

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS. ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XIII. 18–21.

18 Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it?	of the air lodged in the branches of it.
19 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree: and the fowls	20 And again he said, Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

THERE is a peculiar interest belonging to the two parables contained in these verses. We find them twice delivered by our Lord, and at two distinct periods in His ministry. This fact alone should make us give the more earnest heed to the lessons which the parables convey. They will be found rich both in prophetic and experimental truths.

The parable of the mustard seed is intended to show *the progress of the Gospel in the world*.

The beginnings of the Gospel were exceedingly small. It was like “the grain of seed cast into the garden.” It was a religion which seemed at first so feeble, and helpless, and powerless, that it could not live. Its first founder was One who was poor in this world, and ended His life by dying the death of a malefactor on the cross.—Its first adherents were a little company, whose number probably did not exceed a thousand when the Lord Jesus left the world.—Its first preachers were a few fishermen and publicans, who were, most of them, unlearned and ignorant men.—Its first starting point was a despised corner of the earth, called Judea, a petty tributary province of the vast empire of Rome.—Its first doctrine was eminently calculated to call forth the enmity of the natural heart. Christ crucified was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness.—Its first movements brought down on its friends persecution from all quarters. Pharisees and Sadducees, Jews and Gentiles, ignorant idolaters and self-conceited philosophers, all agreed in hating and opposing Christianity. It was a sect everywhere spoken against.—These are no empty assertions. They are simple historical facts, which no one can deny. If ever there was religion which was a little grain of seed at its beginning, that religion was the Gospel.

But the progress of the Gospel, after the seed was once cast into the earth, was great, steady and continuous. The grain of mustard seed “grew and waxed a great tree.” In spite of persecution, opposition, and violence, Christianity gradually spread and increased. Year after year its adherents became more numerous. Year after year idolatry withered away before it. City after city, and country after country, received the new faith. Church after Church was formed in almost every quarter of the earth then known. Preacher after preacher rose up, and missionary after missionary came forward to fill the place of those who died. Roman Emperors and heathen philosophers, sometimes by force and sometimes by argument, tried in vain to check the progress of Christianity. They might as well have tried to stop the tide from

flowing, or the sun from rising. In a few hundred years, the religion of the despised Nazarene,—the religion which began in the upper chamber at Jerusalem,—had overrun the civilized world. It was professed by nearly all Europe, by a great part of Asia, and by the whole northern part of Africa. The prophetic words of the parable before us were literally fulfilled: the grain of mustard seed “waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it.” The Lord Jesus said it would be so. And so it came to pass.

Let us learn from this parable never to despair of any work for Christ, because its first beginnings are feeble and small. A single minister in some large neglected town-district, a single missionary amidst myriads of savage heathen, a single reformer in the midst of a fallen and corrupt Church,—each and all of these may seem at first sight utterly unlikely to do any good. To the eye of man, the work may appear too great, and the instrument employed quite unequal to it. Let us never give way to such thoughts. Let us remember the parable before us, and take courage. When the line of duty is plain, we should not begin to count numbers, and confer with flesh and blood. We should believe that one man with the living seed of God’s truth on his side, like Luther or Knox, may turn a nation upside down. If God is with him, none shall stand against him. In spite of men and devils, the seed that he sows shall wax a great tree.

The parable of the leaven is intended to show the *progress of the Gospel in the heart of a believer*.

The first beginnings of the work of grace in a sinner are generally exceedingly small. It is like the mixture of leaven with a lump of dough. A single sentence of a sermon, or a single verse of Holy Scripture, a word of rebuke from a friend, or a casual religious remark overheard, a tract given by a stranger, or a trifling act of kindness received from a Christian,—some one of these things is often the starting-point in the life of a soul. The first actings of the spiritual life are often small in the extreme,—so small, that for a long time they are not known except by him who is the subject of them, and even by him not fully understood. A few serious thoughts and prickings of conscience, a desire to pray really and not formally, a determination to begin reading the Bible in private, a gradual drawing towards means of grace, an increasing interest in the subject of religion, a growing distaste for evil habits and bad companions,—these, or some of them, are often the first symptoms of grace beginning to move the heart of man. They are symptoms which worldly men may not perceive, and ignorant believers may despise, and even old Christians may mistake. Yet they are often the first steps in the mighty business of conversion. They are often the “leaven” of grace working in a heart.

The work of grace once begun in the soul will never stand still. It will gradually “leaven the whole lump.” Like leaven once introduced, it can nev-

er be separated from that with which it is mingled. Little by little it will influence the conscience, the affections, the mind, and the will, until the whole man is affected by its power, and a thorough conversion to God takes place. In some cases no doubt the progress is far quicker than in others. In some cases the result is far more clearly marked and decided than in others. But wherever a real work of the Holy Ghost begins in the heart, the whole character is sooner or later leavened and changed. The tastes of the man are altered. The whole bias of his mind becomes different. "Old things pass away, and all things become new." (2 Cor. v. 17.) The Lord Jesus said that it would be so, and all experience shows that so it is.

Let us learn from this parable never to "despise the day of small things" in religion. (Zech. iv. 10.) The soul must creep before it can walk, and walk before it can run. If we see any symptom of grace beginning in a brother, however feeble, let us thank God, and be hopeful. The leaven of grace once planted in his heart, shall yet leaven the whole lump. "He that begins the work will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. i. 6.)

Let us ask ourselves whether there is any work of grace in our own hearts. Are we resting satisfied with a few vague wishes and convictions? Or do we know anything of a gradual, growing, spreading, increasing, leavening process going on in our inward man? Let nothing short of this content us. The true work of the Holy Ghost will never stand still. It will leaven the whole lump.

NOTES. LUKE XIII. 18-21.

19.—[*Like a grain of mustard seed.*] Some think that the grain of seed here means Christ Himself, who died, and was buried in a garden, and allege in favour of this view, the text, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it beareth much fruit." (John xii. 24.)

I am unable to see this sense in the parable. The words are distinct and plain. It is the "kingdom of God," which is like the seed.

[*Waxed a great tree.*] The growth of the grain of mustard seed into a tree of comparatively great size, ought not to be wondered at, when we remember the rapidity of vegetation in a hot climate. Parkhurst's Lexicon, on the Greek word translated "mustard seed," mentions several facts which prove the correctness of our Lord's language.

[*Fowls of the air lodged, &c.*] It is thought by many that this expression was meant to denote the corruption which crept into the Church of Christ, when it grew into a large body, and was favoured by the powers of this world. The idea may possibly be true, though it seems to me more likely that the circumstance is only mentioned in order to show the size of the tree.

It may be well to remark that there is nothing in this parable to justify the idea that the visible Church shall gradually increase, till the whole world is converted. It is not said that the mustard tree would bear good fruit, and never be cut down. The lesson taught is simply this, that from a small beginning the visible Church of Christ shall become very large.

21.—[*It is like leaven.*] It is thought by many that "leaven," in this parable, was intended by our Lord to mean an evil and corrupt principle, and that the object of the parable was to

describe the silent entrance and rapid growth of corruption and false doctrine in the Church of Christ. In defence of this view it is alleged that the word "leaven" is always used as an emblem of something evil. The doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees, for example, is called "leaven."

I am quite unable to see the correctness of this view.

For one thing, it seems to me very improbable that our Lord would speak two parables in a breath, both beginning with the expression, "the kingdom of God," and compare this kingdom, in one case, with that which is healthy and prosperous, and in the other case, with that which is poisonous and corrupting. To my eyes His object in both parables seems one and the same. Had He meant "evil" when He spoke of leaven, He would surely have said, "whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of the evil one."

For another thing, I can see no force in the objection that "leaven" is generally used as an emblem of that which is evil, and therefore must be so used here. I do not see why the word is to be rigorously tied down to be only an emblem of evil; and why it may not be in this case an emblem of good.

The goat in the 25th of Matthew is an emblem of the wicked: yet the goat in the Old Testament is a clean animal, and appointed to be used in some sacrifices, as well as the sheep. The serpent is generally regarded as an emblem of evil. Our Lord calls the Pharisees "serpents." And yet in another place He says to the disciples, "Be wise as serpents." In short I believe that the same word may be used in one place as a figure of that which is good, and in another as a figure of that which is evil. In some places leaven certainly means "false doctrine." In the passage before us, I believe it means "grace."

Stella supports the view which I have maintained by quotations from Augustine and Gregory.

[*A woman...three measures of meal.*] There are some who see allegorical meanings in the "woman," the number "three," and the "meal." I will only record my own conviction that these meanings were not in our Lord's mind when the parable was spoken. One great truth was intended to be conveyed: that truth was the small beginning of grace in a heart, and the influence which it gradually acquires over the whole character. To this view let us adhere.