

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

## LESSON 9--A SUMMARY OF JESUS' TEACHINGS: PART III - THE KINGDOM

The background for this lesson has been given in part in the lesson on Messiahship. The Jewish people expected the Messiah to have a kingdom over which he would rule. Some expected a Davidic king who would "recover the remnant of his people," the dispersed of Israel and Judah. Others awaited a powerful leader whose supernatural appearance would be followed by the destruction of the existing order. The kingdom of God would then be miraculously established.

The Essenes at Qumran expected two messiahs, one a King and the other a High Priest. One would be a political Messiah modeled after Moses, and the other a priestly Messiah modeled after Aaron. Before they appeared, however, they would be preceded by a quasi-messianic figure known as "The Prophet."

General unrest pervaded Palestine at the time. The current apocalyptic hopes created a potentially dangerous situation. Jesus had a difficult challenge: to teach the kingdom of God in such a way that wrong beliefs would be cleared away, and that a true understanding of the inner Kingdom would take their place. In Jesus' own day, through no fault of his own, he fell short of the goal. He was largely misunderstood by his followers and even his apostles, as well as being opposed by his adversaries.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KINGDOM IN ANCIENT TIMES

Exodus 23:14-19 commands that every Israelite appear, three times each year, before Jahveh with his gifts. This demonstrated that Jahveh was Israel's divine King. The Hebrews, unique in this respect, continued as a people with an invisible king until the period of the judges ended.

Beginning with the judgeship of Samuel, the Israelites demanded a king. When Samuel protested, they replied: "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." (I Samuel 8:19-20)

The Hebrew belief that Jahveh was their divine king did not prevent them from paying homage to their earthly kings. Their ideal of kingship was democratic, although individual kings, including Solomon, often exercised dictatorial and despotic powers. The king's authority was conferred upon him by the people, and it returned to them at the king's death. The people retained the right of veto over the king's acts, and they exercised it when occasions demanded it.

The Jewish people had never forgotten the proud achievements of David's reign. Their hopes for the future were formed by the memories of the conquests and achievements of that early period. The hope of restoration and of future glory continued through the centuries that followed the Exile (6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.)

In Psalms 24, 29, 47, and 95-100, Jahveh alone reigns over the earth and over all nations. This vision grew out of the teachings of the pre-exilic prophets and of II Isaiah. It is by far the

noblest teaching of the kingdom of God to be found in the Old Testament. It was “the everlasting kingdom” which shall not be destroyed, also seen in the later Book of Daniel.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KINGDOM IN JESUS' DAY

The Hebrew word commonly translated as kingdom meant rule or dominion. The Kingdom of God or Heaven was the term used to express the current expectation of the Jews in Jesus' day. The Kingdom of God, therefore, meant the reign or rule of God. Since the Jews avoided the use of all direct titles of deity, the term “heaven” was often substituted for "God" or "Jahveh." The Gospel of Matthew often uses the expression “Kingdom of Heaven.” The Gospel of Thomas often uses "Kingdom of the Father," or simply “the Kingdom.”

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KINGDOM TO JESUS

"Jesus' kingdom is a permanent possibility, not an imminent certainty." --John Dominic Crossan

New Testament scholars have differed widely as to which view of the Kingdom Jesus himself accepted. Modern parables research tends to confirm the New Thought view of an Inner kingdom of spiritual consciousness, a point of great importance. However, whatever trends might occur in scholarly circles, it would be hard for Truth students to believe that Jesus envisioned himself as an earthly potentate ruling over a material kingdom.

The most conclusive proof that Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom was a spiritual one came from his own lips. The kingdom sayings of the Canonical Gospels, and of Thomas, are increasingly seen as part of the earliest traditions about his teachings. For example, when the Pharisees questioned him as to the coming of the Kingdom, he replied, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21, KJV)<sup>1</sup>

To Jesus, the Kingdom of God was the place of spiritual dominion which we reach by overcoming our negative beliefs and desires. When this work has been done, we have a right to expect that our needs will be met.

Jesus never defined the term Kingdom of God, or its equivalents, although the Kingdom is mentioned over 80 times in the canonical gospels. Its core meaning is suggested by what it denotes: the dominion or rule of God.

### SPECIFIC STATEMENTS OF JESUS REGARDING THE KINGDOM

"Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

"How hard it is for those who trust in their wealth to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a rope to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:24-25, Lamsa Translation)

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

"I promise you, just as my Father has promised me, a kingdom." (Luke 22:29, Lamsa Translation)

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (John 3:3)

"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (John 18:36)

"Jesus said, 'He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom.'" (Thomas 82)

"His disciples said to him, 'When will the kingdom come?' Jesus said, 'It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying, Here it is or There it is. Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.'" (Thomas 113)

### PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

**The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**

--Matthew 13:44

**Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a man who had a hidden treasure in his field without knowing it. And after he died, he left it to his son. The son did not know about the treasure. He inherited the field and sold it. And the one who bought it went plowing and found the treasure. He began to lend money at interest to whomever he wished."**

--Thomas 109

In his book, Finding is the First Act: Trove Folktales and Jesus' Treasure Parable, John Dominic Crossan reveals how widespread treasure tales are in world literature. We are thus alerted to the great importance of the hidden treasure motif as pointing to a reality within ourselves.

The treasure parables in Matthew and Thomas share the motif of finding a hidden treasure, but they are quite different in detail. Scholars can sometimes reconstruct an original parable by comparing two or more versions. On the other hand, we must consider that Jesus would have given somewhat similar, but not identical, parables at different times. So two (or more) forms can be equally authentic, as is the case here.

In the Near East, landowners often buried gold, silver, and other valuable things in the ground, as protection against thieves. They still do this in some areas, though with modern banking the practice is not as important as it once was. If the owner dies, and another person later finds the treasure, he has a legal right to keep it.

The Hidden Treasure is the Divine Presence within, which includes all the ideas of Divine Mind. To claim this treasure is to realize our true Identity which is one with God. This has practical effects, for our destiny as God's Self-expression is one of dominion and fulfillment, manifest on a human level as health, harmony, and abundance.

Among the alchemists, as well as others, the treasure referred to the highest level of our own being. The great treasure is within, not outside of ourselves. Carl G. Jung noted that the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the mustard seed all point symbolically to the Indwelling Christ. These images point to the integration of the Christ Mind into the human soul, resulting in the individual's positive growth and development.

Matthew 13:44-45 links together the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl. Crossan, pointing to their life-transforming themes, notes the importance of their three main verbs which are finds, buys, and sells. He summarizes the following three steps:

Advent - Discovers the treasure, "which opens up new world and unforeseen possibilities."

Reversal - Gives up past beliefs and limitations, selling "all that he has."

Action - Obtains the treasure, making available "a new world of life and action"<sup>2</sup>

The great treasure, the Indwelling Christ, is "hidden" within our own being. As Elizabeth Boyden Howe declares, commenting on the treasure and the pearl, "the Kingdom is here, present, to be actualized in and by individuals."<sup>3</sup> So it need not remain hidden, if we shift our attention to it. When the man in the parable finds the treasure, he willingly sells all that he has. This represents a willingness to give up all contrary beliefs and opinions. He then buys the treasure. This means to receive, and thus release, this inner reality to heal, harmonize, and inspire us.

The parable emphasizes that the man made the exchange in his joy. It is joyful to let go of self-imposed limitations (though this can be temporarily frightening, too). It is a joy to claim our heritage as children of God. Also, when a person overcomes some limitation on a subconscious level, formerly blocked-off energy is released. This results in a feeling of joy, peace, and vitality welling up from within. Advent-reversal-action is thus a theme of great practical importance. The process occurs over and over again, as negative programming is cancelled and creative potential is made active.

The version in Thomas is longer than the canonical one. The treasure is still the Christ within, but the emphasis is different: We are first to bring this treasure to conscious awareness, and then to apply it to everyday thinking and living. Lending at interest suggests the practical fruits of finding the kingdom within, and the continuing nature of its benefits.

# PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

**He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."**

--Mark 4:30-32

**The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell me what the kingdom of heaven is like." He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."**

--Thomas 20

(parallel passages: Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19)

Copyright © 1991 by Robert Winterhalter

Using the Aramaic grammatical form, Jesus stated that it is the case with the kingdom of heaven as with the fully grown mustard plant. The mustard seed was the smallest seed available in the ancient Near East. (The petunia plant has even smaller seeds, but it was then unknown.) The mustard plant, however, grows to great size near the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan. A height of ten feet is not unusual.

Jesus meant to contrast the smallness of the seed with the bigness of the mature plant. In Jungian psychology, this reflects the archetype of the child, in which a tiny seed works to fulfill its potential with invincible power. As a child grows from a single cell to become a man or a woman, and a mustard seed becomes a large shrub where conditions are favorable, so it is with the expansion of spiritual consciousness. Such is the vitality of the Christ Consciousness within us to grow and increase in our awareness.

The mustard seed, then, is a symbol of the Indwelling Christ and Its ideas. It begins very small among all the thoughts in the mind. Yet it has enormous potential to expand and grow within, until it becomes the dominant state of the soul. The birds, mentioned in all four versions, nest in the plant's shade or in its branches. These birds are images of spiritual ascent. They represent Divine ideas that come to permanent awareness, such as Love, Life, Truth, Substance, Spirit.

Christ in us is a constant, an organized potential. In the early stages of spiritual growth, however, one needs a firm resolve to focus attention on the Christ within. What we think upon grows. The Christ Idea is to become the central point of attention. It brings psychic order out of the chaos of conflicting thoughts and interests.

Jesus emphasized the active role of the conscious mind in these earlier states. In Matthew and Luke, a man took the seed in his hand and sowed it. In Thomas, the seed falls on tilled soil, again pointing to the need for conscious preparation. Both metaphors probably refer back to original forms of this parable. Nevertheless, the more dominant true ideas become, the more they expand in our awareness according to their own spontaneous energy and potential.

This is like most plants when they are firmly rooted and reach a certain stage of growth--then keep on growing without much help, if they are given half a chance.

At other times, Jesus used the mustard seed as an image of the expanding power of a quickened faith. He did not mean that a tiny bit of faith can have great results. He did, however, affirm the potential growth of spiritual confidence and trust, and the mighty works that can be released as a result of such an unfoldment. For example, Matthew 17:20 (RSV) declares (cf. Luke 17:5-6):

“Truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you”

#### NOTES

1. Also see commentary on Saying 3 of the Gospel of Thomas in The Fifth Gospel, by Robert Winterhalter. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 15-17.
2. Crossan, John Dominic; In Parables--The Challenge of the Historical Jesus; New York, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 34
3. Howes, Elizabeth Boyden; Jesus' Answer to God; San Francisco, Guild for Psychological Studies Publishing House, 1984, p. 88

#### QUESTIONS

1. Explain the Kingdom as it was understood in Jesus' time.
2. What did the Kingdom mean to Jesus?
3. How shall we as Truth students interpret the Kingdom?
4. Give a spiritual interpretation of one of the eight SPECIFIC STATEMENTS OF JESUS REGARDING THE KINGDOM that are listed in this lesson.