

# Lesson 6 | January 7, 2024

## Growth of the Kingdom

**Study Text:** Matthew 13:1–43

**Central Truth:** God’s kingdom grows as the Word of God is planted in people’s hearts.

**Key Verse: Matthew 13:23**

He that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (KJV).

“The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God’s word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!” (NLT)

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will prepare their hearts to be fertile ground for the gospel to grow.
- Students will be confident that the kingdom of heaven will triumph over evil, regardless of how dire the situation looks.
- Students will understand the growth process of the kingdom of God and become aware of the influence it is having in the world.

## Introducing the Study

**Say:** Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a lot of things—including the process of farming. If a farmer’s seed is good and the soil is ready, growth should be a natural process. As Paul would later explain, people plant and water seeds, but only God can make them grow (1 Corinthians 3:6).

**Opening Activity—How Does Your Garden Grow?**

*Ask: What successes or failures have you experienced in growing a garden? If you have a green thumb, what tips help you get the greatest return from your seeds?*

**Say:** Some people seem to be able to take a plant that’s nearly dead and make it flourish. Then there are others who find the hardiest, healthiest plants—only to watch them die in a matter of weeks. In gardening, there’s a lot going on beneath the surface, and the quality of the seed and preparation of the soil can mean the difference between success or failure. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Today’s lesson emphasizes a series of illustrations Jesus used to explain the growth dynamics of the kingdom of heaven. The enemy’s goal is to keep the kingdom of heaven as small and ineffective as possible. He is not satisfied to coexist with the Kingdom; he wants to snuff it out. That’s why people who make steps toward the Kingdom are often targeted by his deceptive strategies. But the good news is that the Kingdom will continue to grow despite the resistance of the world and hindrance of the

enemy. At the right time, judgment will come, and the victorious kingdom of God will be fully realized.

## Part 1—Sowing the Word

### The Sower and the Seed

Matthew 13:1–9

**Say:** Matthew wrote that “Jesus always used stories and illustrations . . . when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables. This fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet: ‘I will speak to you in parables. I will explain things hidden since the creation of the world’” (13:34–35, NLT). Jesus’ disciples and the crowds following Him were not the only ones who would benefit from the wisdom and insights in His parables; they are for us as well. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Greek word for *parable* means “comparison” and is related to another Greek word meaning “to throw alongside.” In other words, Jesus would tell a parable to throw a relatable story alongside the truth He was about to teach. To interpret parables correctly, it’s important to understand that each parable teaches one main point or principle. All the extra details are not as important as the overall meaning.

Matthew 13 includes a sample of parables Jesus told in one afternoon. He exited the house in Capernaum where He had been staying and “sat beside the lake” (verse 1, NLT) or Sea of Galilee. It is clear from 12:38–50 that Jesus had been teaching earlier that same day. Not only was He confronted by religious teachers asking for proof of His authority, but His family came to see Him, likely intending to interrupt His ministry (Mark 3:21).

A large crowd gathered around Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. He got into a boat to continue teaching the people who stood along the shore. He had often taught in the synagogues, but because He was facing opposition from the religious leaders, perhaps an outdoor venue removed Him from their territory or simply allowed more space for the crowd to gather. It is also possible people simply recognized Jesus resting by the lake and gathered to hear what He might say.

At this point in His ministry, Jesus was differentiating between the way He spoke to large crowds and the way He taught His close disciples. Soon, the disciples would carry on His work, so He was preparing them by explaining the Kingdom more thoroughly. Also, the opposition He was facing might have made it prudent for Him to be a bit more ambiguous when speaking publicly. Had He spoken plainly, His enemies could have more easily used His words against Him.

Matthew first records a story Jesus told about a farmer who scattered seed in his field. The same story is told in Luke 8:4–15. While there are some differences in the way the two authors relate the parable, its message is the same. Many people in the crowd

probably did not understand the parable's meaning at the time, though it may have become clear later. Even the disciples—who had followed Jesus for some time—needed Him to explain it.

People could relate to this parable because Jesus referred to common agricultural practices of the day. A farmer would break up the soil and scatter seed in his field. Then, holding the container of seed with one hand and tossing handfuls with the other, he would often be followed by a plow to cover the seed. The farmer was not being careless or wasteful when some of his seed landed in thorny, rocky, or hard-packed areas; he was simply making sure the seed reached every available inch of soil. Any seed that fell on the footpaths separating the individual fields would be exposed to hungry birds and never have a chance to take root and grow (Matthew 13:4). The “stony places” (verse 5, KJV) where some of the seed fell did not refer to soil full of rocks, but to a larger “underlying rock” (NLT) covered with a thin layer of soil. Seeds in this area would sprout quickly and then die quickly. Still more seeds would fall among thorns, which would grow faster and thicker than the tender plants, eventually choking them out (verse 7). But all was not lost. The farmer had not sown his seed in vain, because some fell on fertile soil and produced a good crop. Jesus did not explain the parable to the crowd, instead waiting until later to interpret its spiritual meaning for His disciples.

### ***Discuss***

? Why do you think Jesus used farming imagery in this case (instead of fishing imagery, household imagery, etc.)?

? How do you think you would have responded if you had been in the crowd?

## **The Meaning Revealed**

Matthew 13:18–23

**Say:** Not everyone in the crowd that day was ready for the deep truths Jesus taught. Some may have been hard-hearted. Some may have been listening just because they enjoyed Jesus' stories. While we don't know how individuals in the crowd responded, we do know Jesus took time to explain the parable in detail to His disciples. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus told the disciples that they were “blessed” (Matthew 13:16, NLT)—not because they were superior to anyone else, but because they were eager to learn from Him. This blessing is also available to us. Jesus' teachings can have an ever-expanding influence in our lives as we meditate on them and rely on the illumination of the Holy Spirit—whom Jesus promised would “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

Many believe this parable—which the King James Version renders “the parable of the sower” (Matthew 13:18)—should be titled “The Parable of the Soils.” One of the differences between Matthew and Luke's accounts of this story is their explanation of the seed. In both Gospels, the farmer scatters seed in four distinct soils, but Matthew groups the seed and soil together when describing the four levels of receptivity, while Luke clearly states, “The seed is God's word” (Luke 8:11, NLT).

Some people—represented by the footpath—hear the message of the Kingdom but don't understand it. The Word does not take root in their hearts. Others—like the shallow, rocky soil—are initially receptive to the message, but when persecution comes, they quickly fall away and return to their life of sin. Still others—like the soil filled with thornbushes—accept the message of the Kingdom, but their competing loyalties choke out their commitment to God. The last group—represented by the good soil—have tender hearts that understand and receive the Kingdom message. The Holy Spirit multiplies their fruitfulness, causing them to grow and reach others for the Kingdom.

### **Resource Packet Item 1: Discipleship Strategies**

Distribute the worksheet, divide your class into small groups, and give them a few minutes to strategize. Then have the groups share their ideas.

#### ***Discuss***

- ? In your own experiences of sharing the gospel, have you encountered people who were hard-packed soil, rocky soil, thorny soil, or good soil? What was their response?
- ? How have you seen God multiply the harvest of the Kingdom?

## **Part 2—Wheat and Tares Growing Together**

### **The Deceptive Enemy**

Matthew 13:24–30

**Say:** The next parable Matthew records also relates to agriculture, but this time the focus is on the enemy of the Kingdom. We know Jesus defeated Satan once and for all—triumphing over death and the grave (Revelation 1:18). But we also know the enemy of our souls is actively working to discourage and distract believers, intending to keep as many people as possible from coming to Jesus. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

As He had with the previous parable, Jesus told the story of the wheat and the “weeds” (Matthew 13:25, NLT; “tares,” KJV) to the crowd and then interpreted it for His disciples later. He began the story: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field” (verse 24, NLT). That night, while his workers were sleeping, the owner’s enemy attempted to destroy the freshly planted crop. It would not be feasible to remove the wheat seeds, so the enemy sowed weeds on top of the wheat instead. The kind of weed Jesus referred to is the bearded darnel, which is still commonly found among fields of grain in the Middle East. It resembles wheat in its early stages, so it could have grown enough before it was discovered to be well established in the field.

When the owner heard about the weeds in his wheat field, he immediately knew what had happened. He told the workers not to try to salvage the crop by pulling up the weeds, understanding that would cause even more damage to the wheat. The owner’s solution was to let the weeds and the wheat grow up together. At harvesttime, the weeds would be bundled up and burned. Despite his enemy’s evil intentions, the crop would be saved.

Jesus' disciples sometimes behaved like the workers in His parable who suggested pulling up the weeds as soon as they appeared among the wheat. James and John, for example, wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that refused to welcome Jesus on His way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–55). Later, Jesus reprimanded Peter for cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant Malchus in the Garden of Gethsemane when He was arrested (John 18:10–11). While we may be eager to get rid of the evil growing around us, we must submit to God's direction and timing. Paul addresses this issue further in Romans 12:14–21: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the LORD. . . . Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (verses 19, 21, KJV; see Deuteronomy 32:35).

### ***Discuss***

? What deceptive tactics does Satan use to reduce our effectiveness in expanding the Kingdom?

? Has the Holy Spirit ever stopped you when you were about to uproot a perceived evil on your own? If so, share the experience with the class.

## **The Victorious Kingdom**

Matthew 13:36–43

**Say:** When the disciples did not fully grasp this parable, Jesus did not reprimand them for their lack of understanding. Instead, He patiently explained the story's significance, assuring them His kingdom would endure regardless of the enemy's attempts to destroy it. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus used the term "Son of Man" (Matthew 13:37, NLT) to identify himself as the farmer in the story. The field represents the world, while the good seed being sown stands for the people who have become part of the Kingdom (verse 38). Jesus plants His followers in the world to establish and advance God's work on earth. The weeds in the story are "people who belong to the evil one" (verse 38, NLT). Satan is the one who sows the weeds among the wheat, and they serve him, living according to his standards. They do not want to give up their authority in the world and will do anything to thwart the advancement of God's kingdom. Satan often attacks believers directly, but when that doesn't work, he uses more subtle methods.

Jesus tolerates this evil infiltration for a while, but there will come a day when He will "send his angels, and they will remove from his Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil" (verse 41, NLT). Those who have served Satan will be uprooted and thrown "into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (verse 42, NLT). Just as the wheat grew alongside the weeds in Jesus' parable, He calls us to live and grow in this world and make a positive difference. In the end, we will receive the reward He has promised: to "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of [our] Father" (verse 43, KJV).

### **Resource Packet Item 2: Deceptive Tactics of Satan**

Distribute the worksheet. Have students list their ideas for withstanding the enemy's attacks. Then invite them to share with the class.

**Discuss**

? In what ways could this parable help you avoid judging others?

? Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus compared His followers to salt, light, sheep, wedding guests, wineskins, and fish—just to name a few. Why do you think He chose to add this comparison to wheat in a field?

## **Part 3—The Growing Kingdom**

### **From Smallest to Greatest**

Matthew 13:31–32

**Say:** Jesus used two short parables to describe the increasing size and influence of His kingdom. In each case, the beginnings seem quite insignificant, but the expectations are remarkable. Looking back over the last two thousand years, we can see Jesus' words proved true. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus first compares the Kingdom to a mustard seed, which is one of the smallest seeds many of His listeners would have recognized. Jewish rabbis of that time commonly used the mustard seed as a symbol of anything extremely small. When planted and tended to, mustard seeds would grow into plants more than ten feet tall in just a few short weeks. The same birds that could have consumed the seeds were supported on its branches. Jesus understandably calls the full-grown plant a "tree" (Matthew 13:32), which was a symbol for a flourishing kingdom that protected its subjects (Ezekiel 17:22–24; 31:2–6; Daniel 4:10–12, 20–22).

The Kingdom that Jesus came to establish started with only a handful of people. From twelve disciples to 120 meeting together after Jesus' ascension to three thousand new believers on the Day of Pentecost, the Church multiplied quickly, eventually expanding into all parts of the known world. The kingdom of heaven could not be thwarted. As Jesus himself had said, "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Matthew 16:18, NLT). There will always be opposition to Christianity, likely increasing in frequency and severity, but the Church will continue to grow and lives will continue to be transformed until Jesus' return.

#### **Resource Packet Item 3: Small Beginnings**

Distribute the worksheet and discuss the exponential growth of the Kingdom up until now and going forward.

**Discuss**

? Why do you think Jesus included this parable among the others He told that day?

? How can you contribute to Kingdom growth in your local community—either individually or as a class?



## Ever-Increasing Influence

Matthew 13:33

**Say:** Jesus' second short parable described the influence of the small group of disciples He left to spread His kingdom. Again, it begins small and grows exponentially. Jesus encouraged His followers that even though they began as a only a few people, they would make a great difference in their world. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus introduced a new perspective on the word *yeast*. Everywhere else in Scripture, yeast was used to represent some form of wickedness, but here Jesus used it in a good sense, equating the effects of yeast with the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus highlights the smallness of yeast compared to the lump of dough. The yeast permeates the entire lump of dough, changing its composition. This is a slow and gradual process. The Jews expected the kingdom of heaven to come quickly and powerfully, overturning the Roman government. But the Kingdom does not stand in opposition to Rome. The kingdom of heaven is interested in overcoming a much greater enemy. It has expanded greatly over time and its influence can be seen by anyone willing to observe.

### **Discuss**

- ? What are some specific ways the yeast (the Kingdom) has impacted the world today?
- ? How has the illustration of the yeast been a reality in your life?

## What Is God Saying to Us?

**Say:** As followers of Jesus, we have reason for hope. The kingdom of heaven is gaining citizens every day as those who are a part of it accept their assignments and actively live out the gospel and share the good news with others. We must not stay huddled together with fellow Christians in our local church buildings fearing the world. We must actively engage with others and show them the power of our Lord and Savior.

## Living It Out

### Ministry in Action

- Evaluate the condition of your soil by asking yourself how the kingdom of heaven has expanded as a result of your citizenship.
- Share the hope we have that the kingdom of heaven will triumph over evil with those experiencing anxiety about the current state of society.
- Look for ways to be an active agent of positive influence in the world by infusing the principles of the kingdom of heaven wherever possible.

## Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

God's Growing Nation.

Exodus 1:7–12

Tuesday:

The Lord's Growing Prophet.

1 Samuel 3:16–21

Wednesday:

The Righteous Keep On Growing.

Psalm 92:12–15

Thursday:

The Growing Church.

Acts 2:41–47

Friday:

Grow Up Into Christ.

Ephesians 4:11–16

Saturday:

Grow in Christlike Character.

2 Peter 1:1–10