

## **BACKGROUND NOTES AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STUFF**

For April 7, 2024

Pastor Kerry

Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

Ralphie from the movie, *A Christmas Story*, wants a BB rifle. Throughout the movie everyone from his mother to the department store Santa Claus warns him that if he gets it, he will poke his eye out. But Ralphie will not listen. No amount of warning, no matter how well intentioned, will dissuade him from his wish for that BB rifle. In the end he does get the BB gun and while not poking out his eye, he does get a black eye.

In the movie, the repeated warnings that Ralphie would poke out his eye is a humorous refrain. One that would not be heard by Ralphie no matter what. His mind was made up and nothing would deter him. Therefore, the warnings went unheeded.

While the warnings in the movie *A Christmas Story* are humorous, there are other warnings that are very serious, and likewise go unheeded. Not in the sense that no one hears them, but that no one will pay attention to them.

When Jesus says in Matthew 13:15, “For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them,” he is quoting from the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah was called to be a prophet, he had a magnificent vision of God. But immediately after responding to the call to speak God's words, Isaiah is told that he will speak, but no one will listen, for they will not hear. There were many times in his ministry when Isaiah spoke the word of God, but few heard, for the people would not open their ears to hear.

Jesus faced much the same reality. He could speak and people would hear the words, but would they understand? Parables or stories are a great way to teach. People remember stories and stories invite you to ponder what the speaker means. For those who take the time to ponder the stories and let the stories speak to them, stories can be an effective way to communicate a message. But if one just enjoys the stories as pleasant entertainment and does not think about them after they are told, stories,

like all teachings, can easily be ignored. If we will not listen with our heart, then it is like our ears are closed. We may hear the sounds of the words, but their meaning will never enter in. When we do this with the word of God, we shut our hearts to the healing that God offers us.

*A Christmas Story* is not just about a young boy's Christmas wish, but also about his relationship with his parents. As a father, I can identify with the parents' concern that Ralphie not get something that could hurt him. And as a parent, I know the frustration of speaking to children who are not listening.

We can read these words from Isaiah, that were quoted by Jesus, as the pained cry of our parent, our Heavenly Father. Our father desperately wants to speak to his children. But the children will not stop to listen. Yes, the children hear the words, and nod their heads as if listening, but somewhere between the eardrum and brain, the words are lost. Can you hear in these words the frustration of a father who knows that his children will not listen for their hearts are closed? And because the children will not listen, the father cannot heal them.

May we not be those who refuse to hear, but those who per the last part of Matthew 13:15, "understand with their heart and turn," and allow God to heal them.

## **BACKGROUND NOTES AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STUFF**

For April 14, 2024

Jarron Cuoghi

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

How do we live as people faithful to God in a culture that so often pulls us away from his ways? This is a question that I have addressed before in these notes and will probably address again, for it is a critical question as crucial for our age as it was in the time of Jesus.

It was a critical question in the time of Jesus because the Jewish people, except for a brief period of independence, had lived under foreign rulers for centuries. The political rule and the cultural influences of these foreign empires both threatened to undermine the Jewish way of life. Greek plays, literature, and philosophy presented moral values at odds with the moral law of Moses. Even when the Jewish people were not asked to abandon their worship of God, they faced pressure to at least join in the festivals of the Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and other gods. How did one remain faithful in a time of cultural change?

There were many answers to this question. Some saw the solution as taking up arms to drive out the Romans and all foreigners so that the land could be free of foreign influences and the people would once again be able to be fully devoted to God. Perhaps some of those who cheered Jesus on his entrance to Jerusalem were hoping that Jesus would lead the nation in such a revolt. Perhaps the extreme opposite view was to abandon their Jewish heritage and the worship of God and adopt the culture of the Romans. These people might have been seen as traitors to their nation. Perhaps some of the tax collectors fell into this group. They were certainly seen as traitors and collaborators.

Then there were those who attempted to find a middle way, to hold onto their Jewish faith in God while working with the Romans. Perhaps many of the temple offices and wealthy merchants in Jerusalem might fit here. They may not have liked the Romans but saw no practical position other than cooperation. Of course, those that cooperated with the Romans were often seen as failing to keep the law and failing to be faithful to God. Groups like the Pharisees might look down on those whom they thought compromised too much to get along with the Romans. They sought to maintain their faith against the pressures of the Roman culture by doubling down on strict

obedience to the laws. Their purpose was not to make life burdensome, but to live a life acceptable to God and not to compromise with the outside culture. Then there were those who felt that even the Pharisees did not go far enough in rejecting foreign culture. They accused the Pharisees of speaking smooth things and failing to obey God. Such criticism of the Pharisees is found in the writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

What is important is not the specific position held by any particular group, but that each was attempting to come to terms with conflict between their traditional expression of faith in God and the demands of their culture. And the other important point was that each was highly critical of the other and thought that they alone had the right way forward.

It is against this historical background that I read Jesus's parable about the field of wheat that was discovered to have weeds. First, Jesus is very clear that there is a right and wrong way. There are wheat plants and there are weeds. And there will be a day of reckoning. But to me, this parable turns on the master's reply to his servants when the servants ask if they should pull the weeds. The master replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them (Matthew 13:29)." Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, and to those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, and to the other groups of his time, that they were right is saying that there is right and wrong, but wrong in being so quick to judge others. In doing so, they may be judging those who are wheat and not weeds. Or to put it another way, yes there is right and wrong, but are you sure that your definition of right and wrong matches with God's definition?

I hear Jesus saying the same words to us today. There is right and there is wrong. There is being faithful to God and there is selling out to this world. But who are we to act as the final judge? Our duty is to navigate the obstacles of our world the best of our ability, being faithful to how God is calling *us* to live out our faith. At times we need the humility to say that even with all our efforts, we ourselves do not get it right. As for judging others, that belongs to God.

## **BACKGROUND NOTES AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STUFF**

For April 21, 2024

Pastor Kerry

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

The Kingdom of Heaven—The Mustard Seed; Yeast; Valued Treasure

Some days it is hard to see the kingdom of God at work. I say that because I believe that the kingdom of God is not just for the future, but also the work that God is doing in the world today. Some days it is easier to see the things that are not of God than to see the places where he is working.

Reading the news can be downright depressing. I read with horror I read of the suffering in Gaza, but neither can I forget that civilians were murdered in Israel. It seems like the leaders carry on, while innocent people, particularly children, suffer. Closer to home, I read how racism is alive and well in our nation even after 60 years of the civil rights movement. It seems that we are constantly looking for someone to blame, whether it is those of a different race, nationality, or culture. I write as one concerned about the environment. I hear so much being said, but little is being done. Most painful of all for me is the divisions in Christ's church. Christians seem to me to be so ready to turn on each other.

I know some people look at these events and ask if it is time for Christ to return. Maybe, I think. I don't know. There have been many periods in the history of the church when people thought it was time for Jesus to return.

But when I read the parable of the tiny mustard seed that grows into a great plant and the parable of the little bit of yeast transforming a much greater measure of wheat, I see a promise of hope.

The images of the parables are not hard to understand. The mustard seed is a tiny seed at one to two millimeters, but depending on the type and location, it can grow up to six feet or more. And a tablespoon of yeast can allow eighty times its volume of flour to rise.

It is not just the images of growth themselves that are important; it is what Jesus is saying with them. There may be times when the work of God is just a tiny seed among all the junk of this world. But I am always amazed when I see grass growing in the tiniest crack in the sidewalk, or trees growing in the midst of rocks. And who would have thought eleven disciples

and a handful of other followers could do anything in the days after Jesus was crucified? But their witness has reached around the world.

And like the ratio of wheat to yeast, there are times when bad news seems to outnumber the good news by eighty to one, or more. But as one who has baked bread, I remember what those one or two tablespoons of yeast did to those many cups of flour. I also remember that it takes time for yeast to do its thing. You cannot just mix flour and yeast and throw it in the oven, you have to let the bread mixture rise over time so that the yeast can work. And so, whether looking back through history, or even in my own life, I can see God working even in the darkest times to quietly build up those who follow Jesus, much as the yeast works in the bread.

And so, I take hope in these two parables. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, God is still at work. The signs may appear small right now, but God is not done, and like the tiny mustard seed, God's kingdom is growing into what it someday will be.

## BACKGROUND NOTES AND OTHER MISCELLANEOUS STUFF

For April 28, 2024

Tyriq Clark

Matthew 18:21-35

The Kingdom of Heaven—Forgiveness Required

When Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times (Matthew 18:21)?” I imagine Peter asking that question with all sincerity. While it is speculation on my part, I see Peter honestly trying to apply Jesus’ teaching. He had heard Jesus speak about forgiveness and understood that forgiveness was to be a mark of one who followed Jesus. And when Peter suggested that seven times was enough to forgive another person, I see Peter attempting to be generous. Surely seven times is more than enough, more than I can be expected to forgive. And I wonder if Peter was not a little confused when Jesus said that seven was *not* enough, but seventy-seven times.

As is so often the case, I think my speculation about Peter says more about myself than about Peter. Like my imaginary description of Peter, I want to follow Jesus, and I want to apply his teachings to my life. But like my reconstruction of Peter’s motives, there are times when I want to know when I have done enough. I want to give generously, but when have I given enough? I want to see all people as children of God, but how far out of my comfort zone do I need to go to do this? I want to follow Jesus’ teaching to love my enemies and to pray for them, but how many times do I need to pray for them, and do I still need to love them when they mock my political, social, or religious views. I want to forgive others, but when can I say that I have done enough, and that person is just too far gone?

In response to Peter’s questions, Jesus told a parable. The parable is simple enough, a man owed an immense debt, one that he probably could never pay off. But when he asked, he is forgiven that debt. However, that man, having been forgiven his debt, refuses to forgive a fellow servant a much, much smaller debt. I understand Jesus’ message. We have been forgiven an immense debt that we could have never repaid, so I should forgive others in turn.

But the verse that strike me is that last one, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from

your heart (Matthew 18:35).” When I read that verse, I realize that Peter’s question about numbers and my questions about how much is enough are irrelevant. Jesus is not asking me whether I told someone that I forgave them seven times or even seventy-seven times., Jesus is asking me whether I have truly forgiven with my heart. Jesus is not asking me how much money have I given, but have I given it out of love? Jesus is not asking me if I have been nice to my enemies, but have I truly seen them as a brother or sister who is also a child of God?

I like numbers. When I was working, it was nice to know I was meeting. But Jesus has a very different standard. Is not a matter of accounting, of saying I have been forgiven so much, therefore I need to forgive so much. Jesus wants to know the state of my heart. Not only must I go through the motions of forgiving, I need to forgive from the very depths of my heart.

### Answers for March Trivia

Several of the messages this month were built on the idea of truth and knowing truth from falsehood.

What follows is not as serious as the messages, but can you separate the truth from falsehood in the following statements.

- 1) Moses took two of every kind of animal onto the ark. **False. It was Noah that took animals on the ark. (I missed this one the first time I heard it.)**
- 2) Joseph was the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob. **False. Benjamin was the youngest son.**
- 3) Joshua marched around the walls of Jericho seven times on the day that the wall fell.  
**True**
- 4) According to the book that bears his name, Jonah spent three days in the belly of a big fish. **True. while it is usually translated whale, it was literally a big fish**
- 5) In addition to Isaac, Abraham had a son named Lot. **False. Lot was Abraham’s nephew.**
- 6) Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Haggai are lesser-known books of the Bible.  
**True.**

- 7) Peter is also known as Cephas. **True. Petros is Greek for rock, and Cephas is Aramaic for rock. Paul uses this title for Peter (see Galatians 1:18.)**
- 8) When Jesus fed the 5000, that total did not include women and children. **True**
- 9) The ostrich is mentioned in the Bible. **True (e.g Leviticus 11:6).**
- 10) Bears are not mentioned in the Bible. **False (see I Samuel 17:36-37).**

## April Trivia

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven, but in the Bible many earthly kings are also mentioned. Can you match the kingdom and their kings

### Kingdom

- 1 Egypt \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 Babylon \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 Rome \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 Persia \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 Judah \_\_\_\_\_

### King

- A Cyrus
- B Hezekiah
- C Pharoah
- D Augustus
- E Nebuchadnezzar

Bonus: What Phoenician City-State might remind you of a part of a car?