donkey instead of a war horse can be

represented by a kingdom symbolized by a garden herb rather than a tree. For Matthew's readers (and us) the parable functions not to upset our imagery of what the kingdom is as such, but as an encouraging/threatening image contrasting the present lowliness of the kingdom with its final greatness and extravagance.

- Adapted from The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VIII, pp. 283-301, 308-9

### **Questions to Ponder for Accountability in the Group:**

1. Does your worldview take into account the unseen conflict between the kingdom of heaven/God and the kingdom of Satan? Why or why not and what are the signs that support your worldview?
2. Are you one who tends to hear Jesus' parables and accepts the obvious meaning or one who tends to question and tries to understand what it says about the kingdom of heaven/God? Did you ever wonder before why Jesus would mention in the Parable of the Mustard Seed that its plant would grow into a 'tree' when in reality it grows to only be a shrub?
3. How does the example of the mustard seed used by Jesus to explain what the kingdom of heaven/God is like relate to the faith of his disciples? Do you believe that God's kingdom in the world will finally turn out to be beyond one's imagination? What things or situations of the world make it easy or hard for you to believe this?

### **Activity for the Life of a Disciple:**

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMCC.
2. Prayerfully reflect about what you will do with your **Lenten Seed Gift** during this season.
3. Ponder and pray on this scripture this week: Matthew 13:31-32 NRSV  
<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the 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."
4. Prayerfully approach God asking for faith, even though it be little as a mustard seed, to have a worldview that keeps the kingdom at the center and believing that finally the kingdom of the world/Satan will become the kingdom of heaven / God and of his Messiah (Rev. 11:15).