

Matthew's Gospel – 13:31-58

More Kingdom Parables

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Matthew chapter 13 begins with The Parable of the Sower (vv.1-9). Then, in verse 10, the disciples of Jesus ask Him why He spoke in parables to the multitudes of people who came to listen to Him. He explained that His parables were a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. And the Lord tells the disciples that they were chosen to see and hear the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (vv.10-17). Then he explains the meaning of the Parable of the Sower in (vv.18-23). Straight afterwards, Jesus tells them the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (vv.24-30).

Today we will look at more of the Kingdom parables of Jesus Christ in Matthew's Gospel chapter 13, from verse 31-52, and then go to the end of the chapter (v.58). This section of Matthew 13 covers the following:

- The Parable of the Mustard Seed (vv. 31-32).
- The Parable of the Leaven (v.33).
- The Lord's comments on Parables (vv.34-35).
- The Lord's explanation of the Parable of the Tares (vv.36-43).
- The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (v.44).
- The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price (vv.45-46).
- The Parable of the Dragnet (vv.47-50).
- The Lord asks His disciples if they understand the Parables (vv.51-52).
- Jesus is rejected at Nazareth (vv.53-58).

The Kingdom of Heaven

Before we plunge into the detail of these subjects, we need to consider the term "the Kingdom of Heaven." This is a New Testament term found only in the Gospel of Matthew, where it is used over 30 times. The term "The Kingdom of God" is used twice as often throughout the Gospels and Acts and in many of Paul's letters.

The Kingdom of Heaven can be linked to Daniel's words to Nebuchadnezzar:

"And inasmuch as they gave the command to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be assured to you, after you come to know that Heaven rules" (Daniel 4:26).

Nebuchadnezzar had to learn:

"That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses" (v.32).

And it is Nebuchadnezzar who declares God's Kingdom to be "an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation" (v.34).

The timing of this declaration is important. The northern Kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity in Assyria, and their exile was completed under Nebuchadnezzar when he took Judah into captivity into Babylon. A nation which had begun in captivity and been redeemed from it went back into slavery, and the nation was scattered. It was the start of the period the Lord refers to as "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). This term describes the domination of the Gentiles over the nation of Israel. The exile did end, and the people returned, but when the Lord "came to His own", it was to a nation ruled by Rome. By AD 70, Jerusalem was destroyed, and the state of Israel ceased to exist until 1948.

God had said to Moses at the beginning of Exodus 25:

"Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (v.8).

And when this sanctuary, the tabernacle, was finished, "the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34).

Later, King David prepared the materials so his son Solomon could build a temple and:

"The glory of the Lord filled the temple" (2 Chronicles 7:1).

Ezekiel records the words of God concerning the temple:

"Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever" (43:7).

But because the nation became idolatrous and turned its back on Jehovah, God's glory departed from the temple (Ezekiel 10:18). This happened before Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and Judah. And although a new temple was built in Ezra's day, the Shekinah glory (the manifestation of the Presence of God) did not descend into it.

Daniel foretold the coming of a kingdom that would supersede all the kingdoms of the earth. In character, John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, announced the Kingdom of Heaven was "at hand", and so did Jesus (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). The King, Jesus Christ, not only was present but also declared the Kingdom of God had come. But the King was rejected by His own people and crucified at Calvary. He was raised, not to be enthroned on earth, but to ascend to the throne of heaven. He is building His Church and awaits the day He will return to reign in righteousness over the world. The "Kingdom of Heaven" refers to the rule God has set up in heaven, particularly after Christ returned to heaven until His future Millennium reign. The Kingdom of God covers some of the same detail, but also describes the spiritual features which characterise the Kingdom of God and its people.

In The Parable of the Sower (vv.1-9), we see the publishing of the Gospel and the different ways it is received. Then Christ teaches us about the purpose and blessing of His parables in verses 10-17. Afterwards, the Lord explains the Parable of the Sower in verses 18-23. Then he tells the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares and describes the problems that afflict the Kingdom of Heaven (vv.24-30). So, let's systematically go through the subjects presented in the second half of Matthew 13, beginning with:

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (vv.31-32)

“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.””

This parable and the one following it have been interpreted in different ways. It is clear that the Lord tells the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven before He explains the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. These shorter parables detail the period described in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

As mentioned earlier, the term “Kingdom of Heaven” is used exclusively by Matthew in his Gospel. Other Gospel writers refer to the Kingdom of God. Matthew wrote of Christ as the Messiah-King who was rejected by the nation and crucified. They asserted they had no King but Caesar. The resurrected Lord did not reappear to the nation, only to His disciples before He ascended in glory to heaven, having promised to return. When the Holy Spirit descended and Christ’s Church was born, the apostles and disciples began to spread the Gospel in fulfilment of the Lord’s words at the beginning of Acts:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Gospel spread swiftly, and persecution increased its advancement instead of halting its progress. The most significant opponent of the Gospel, Saul of Tarsus, was transformed by Christ into the Apostle Paul and became its leading witness.

But even in the days of the apostles, a battle raged between the true teachings of Christ and opposing forces external to Christianity, which became increasingly evident within Christian churches. Paul warns the Ephesian elders of these dangers in Acts 20:29-31:

“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

False teaching and practice increased, and the purity of the Church was diluted. The Parable of the Wheat and Tares explains that the counterfeit grew alongside the true disciples of Christ. Tares are weeds that can grow alongside wheat and, to the untrained eye, look similar. The Lord was painting a picture of the Church being infiltrated by false disciples. A spiritual conflict developed within what Matthew describes as the Kingdom of Heaven. It was a conflict between true Christianity and lifeless religion. This mixture is Christendom. Only Christ will resolve this state of affairs in the divine judgement He foretells at the end of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares:

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of 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 13:30).

In the New Testament Christ and His apostles warned of this development. Christianity suffered a prolonged period of persecution under the Roman Empire. But things changed when Constantine the Great embraced the Christian faith. Consequently, the Church ceased following Christ in lowliness and simplicity and in witnessing to the world. Instead it became worldly, organised, corrupted and powerful. It became a power which could set up and remove kings, and trade in the souls of men. Dr Campbell Morgan described this event as “the darkest day that dawned in all the history of the Church.” But the Lord Himself had prophesied this outcome.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed does not describe the positive advancement of Christ’s Church, but an external system of religion that adopted the Jewish approach to temple worship and priesthood, and controlled peoples' lives with damaging effects. The “birds of the air” do not signify what is pure and good, but the harbouring and protection of evil influences. And this character was clearly demonstrated for centuries. This period of history has been linked to the prophetic words spoken to the church at Pergamos in Revelation 2:

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells”’” (Revelation 2:12-13).

The Parable of the Leaven

The Mustard Seed provides a vivid outward picture of Christendom. However, the Parable of the Leaven in verse 33 illustrates its internal corruption:

“The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

Leaven is almost invariably used to portray the insidiousness of evil. It has a subtle and cumulative effect. It develops very gradually, becoming well-established before its danger is apparent. It entraps by being enticing and seductive and counterfeiting the truth to destroy it. The Lord was describing the process of the leavening of those professing to be in the Kingdom of heaven (the tares).

We read of the Lord’s warning against “the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” in Matthew 16 verses 6 and 11 and described as the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees in verse 12. Mark refers to the Lord’s warning:

“Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15).

These were the dangers of religious and moral hypocrisy (the leaven of the Pharisees); rationalism and the denial of the resurrection (the leaven of the Sadducees); and worldliness and immorality (the leaven of Herod). Leaven describes the hidden activity of false teaching under the banners of religion, intellect, and self-will which led to the denial and distortion of the truth in order to control and benefit from Christendom as a religious system. To view these parables as positive illustrations of spiritual growth is to misunderstand the content and context of the teaching of Christ.

The Lord's comments on Parables (vv.34-35)

“All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.””

The Lord spoke to the multitude in parables. Superficial listeners quickly forgot or were put off by the complexity of the illustrations. But parables provoke faith and the desire to understand the mind of God. It was given to the apostles to understand the illustrations Christ used to describe things to come. After the resurrection and ascension of Christ it was part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to teach the apostles and future Christians of things to come:

“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come” (John 16:13).

The Lord's explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (vv. 36-43)

The Lord answers the questions that faith wants to understand. We see this in His explanation of The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares:

“Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.” He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!””

After Jesus sent the multitude away, He went into a house with His disciples, and they asked Him to unfold the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. He explains that the Sower is an illustration of Himself as the Son of Man and that the field is a picture of the world. The good seed represents those who have a living faith in Him, and the tares are described as the sons of the Devil. The enemy places his disciples amongst Christ's people. The harvest portrays a coming day of judgement. The Lord directs His angels to remove everything that is in opposition to His kingdom. This marks the day when Jesus, as King of kings and Lord of lords, reigns over this world in righteousness.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price (vv.44-46)

We next come to two small but beautifully similar parables.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

These two parables are also interpreted in different ways. The usual interpretation is to view the man and merchant as seekers, searchers, finders, and purchasers, of the treasure and the pearl, representing people seeking and finding the Kingdom of Heaven. It implies giving up everything for Christ. However, the Gospel is not the story of us finding God, but of God, through Jesus Christ, finding us. We were lost, and Christ gave everything to find us:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

We know from the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares that the field represents the world. How could we buy the world? Christ, as Creator, made the world. As the Redeemer, He bought the world. It belongs to Him.

The treasure is not described in detail. But in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was represented by the jewels on the shoulders and over the heart of Aaron, the first High Priest. In the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, God describes the godly remnant as “My jewels”, which literally means “special treasure”:

“Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. “They shall be Mine,” says the LORD of hosts, “On the day that I make them My jewels”” (Malachi 3:16-17).

Thus, the treasure has been related to the nation of Israel, which I can appreciate, given the context of the Scriptures quoted. But I like to think the treasure illustrates the value of every child of God that was once lost in a dark world but has been found. We can say, like the apostle Paul:

“Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

The pearl was also a jewel, but a single one. Pearls are created through suffering. All the redeemed will only be in heaven because Christ died for us. The many redeemed form a single body:

“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

We are living stones in the Spiritual House, the Church:

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

At the cross, both these aspects – the individual and the corporate – are seen. In the penitent dying thief, we see one lost soul found by the Saviour, as the Saviour is dying for the whole world:

“The Son of God who loved me” (Galatians 2:20).

In the spear which pierced the side of the Saviour, we are reminded of the day when,

“The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:21-22).

There is a beautiful hymn that has the words:

Thy brethren, Lord, Thine own and one with Thee,
Were in Thy heart when dying on the tree;
Thy church complete and in Thy beauty dressed ---
The day of God and love divine at rest.

H.F. Nunnerley (1873 -1953).

We can disagree over the precise meaning of the parables, but it is challenging to overlook the beautiful reminders of the love and sacrifice of Christ for each of us and for the whole Church.

The Parable of the Dragnet (vv. 47-50)

The final parable in Matthew 13 is The Parable of the Dragnet.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

This is a vivid picture of how the Gospel, like a dragnet, draws those who, through grace, possess eternal life and also those who only profess it. People are attracted to the outward forms of Christianity without ever knowing the Saviour. Christianity is not a religion. It is faith in the living Christ. As Paul wrote:

“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God”
(Galatians 2:20).

The outward trappings of Christendom are man-made accretions added down the centuries. Moreover, within Christendom today, voices deny Christ’s virgin birth, miracles, atoning death, resurrection, and return. But:

“The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Timothy 2:19).

And the Bible teaches us that all judgment has been placed into the hands of God the Son:

“For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22).

The Person who was judged by the world is the One who will perfectly judge the world.

The Lord asks His disciples if they understand the Parables (vv.51-52)

“Jesus said to them, “Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.””

The Book of Hebrews tells us:

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

And Paul, coming to the end of his life of service, reminds Timothy that:

“From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

Both Paul and Timothy must have read the Old Testament Scriptures repeatedly. But it was only when they came to Christ that they began to understand God’s revelation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

It is interesting, in Matthew 13:52, that Jesus likens the enlightened scribe to a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old. It conveys someone who possesses, and values, treasures accumulated over a lifetime. These treasures were not hidden away but enjoyed personally and shared with others. The order in which they are presented is striking: “new and old” treasure. The words remind me of the Old and New Testaments. Paul writes with sadness to the church in Corinth about his people, the Jews. He describes them as having a veil over their minds and hearts when they read the Old Testament (2 Corinthians 3:12-15). But then he writes:

“Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (vv.16-18).

This was the experience the apostle had. Christ lifted the veil from his eyes to see the Saviour’s blazing glory. The Saviour unfolds and fulfils the meaning of the Old Testament. This is beautifully described in Luke 24:

“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (v. 27).

New and old treasure also conveys the application of the word of God to our lives.

The Lord told His disciples that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, would guide them “into all truth” (John 16:13). This truth is contained in all the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16). Unfortunately, there are constant attempts today to redefine truth to fit in with selfish preferences. This is not new. When faced with Jesus, “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6), Pilate dismissively said to Him, “What is truth?” (18:38). He then went on knowingly to subject himself to the force of lies and expediency to crucify the Saviour and expose the corruption of the human heart.

We thank God for His word and indwelling Spirit, which constantly reminds us of the truth “in Jesus.” This ancient truth is timeless and applied with freshness and power to our daily lives, enabling us to:

“Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:20-24).

And with burning hearts share the new and old treasure Christ teaches us on the journey of faith.

Matthew ends with:

The rejection of the Lord at Nazareth (vv. 53-58)

“Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?” So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and in his own house.” Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”

Astonishingly, it was in one of the most despised towns in Israel that the Saviour was Himself despised - in Nazareth, where He grew up. The seeds of rejection began in Galilee, where Jesus lived as a humble carpenter and where His ministry began. But Christ was never diminished or ashamed of His title, “Jesus of Nazareth.” It was written above His head when He died for us on the cross. It was the name declared to Paul when He asked the Lord of Glory, “Who are You Lord?” The Saviour answered:

“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8).

The persecution has never ceased to be executed, the Gospel has never ceased to be preached, the Church has never ceased to grow, and the hope of Christ’s return burns as brightly as ever.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on More Kingdom parables, Matthew 13:31-58, Talk number T1309.

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