

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **A Study of Scripture Sevens: The Parables of the Kingdom Part 1 - Matthew 13:1-35**

A few years ago now, my youngest son was up to something. I knew he had a secret because his behaviour was subtly different. We were soon to go on our summer holiday and he was making plans. Once we got there all was revealed. He had bought with his pocket money a set of model soldiers and done all the preparation work required. He had kept them hidden from me until grandly revealing them on holiday with all the paints, so that we could spend some quality time together relaxing. We had a great week, painting and chatting together.

As we come to this morning's subject of the seven parables of the kingdom, we too are to be let into a secret. Jesus is about to reveal God's plan for the ages. It would be all too easy to look at the first four of these parables in a dry, academic sort of way. However, what we really need to do is to keep in our hearts and minds the great "Divine excitement" that God felt as He revealed to the disciples all that was in His heart. Matters that were particularly precious to Him were now going to be revealed to mankind for the first time. If it mattered to God, then it ought to excite us to, and lead to, changed behaviour in our lives.

Matthew 13 is one of the great chapters of the Bible, and so it is right that we just set the context, before we look at the details of the first four of the parables this morning. God willing, we shall look at the final three next week. It is interesting that almost always in the Bible where we have a series of seven things brought before us, they fall naturally into a group of four and a group of three, or vice versa.

At the end of Matthew 12, Jesus' mother and brothers had come to Him requesting His attention (Matthew 12:46-50). Jesus had replied that it was no longer earthly relationships that would constitute family but faith that would bring us into relationship with Him (Matthew 12:48-50). Now what was true for Jesus on a personal level was about to be true on a global level also. So we note that at the beginning of Matthew 13, on the same day, "Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea" (Matthew 13:1). This detail is more than just story padding, or Jesus getting a breath of fresh air. Until now, God had been dealing with the house of Israel (Hebrews 8:8). As a landowner, He had been expecting fruit from His vineyard. Now, following their rejection of Jesus, He would go out into all the world, with His word being for the Gentiles also. The picture of sea in the Bible is generally used to represent Gentile mankind in general (Isaiah 9:1). Until this point in time, the faithful Jew would have been expecting the Messiah to return to establish His kingdom upon the earth, with the nation of Israel at its heart and Jerusalem as its capital. The Old Testament prophets had been so clear upon this that it does, in part, at least help to explain why the Jews found it so difficult to recognise that the Man who was humbly born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:8-20), and had no place to call His own while upon earth (Matthew 8:20), was indeed their long promised Messiah. We would do well to learn from their mistake and be very slow in being absolutely certain that we fully understand what God is doing, and acting upon that knowledge. Later on Matthew 13 Jesus will move back into the house as His words are no longer for all to hear but just for His disciples, but that is for next week.

Jesus is about to teach them in a new way, about a new work with a new revelation. In His use of parables, Jesus took the ordinary things of life so that for those who were open hearted and ready to listen, His teaching would be memorable and plain. However, at the same time, for those who had closed hearts whilst they may understand the words themselves the meaning would remain hidden. The spiritual things of God are not to be learned from the text books of mankind, in universities and colleges, but rather from the working of the Holy Spirit, taking the Word of God and applying it to the heart of each one of us who believes in Jesus.

### **Parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9)**

So now let us look at the first of these seven parables. In doing so, it sets the scene for the other six, and in interpreting this parable for the disciples, Jesus shows them how they are to interpret the other parables. As a general rule, there is a major point to the parable, with the main details consistently used to make that point. We are to avoid the mistake of trying to press every detail into meaning something and developing rules from that, for that is not how Jesus interpreted this most famous of parables - the parable of the sower.

“Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty, He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:3-9).

In Matthew 13:19-23 Jesus interprets this parable for us. What mattered here was the kind of ground the seed fell into, for the sower and the seed was the same in each case. In another parable, Jesus had spoken about a landowner who had planted a vineyard expecting it to produce fruit (Matthew 21:33-46). This very much spoke of the way in which God had dealt with Israel during the Old Testament period. Obedience to the law of Moses would produce fruit for God to enjoy. Now, however, Jesus is speaking to the whole multitude, Jew and Gentile alike. His word about the kingdom is sown into all the field. In just the same way that He did not segregate his listeners into Jew and Gentile, so the Gospel is for all the world. Here is the first part of the “mystery” that excited the heart of God. No longer was He going to limit His dealings to one nation, but now all the world could receive His blessing. Let us never find the preaching of the Gospel something that is for others or something that has become stale in our own hearts.

Sadly, some of the good seed fell upon the path and the birds of the air came and snatched it away (Matthew 13:4). Well, that would be a familiar enough picture to his hearers living in an agricultural society. Even in our gardens it is a common enough event. The devil is very busy countering the working of God, and is all too ready to snatch away the word of God from hardened hearts. Perhaps, like me, you have been to a Gospel event when the Gospel has been preached and you have thought to yourself, “How can anyone not respond to that?” Well, God has something to say to everyone, but not everyone has prepared their hearts to listen. God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9); there was no shortage of seed, but not everyone wants to be saved, by accepting what His word has to say. None will be lost except by their own choosing (see John 17:12).

Next we come to the stony ground (Matthew 13:5). For some are happy to accept the Gospel, but only while the good times roll. As soon as difficulties come into their lives, as they surely will, they give up. Some even preach a prosperity Gospel that encourages us to think that things will go well for us the more we accept His word. Such a shallow commitment is soon exposed by the heat of daily problems.

Then we have the seed that fell among the thorns (Matthew 13:7). Sometimes the Gospel may be accepted, but there is so much rubbish carried over from the life before salvation, that there is only poor growth. Jesus identified the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches in particular. Fundamentally, the Gospel reveals to us the reality of the world to come. When we truly understand this, then we are able to live in this world wisely. However, too many still cannot take their eyes off this present world and so become stunted in their spiritual growth and unfruitful.

Finally, some seed fell into ground that had been well prepared and produced fruit for God. In this Gospel, the eye of the tax collector identifies the best returns first – a hundred, sixty, thirty - fold. In Mark’s Gospel, possibly reflecting the recollections of Peter who knew what it was to fail, the order is reversed (Mark 4:1-9). In Luke, who presents the perfect Man only a hundred fold return is mentioned, for all that the Lord did was wholly for God (Luke 8:4-8). The challenge for us today, whether in hearing the Gospel, or whether in hearing His word, is what sort of heart do I have? We do need to prepare ourselves to hear His word, by arriving a few minutes early before His word is considered to be still and to empty our minds of the myriad things that have been occupying our thoughts. We need to confess our sins to Him and truly want to hear His voice. Having done so, then His word will produce its fruit. It is worth just pointing out that it is our responsibility to ensure the “quality of ground” is good. The fruitfulness that follows is not our responsibility but is a product of the seed sown. We should not take upon ourselves the false responsibility of how fruitful our service is.

### **Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30)**

Let us now move on to our second parable. “Another parable He put forth to them, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?” He said to them, “An enemy has done this.” The servants said to him, “Do you want us then to go and gather them up?” But he said, “No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”” Matthew 13:24-30.

The great message of this second parable of the kingdom is that of mixture. Note that when Jesus again explains this parable, He explicitly states that the field is the world, rather than the church. You see, the true church, His Body, is only ever made up of those who have truly been saved. However, the kingdom of heaven is a much broader kingdom than the church. It covers everywhere under His authority, including the church. Now as God’s word has gone out

throughout the whole world it has produced a harvest of true fruit for Him, in the lives of those who have genuinely believed. These individuals are described as the wheat. However, wherever God is busy the devil is also busy, counterfeiting the true. So amongst what is right, the tares (darnel) springs up. At first, the two plants look very similar, and it is only when the head begins to sprout that the two plants can be distinguished. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had warned, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16, 20). So it is that at the end of this period of time that has been characterised by the preaching of the Christian Gospel, the world will be in a state of great mixture. We ought not to think that, with time, the entire world will be saved by the Gospel. This is simply not taught in the Bible. Quite the opposite! But it is not our responsibility to decide who is saved and who is not. That is for God to know, although the kind of fruit apparent in their lives may well be a good guide. Certainly from the Reformation period onwards, through the time when Zwingli and others tried to make the church the governing authority on earth, and through the Puritan attempts to enforce a Christian state, mankind has tried to weed out what is false, with disastrous consequences. The plain statement of this parable is that a mixture of what is true and what is false will continue until His return, at which point He will ensure that what is false is destroyed, whilst all that is true is gathered to Himself. What a wonderful experience that will be!

But as we saw at the beginning of this section, Jesus is speaking here about the kingdom of Heaven, and not the church. There is a proper role for the elders to exercise proper discipline within the church. An unbeliever has no place remembering Him in communion, or taking places of authority within the church. History bears appalling record to the times when, for political reasons, heads of state have imposed unbelievers into positions of authority within the church, or have dictated church doctrine. It is the responsibility of the church to reach out to save the lost, but until saved, a person has no place within the church.

### **Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32)**

Next we come to the parable of the mustard seed, and the lesson to be learned is that of great growth. "Another parable He put forth to them, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches'" (Matthew 13:31-32).

In this parable we have a very definite sowing of a single seed. That seed grows until it becomes a great tree giving shelter for the birds of the air. We have here an accurate picture of what has happened in Christendom, from Pentecost and the preaching of the Gospel in Jerusalem at its beginning, through the ages right up to the present day. When Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire by Constantine in the fourth century, the church moved from a period of persecution to one of rapid growth covering the whole empire. But as it did so, it incorporated into itself all sort of pagan practices and rituals, dressing them up as "Christian", as portrayed by the birds finding shelter within the tree. Undoubtedly, the diminishing persecution that followed Constantine's declaration was a good thing, but at the same time the church lost its unique character of separation from the world. The notion that church and state should act as one, that church attendance should be mandatory, the celebration of all sorts of festivals, just to give three examples, has led to a compromised church. The institution of the church has grown so big that it is now one of the richest and most powerful institutions in many countries across the world, and yet its influence has not always been for good, as the devil has put his people into it (the birds of the air), corrupting absolutely. At the beginning, the church behaved with "simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people" (Acts 2:46-47). It is this simplicity that we need to rediscover in today's society. We need to clearly distinguish between the true Church of God, and Christendom, or that which shelters under the umbrella of Christianity. And in seeking to do good in this world, we need to avoid the pitfall of wanting to be big to exert political or financial influence on those in authority. By simply preaching the Gospel in actions and words we will exert the influence that God desires from those who are truly His.

### **The Parable of the Leaven (Matthew 13:33-34)**

Finally we come to the fourth of the public parables in Matthew 13 - the parable of the leaven. "Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them" (Matthew 13:33-34).

In this parable we see the corrupting influence that sin will have upon the kingdom. Consistently in the Bible, leaven is used as a picture of sin, and so it ought to be used here. We should not suddenly see in it a picture of the Gospel, spreading throughout the world, to the salvation of all. In the celebration of the Passover, leaven was to be removed even from the house itself, or an individual was contaminated and would be cut off from the rest of the company (Exodus 12:15, 19). It was to be removed from the majority of the offerings (Leviticus 2:11) as these were to be a picture of the perfect work of the Lord Jesus. Paul similarly speaks of it in a negative way, urging its removal (1 Corinthians 5:6-9; Galatians 5:9). Sin will always corrupt that which is good, in the same way that one drop of ink will turn a whole glass of pure water murky. What Jesus is warning about in this parable then, is the fact that sin would

over time corrupt the purity and witness of the kingdom of heaven, during this age. No wonder Ananias and Sapphira were made such an example of in Acts 5. Sadly today, even within the church we see the awful effect of unjudged sin. Financial corruption, moral decay, child abuse are all things that have now characterised parts of the church. This is simply not right, and should be a cause of real repentance amongst those who truly love the Lord Jesus. It is no good our pointing the finger and saying that we are better than they, for we are all a part of that which so dishonours His name today. And what is true for Christendom as a whole is also true of the individual believer. We need to guard jealously what goes into our eyes and mouths and hearts and minds. For a little sin here, left unconfessed and unjudged will soon corrupt the whole of our lives. As a part of our daily experience with Jesus, there need to be a time we come to Him to confess our sin. We will always find Him faithful and just, ready to forgive us (1 John 1:9), but we then need to make every effort to keep ourselves pure. Pure in what we do, pure in what we say, pure in what we believe, pure in what we think. What a challenge for us as individuals, as we want to live for Him!

We have seen, this morning, in these four parables the way in which Jesus was introducing to His disciples and the crowds that had gathered to listen to Him, how He would no longer confine His blessing to the one nation - Israel. Soon, through the preaching of the word, the whole world would have the opportunity to be saved. The church would grow outwardly into a great organisation, but in doing so would lose its genuine purity and reality. Warning was given that the devil would come in and through his counterfeiting ways would try to undermine the true work of God. Warning was also given that due to the presence of sin, the outward profession of Christianity would be corrupted and spoilt.

It is at this stage that Jesus goes back into the house, having sent the multitudes away (Matthew 13:36). The remaining three parables of Matthew 13 were for His disciples' ears only. We need to remember that though we may live in a day when the outward form of Christendom has been ruined, and the united testimony to His name destroyed, yet still the Lord would always have something to say to those who are real and remain true to His name. That most important message we shall come to next week, God willing.

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