

The Parables to the Disciples
Matthew 13:36-52
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Matthew 13 contains a series of eight parables, each involving truth regarding the kingdom of heaven. The reason that Jesus taught in parables was to grant understanding about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to some, while hiding this from those who were against Him (Matthew 13:11-13).

The first four parables of Matthew 13 (the parable of the sower, the parable of the tares, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven) are all spoken by Jesus to the crowds. In Matthew 13:36, Jesus, "*left the crowds and went into the house.*" The remaining four parables are then addressed to the disciples, after the explanation of the parable of the tares.

The parable of the tares explained (13:36-43)

After Jesus left the boat where He spoke parables to the crowds, He re-entered the house in Capernaum that He exited in Matthew 13:1. In this house, the disciples asked Him to explain the parable of the tares. The most evident difference between the disciples and the crowds is that the disciples sought greater understanding about His teaching, whereas the crowds did not. This greater interest was part of the reason why it had been granted to them to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. God not only enables us to understand, He moves us to be interested in learning.

His explanation of the parable of the tares begins by identifying who the people in the story represent. "*The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels*" (Matthew 13:37-39). Therefore, the good seed was sown by Jesus and the weeds were sown by the devil.

Contrary to the usual misconception, Jesus' explanation explicitly identifies the field where the tares were sown as the world, not the church. The tares are the sons of the evil one that exist alongside the sons of the kingdom in the world. This implies the sons of the kingdom are not relationally removed from the sons of the evil one, particularly since this gospel ends with Jesus sending His disciples into the world. This is the plan of God in the church age and stands in contrast to the Jewish separation from the Gentiles.

Most of this explanation of the parable of the tares involves the judgment of the sons of the evil one. This is obviously an important element of the parable where the angels, portrayed by the reapers, gather the unbelievers. Just as reapers gather tares to burn them at the harvest, so the angels will gather the sons of the evil one at the end of the age. The end of the age is what Jesus describes in the Olivet Discourse (cf. Matthew 24:3).

At the end of the age, the coming of the Son of Man will be like the days of Noah where the unbelievers will be taken away into judgment, with only righteous remaining (Matthew 24:36-41). This is in stark contrast to the rapture, where it is the true believers who will be taken up with the Lord. *“Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord”* (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and *“I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also”* (John 14:2-3). Thus we see clear evidence that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ are two different events in the future.

At the second coming of Christ, the sons of the evil one will be taken into eternal judgment and *“Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father”* (13:43, including an allusion to Daniel 12:3). This judgment will be described later as the judgment of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Those who endure through the seven years of tribulation will remain on earth when the Lord establishes the glorious millennial kingdom on the earth.

The parable of the hidden treasure (13:44)

The parable of the hidden treasure tells the story of a man who discovers a treasure hidden in a field and then hides it again in order to sell all he has to purchase the land and gain the treasure. It appears that the man stumbled upon this treasure accidentally and then planned how to gain it. There is no engagement upon the ethics of the story, only upon the value of the treasure.

The willingness of the man to sell all that he possessed in order to buy the field points to the value of the treasure and the sacrifice of the man. A few interpreters view the man as representing Jesus, who sacrificed His own life. However, this is inconsistent with each of the other parables in Matthew 13 that speak about the disciples of Jesus. It is far better to view this man as representative of a wise man who perceives the value of the kingdom and is willing to give all that he has to obtain it.

The parable of the pearl of great value (13:45-46)

The parable of the pearl of great value describes a merchant who sells all that he has in order to purchase a pearl of great value. Like with the last two parables to the crowds, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven, these first two parables to the disciples have great similarities. Both the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl of great value depict a man willing to sell everything he has in order to acquire it.

The primary difference between these two parables is that the parable of the hidden treasure has the man find the treasure accidentally, while the parable of the pearl of great value has the man seeking after fine pearls. During the time of Christ, there were people who were seeking the kingdom and looking for the Expected One (cf. the magi from the east in Matthew 2:2 and John the Baptist in Matthew 11:3). There were also many who were not actively seeking the Messiah but whom Jesus found and called to follow Him (cf. the first disciples in Matthew 4:18-22).

Some interpreters believe the treasure hidden in the field represents Israel and the costly pearl, taken from the sea, represents the Gentiles. Not only does this stretch the text, but it ignores that both are what *“the kingdom of heaven is like.”* The kingdom of heaven is like the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value, in that it is worth more than what anyone possesses.

For both those who were seeking the Messiah and those who happened upon the Messiah, the kingdom of heaven is worth everything that anyone has. This perspective of value is the result of faith, not the result of our good works. Jesus is not teaching that in order to receive the kingdom of heaven, one must pay everything he owns. Rather, this story illustrates the truth of His teaching: *“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Matthew 16:26). *“So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”* (Luke 14:33).

This is what the disciples did when they responded to the call of Jesus. *“Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him”* (Matthew 4:22). This is in contrast to the rich young ruler who sought to hang on to his possessions (Matthew 19:21-22). Those who, by faith, value the King and His kingdom more than anything else will be greatly rewarded, *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life”* (Matthew 19:29).

The parable of the dragnet (13:47-50)

The parable of the dragnet is similar to the parable of the tares. In both parables, there is the good and the bad that exist together. In this parable, it is fish of every kind, rather than plants. Also like the parable of the tares, there is an explanation of the destiny of future judgment upon the unrighteous.

This net would be similar to what the disciples had used for their fishing business. It would be a large net with weights on the bottom and floats on the top that could catch a great many fish. It would be so large that two boats could be used to manage it as it swept a lake to drag fish onto the shore. Once upon the shore, the fish would be separated and that which could be sold would be packaged into containers.

This imagery of the fishing business conveys the separation of the righteous believers in Christ from the unrighteous unbelievers in the judgment. Similar to the explanation of the parable of the tares, the good fish remain and the bad fish are thrown away. Jesus used this analogy to describe the judgment at the end of the age. As in Matthew 13:41-42, the angels take the active role in the judgment, with the same words used, “*will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 13:50; cf. 13:42). However, unlike the parable of the tares, here the angels are involved in the task of separating the wicked out from the righteous.

The parable of the homeowner (13:51-52)

The last of the eight parables of Matthew 13 is the parable of the homeowner, where a scribe who has been training for the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a house, bringing out from his possessions what is both old and new. Some have overlooked this parable since it follows Jesus’ question to the disciples and because this parable does not describe what the kingdom of heaven is like, but rather what a trained scribe is like. Yet it clearly uses the parabolic style of using a narrative analogy in order to make a spiritual point.

This parable follows Jesus’ question to His disciples, “*have you understood all these things?*” (Matthew 13:51), to which they reply that they do understand. Therefore, if they understand what Jesus had taught them about the kingdom of heaven, they are then like the scribe who had been trained for the kingdom of heaven.

If a scribe had been trained for the kingdom of heaven, then he, like the homeowner, would be able to bring *“out of his treasure things new and old.”* This treasure of the homeowner therefore represents the treasure that a trained scribe has. The knowledge that the disciples gained is a treasure that our Lord has entrusted to them. Likewise, the knowledge that we now possess regarding the kingdom of heaven is also a treasure of great value that we have a responsibility for.

The treasure contains both things new and old. The understanding of the kingdom of heaven involves both things that are new and things that are old. The things that are new are the additional revelation of the aspects of the kingdom that Jesus had revealed to them. The things that are old are the revelation of the kingdom that they had already understood through revelation of God in the Old Testament. The new revelation did not replace the old, it enhanced and supplemented the prior revelation.

This reflects Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:17, *“do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”* The truths about the kingdom of heaven that were revealed by the prophets of the Old Testament remain a part of any good teaching about the future. The primary reason for this is that the promised kingdom was made unconditionally by God, beginning with His promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

Aspects of the kingdom as revealed in the Old Testament include:

- It is a part of our salvation (Isaiah 52:7-10)
- It will be holy (Ezekiel 28:25; Zechariah 14:20)
- Jesus will rule with justice (Isaiah 32:5; Malachi 3:18)
- Jesus will bring peace to earth (Isaiah 9:7; Micah 4:3-5)
- It will bless the land (Psalm 72:16; Isaiah 4:2; Ezekiel 36:4-11)
- It will bless the climate (Isaiah 30:23-20; Ezekiel 34:26; Joel 2:21-24)
- It will bless the animals (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:25; Hosea 2:18)
- It will eradicate disease (Isaiah 33:24; 35:5-6; 61:1-2; 65:20; Malachi 1:8)

These truths are just some of the literal promises yet to be fulfilled as we await the kingdom of heaven when Jesus returns. The Old Testament teaching of the kingdom has not been fulfilled by the church through a spiritualization of these promises. The Old Testament promises fulfilled in the New Testament by Christ’s first coming were done so literally and we ought to expect the Lord to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies in the same manner, by interpreting these promises as stated, without spiritualizing them away.

The new things that a trained scribe will bring out of his treasure will include the teaching of Jesus from the parables of Matthew 13, just as they professed their understanding of this teaching in Matthew 13:51. Every true disciple of Christ must become like a trained scribe, for as we understand the truth of the kingdom of heaven, we have a responsibility to communicate this to others. *“What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops”* (Matthew 10:27; cf. Matthew 28:19; Hebrews 5:12).

In the parable of the sower, the disciples learned that there will be different responses to the message of the kingdom of heaven. Some of those who appear to respond with acceptance of the message of the kingdom will not bear fruit due to either afflictions and persecution, or due to the worries of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. This temporary response of people to the word of God remains difficult for us to keep in mind as we minister the word to the world.

In the parable of the tares, the disciples learned that the sons of the kingdom will exist among the sons of the evil one. We have a responsibility to trust the future judgment that is coming to the unrighteous and not seek to bring this judgment ourselves, lest we wrongly judge the true believers. This temptation to condemn unbelievers remains difficult for us to resist as we minister the word of God. *“Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.”* (James 5:7-9).

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven picture the growth of the kingdom of heaven. Even though the participants were only a few followers of Jesus, they will grow into a very large number of true sons of the kingdom. This growth will take place consistently over time, in a way that is more organic than organizational. The tendency to evaluate success based upon the numbers of people remains a plague in Christian ministry. We can give much attention to size that may have little to do with the substance of the kingdom of heaven. Organizational growth may not truly reflect spiritual growth. Furthermore, tactics employed in the pursuit of numerical growth not only place the focus on the efforts of man rather than the sovereign work of God, they may actually further the growth of the tares among wheat. *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value involve the significance of the value of the kingdom of heaven. When a person esteems something to be of great value, they are willing to give up everything to acquire it because they consider what will be gained to far outweigh whatever the cost may be. In the words of Jim Elliot, the famous missionary to Ecuador, echoing the teaching of Jesus from Matthew 16:26, “he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” We can come to take the kingdom of heaven for granted, focusing our attention on the things of earth at the expense of the things of heaven. *“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal”* (2 Corinthians 4:18).

The final two parables of Matthew 13 speak to the responsibility of Christ’s disciples. In the parable of the dragnet, God uses His people to cast a wide net for all kinds of fish. As the fish are gathered without distinction, the final judgment will reveal the good and the bad fish. The kingdom of heaven will deliver the sons of the kingdom into glory and deliver the sons of the evil into eternal destruction. We can lose sight of our responsibility to the gospel that provides this life saving message that changes lives for eternity. The parable of the homeowner exhorts the disciples to be equipped to share the good news of the kingdom of heaven. Our message to the people of this world is what Jesus sent out His disciples with in Matthew 10:7, *“the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* We are called to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

Conclusion

The teaching of the kingdom of heaven abounds in Matthew 13. We must never neglect the centrality of the kingdom in our Christian life. It is the destiny of all true believers in Christ. We are sons of the kingdom through faith in Christ alone, and as such we have the responsibility to convey the truth of the kingdom to others. In a sense, Jesus replaced the Jewish scribes who were opposing Him with the “trained scribes” of the parable of the homeowner, that is, His disciples. May we embrace the truth of the kingdom of heaven in such a manner that we are eager to proclaim it to others.