

## Van Pernis – Isaiah 58: 9b-12 and Matthew 13: 31-32 Working Exegesis

### I. Getting the Text in View

#### 1. Select the text:

Isaiah 58: 9b-12

Matthew 13: 31-32

#### 2. Place the text in its larger context:

The prophetic voice of Isaiah in Chapter 58 is found in a section of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah entitled *Vindication of the Servant By God* by biblical scholar Christopher Seitz. Seitz writes that Isaiah 58 begins a subsection of *Vindication of the Servant By God* entitled, “God’s Righteous Sentinel Speaks.”<sup>6</sup>

The parable of the mustard seed as told by Jesus in Matthew 13: 31-32 is described as a Kingdom Parable and comes in a section of Matthew in which Jesus is using parable to convey to people the revolutionary aspects of God’s kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

#### 3. Reconsider where the text begins and ends:

a. The lectionary passage in Isaiah 58 comes after the prophet has warned Israel against the false worship practices that they have been practicing. Israel is accused by the prophet of serving their own interests and abandoning God; worshipping and serving—in this case fasting—God is meant to “*loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked cover them.*” [Isaiah 58: 6-7]

b. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ telling of the parable of the mustard seed is completed in its entirety in verses 31-32. The parable fits into the agrarian theme of the preceding parables [*The Parable of the Sower; The Parable of Weeds Among the Wheat—See Matthew 13:1-30*] Jesus employs to convey an understanding of God’s revolutionary kingdom.

### II. Getting Introduced to the Text

#### 1. Establish a reliable translation and basic understanding of the text:

I will be using the NRSV translation of Isaiah 58: 9-12 and Matthew 13:31-32

#### 2. Read the text for basic understanding:

***What is the significance or symbolism of the yoke to which Isaiah claims to be removed in true worship?***

A yoke in the Ancient Near East was used to harness and control animals in the production of crops. The yoke would easily have been easily identified by the audience to which Isaiah was speaking in this capacity—as a means of restraint and control.

However, to speak of the yoke/ accepting the yoke also evoked various meanings—ownership, service, a way of marking property, being subjugated to political leadership or those of a higher economic status, acknowledgment of being under ownership or being under the sovereignty of another, bringing tribute to another—in Ancient Near East culture.

Israel was to wear the yoke of service given them by God. However, Israel had thrown off the yoke of God and was in rebellion—they had accepted the yoke of other gods. Isaiah is calling Israel to take back the yoke of God—to enter into the covenantal relationship with God—and bear the yoke that removed the stain of injustice, oppression, hunger, poverty, shame; Isaiah is calling the people of Israel to take on the yoke that breaks all other yokes—the yoke of God which removes the blight and tarnish of sin. Isaiah is saying to the people of Israel “Remember you are children of God!”

---

<sup>6</sup> Please see Seitz, Christopher R. “Isaiah 40-66.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VIII.*, ed. Leander E. Keck., et. al. Abington Press, Nashville, TN. 1995. p. 325.

<sup>7</sup> Please see Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VIII.*, ed. Leander E. Keck., et. al. Abington Press, Nashville, TN. 1995. p. 113.

The yoke can also represent the cord binding a tefillin—a small scroll upon which the Shema was written—to those who the tefillin as a symbol of their devotion to God. In the Ancient Near East this visible sign of devotion to God set people apart within a culture of polytheist and idolaters. The yoke—the cord and tefillin together—in this light was a symbol of devotion to God and the Jewish faith.<sup>8</sup>

### ***What is meant by “gloom”?***

The NIV translates this v. 10 of Isaiah 58 as follows: *and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday.* From this one can deduce that gloom refers to the dark of night or an environment in which it is difficult to see what lies ahead.

### ***Can a mustard seed produce a tree?***

Mustard, an annual herb, was grown along the Sea of Galilee in the Ancient Near East. The plant, therefore, would be familiar to the people to whom Jesus was speaking when he employed the parable of the mustard seed as recorded in Matthew.

The mustard plant grows in varieties that produce plants ranging in size from 2- 6 feet. In favorable conditions the plant may be able to reach heights of ten feet. The plant has a thin stalk and produces a number of yellow flowers which produce the mustard seeds. The plant, although it can grow to a height of ten feet, does not resemble a tree—the mustard plant stems would not be able to support many birds or their nests.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, Jesus must be using the mustard seed symbolically—it’s size is important to the parable. The importance is placed on the transformation that occurs as the seed grows into a shrub and then a tree. Jesus may represent the seed—the revelation of God’s love in human form—who shares the vision of God’s kingdom, which continues grow and strengthen eventually becoming like a mighty tree providing shelter for people from all times and places. References to this biblical image can be found in Daniel’s prophecy [Daniel 4:10-12] and the John’s revelation [Rev 11:15].

## **III. Attending to the Text**

### **I. Listen attentively to the text:**

#### **I. Questions from the text:**

1. In the plurality of today’s society what would be considered true and false worship?
2. What are *yokes* that quietly remain unseen or under the surface that need to be addressed?
3. What are the *parched places* in our lives? Are these *parched places* talked about?
4. What are the *breaches* of today that Isaiah’s prophetic voice addresses?
5. Are we able to connect with the parable of the mustard seed? If so or if not how can this parable be told in such a way that it falls afresh on those who hear it today?
6. What does it look like for the Kingdom of God to shelter our lives? Do we find safety in the Kingdom of God or are we afraid of it?

#### **II. Important themes to explore:**

*From Isaiah 58: 9-12*

- The removal of the yoke which causes the pointing of fingers and the speak of evil.
- The *parched places* in our lives that need the restorative grace of God.
- That as God’s children we are called by Isaiah “repairers of the breach” and “restorers of the streets to live in”
- A seed as tiny as a mustard seed representing the imperial/mighty tree of God’s Kingdom.
- The contrast of the present lowliness of the kingdom of God— an annual shrub—with its final greatness— a tree which harbors birds of the air and their nests—in the parable of the mustard seed.

---

<sup>8</sup> Please see Tyler, Charles L. “Yoke.” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 6 Si-Z.*, David Noel Freedman, ed., et al. Doubleday Press, New York, NY. 1992. pp. 1026-1027.

<sup>9</sup> Please see Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VIII.*, ed. Leander E. Keck., et. al. Abington Press, Nashville, TN. 1995. p. 309.

#### **IV. Testing What is Heard in the Text**

##### *I. Check the text in commentaries:*

- The prophet Isaiah, in chapter 58, speaks of atonement coming only after the people look beyond themselves—the fasting the people are partaking of does nothing if their focus is only inward and they do not look to the poverty, injustice, oppression, shame and guilt that surrounds them. The purpose of the fast, the purpose of the horn blowing in the atoning day is to usher in a day in which the Lord is honored and the gloom of sin is lifted. This healing comes from an outward focus; the Lord is honored and the gloom of sin—the pointing of fingers and maligning speech; living in a parched land—is lifted when the hungry, the oppressed, the neglected, the poor are taken care of. In doing this the avenue of reconstruction—key as Isaiah is prophesying as the people of Israel have witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem—is opened. The children of God in honoring God become the *rebuilders* ancient ruins and *restorers* of the streets where they live—this new kingdom will reflect the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>
- Some New Testament scholars believe that Jesus in the parable of the mustard seed concludes with the seed growing first into a shrub eventually becoming a mighty tree as a means of showing the meekness by which the Kingdom of God will come. The mustard seed is very small; the mustard plant is an annual plant that could ordinarily be found in the Ancient Near East; the hoped for coming of the kingdom of God is found in a carpenter from Bethlehem...yet the kingdom of God is transformative. The greatness of the tree is only realized through the transformative work of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

#### **V. Moving toward the sermon**

##### *I. State the claim of the text upon the hearers:*

True worship is actualized within our present day lives through seemingly small actions—feeding the hungry, standing with the oppressed, opposing the unjust, stopping the pointing of fingers and malicious words towards others—which God transforms into something bigger than we can possibly imagine.

---

<sup>10</sup> Sawyer, John F. A. “Isaiah Vol. II.” *The Daily Bible Study Series*, John C. L. Gibson, ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. 1986. pp.172-173.

<sup>11</sup> Please see Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew.” *The New Interpreters Bible Vol. VIII.*, ed. Leander E. Keck., et. al. Abington Press, Nashville, TN. 1995. p. 309.