

Sermon Series is compiled by GCI ministry developer Ted Johnston to aid personal Bible study and sermon and Bible Study preparation. Each issue is part of a series that covers an entire book of the Bible (NIV translation). **This issue continues the series in Matthew**, providing a synthesis of these commentaries: *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment* by Robert Capon, *New Bible Commentary* by RT France, and *Bible Knowledge Commentary* by Louis Barbieri. Due to the nature of this synthesis, direct quotes are not attributed. To obtain back issues or to unsubscribe, email Ted.Johnston@gci.org. For a blog about the Trinitarian, incarnational theology that undergirds this publication, go to <http://thesurprisinggodblog.wcg.org/>.

Sermon Series: Matthew #13

Jesus' kingdom parables

(Mat 13:1-52)

Introduction

In chapter 12, though Jesus had been authenticating his kingdom authority through miracles, great opposition arose. So now Jesus shifts tactics. He begins to teach about the kingdom using *parables*. The ones recorded in chapter 13 express two themes: 1) The paradoxical (mysterious) nature and growth of the kingdom (which explains why different people react so differently). 2) The radical trust in Jesus that characterizes his disciples (the citizens of the kingdom). These themes fit Matthew's purpose in writing this book, namely to exhort and encourage Jewish-Christian churches whose trust in Jesus is waning in the face of opposition. Matthew's use of these parables suggests that they (like all of Matthew's gospel) apply to the church in all times. Indeed, we all are called to trust in Jesus, following him as his disciples. It is in following Jesus that we deeply experience and thus fully enjoy the presence of the kingdom (and its king, Jesus) in our midst.

Before we proceed, let's note that parables often are wrongly viewed as mere stories. But the Greek word *parabole* conveys the sense of *mysterious sayings*. Parables are sort of like cartoons – they have a deep meaning that lies under the surface, so look deeply, and don't worry about trying to find meaning in every little detail. Because this is so, the same parable *enlightens* some, yet leaves others in the dark. This theme of *enlightenment* is key in this chapter, particularly in vv10-17, where the enlightenment of the disciples is contrasted with the blindness of the unresponsive crowds.

1. The parable of the sower (13:1-9, 18-23)

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop-- a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."

... 18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. 22 The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. 23 But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

When we carefully examine this parable in the light of the gospel, we understand its characters as follows: The *farmer* who sows the seed is God the Father. The *seed* that is sown everywhere (in all kinds of soil, representing the entire world) is the kingdom of God now present in the person of Jesus. The point of the parable is thus how people do or do not receive (trust in) Jesus who now is among them, and soon will be "sown" in all the world through his death, resurrection and ascension followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This being so, the question/challenge presented in the parable is this: How will people respond to the presence of the kingdom—to Jesus? Certainly Jesus' disciples are perplexed that others are responding so negatively. This chapter gives an explanation presented in four 'scenes', each showing an important aspect of how the seed (the kingdom in the person of Jesus) does its work. It shows that this work is not something that happens in response to what we do—the *plants* (representing the kingdom) have sprung up, everywhere, no matter the condition of the soil. And then comes the question of our response. Three types of inadequate responses are addressed: refusing to respond, giving a superficial response, and being unable to respond by being preoccupied with other concerns.

The disciples should not be surprised or disheartened by these inadequate responses. Instead, they should look for responses of faith—of acceptance of what Jesus has done. That acceptance is represented by the *good soil*, where the seed (the kingdom in the person of Jesus) is allowed to do its amazing, transforming work—the result being the production of fruit (which is Jesus' own fruit, see John 15), thus yielding a great harvest. However, note that the fruit in this harvest will vary, *a hundred, sixty or thirty times*. Disciples of Jesus will not come in only one size or shape. Indeed, in the kingdom there will be both the ordinary and the spectacular. This also suggests that productivity will come from unexpected places and in unexpected ways (a phenomenon that these disciples will shortly experience). This is part of the mystery of the kingdom.

Note that this parable distinguishes between merely *hearing* the word and actually *understanding* it (13:19, 23). This prepares us for vv10–17, where a sharp distinction is drawn between hearers who do not understand and those who are in possession of the 'secret' which unlocks their meaning. It is thus, in a sense, a parable about parables. It is appropriate, therefore, that it concludes in v9 with an appeal to us all to take notice, for how we *hear* (which is a metaphor for trusting in Jesus who is the Word), will determine whether or not our discipleship is fruitful. One additional note: the contrast between the privacy of *the house* (v1 and see v36) and the large audience gathered by the lake, symbolizes the distinction, which is carefully drawn throughout this chapter, between the crowds whom Jesus taught only in parables and his disciples to whom he gave private (though often perplexing) further explanation.

2. How parables work (13:10–17)

10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" 11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' 16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

Here we are shown that the presence of the kingdom in the person of Jesus meets with different responses depending on the receptivity of the hearer. By explaining his parables to his disciples, Jesus opens to them the *secrets* of the *kingdom of heaven*. The kingdom has a logic all its own—one which human reason cannot penetrate. This truth must be revealed.

To be a disciple of Jesus is thus to be in the school of revelation. Jesus is quoting Isa 6:9–10, a passage that vividly predicts the results of not receiving this revelation. Such people never get beyond a superficial hearing of God's word, and thus it does them little good. But Jesus' disciples "get it"—they are given a privilege greater than that enjoyed by the greatest of God's people in the past (*prophets and righteous men*), who had a preliminary inkling of the kingdom of heaven, but did not yet know its reality. Jesus' point here is not that his parables are designed to conceal truth (and thus to keep people out of the

kingdom), but that as a matter of fact not everyone has the ability to penetrate their meaning. That ability is *given* to Jesus' disciples, rather than being the result of human cleverness. The inference then is that if the disciples (quite ordinary people) can be so enlightened, then so can others, if they will trust Jesus. But as we've already seen, the "seed" (the kingdom in the person of Jesus) falls on all sorts of soils. And Jesus' parables will continue to reveal this division as the mysterious growth of the kingdom continues.

3. The parable of the weeds (13:24-30; 36-43)

24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. 27 The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 28 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

...36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

Note that the seed is sown everywhere (in the whole *field*). Because of God's work in Jesus, the kingdom is everywhere present, doing its mysterious, fruit-bearing work. But it appears to Jesus' disciples that something has gone wrong. An enemy of the farmer (Jesus, who is both the sower and the seed here) has come and sown weeds among the wheat. But as Jesus notes in his interpretation, these weeds will not harm the wheat (the kingdom's fruit). However, the weeds do inconvenience the farmer's servants (harvest workers, representing Jesus' disciples). Their inclination is to take action!

But Jesus' tactic is quite different – he counsels noninterference, at least for now: *Let both grow together* (v30). The word *let* (Greek=*aphete*) in its various forms is used in the New Testament to mean *send away* or *remit* (forgive; as in "forgive [aphes] us our debts" in the Lord's prayer). Thus when the farmer says "let both grow together," Jesus' disciples (and Matthew's original readers), would likely have taken this to mean that the evil in the world is not to be dealt with by attacking it, but by 'letting it be', by 'forgiving' it – by suffering with it – all these ideas rolled into one.

So Jesus is noting that until the great harvest at the end of the age, the kingdom will exist side-by-side with evil. And his disciples are to react, not by going on a crusade to reform the world, but to bring to the world forgiveness, and to focus on reaping the harvest which the Lord is producing thereby. Jesus, the king of the kingdom, will in his good time, remove the evil (evil, by the way, which he has decisively conquered through his life, death and resurrection; yet he allows to remain for a time).

And note another point that Jesus makes about these weeds (evil in the world). It's often difficult to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds. The type of weeds Jesus is referring to in this parable are probably darnel, which looks like wheat in the early stages of growth and after that is so closely entangled with it that it cannot be removed without damaging the wheat. What looks to us like a weed, might actually be wheat; and the reverse is true as well. And so judgment is reserved for Jesus alone, who will act decisively to separate the two at the end of the age. But not now.

One more thing, note in v41 that in referring to 'the kingdom of heaven' as the *kingdom of the Son of Man*, Jesus is making the remarkable claim about his authority as king of the kingdom (also see 16:28; 19:28; 25:31-46).

4. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast (13:31-35)

31 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." 33 He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." 34 Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. 35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."

Both of these parables speak of small (and thus hidden) beginnings and of inevitable growth. *Mustard seed* is proverbial for being tiny (see 17:20), yet yielding huge plants (upwards of ten feet!). A very small amount of *yeast* combined with even a *large amount of flour* has a powerful impact. And so it is that the *kingdom of heaven* (typed by the seed in the ground and the yeast intermingled with the flour), though not highly visible at first, is actively at work—advancing and growing in the midst of all the world.

Eventually, this ever-present kingdom will be seen and thus experienced by all. In the meantime, the disciples must be patient and not use human standards in evaluating progress (or trying to force progress). In the economy of God, little becomes great—how that is so is part of the mystery of the kingdom. Our calling as disciples of Jesus is to trust in that, to rely on the king of the kingdom, and follow along with him on his journey of advancing the kingdom.

The teaching in v34 about Jesus' use of parables reinforces the teaching of vv10-17. Then in v35 Matthew offers another formula-quotation, drawn this time from Psa 78:2, to show how in this method of teaching, Jesus was fulfilling a pattern laid down in the Old Testament.

5. The parables of the treasure, the pearl, and the net (13:44-50)

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

47 "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The key feature of the parables of the *treasure* and of the *pearl* is the issue of the mysterious (hidden) nature of the kingdom at work in all the world. Though not understood by the "wise and learned" it is understood by "little children" (11:25)—those who, in humility, have 'ears to hear' and 'eyes to see' the *treasure hidden in a field*. Here the field represents the world (13:45). But who is the man? There are a couple of possibilities:

- 1) The man represents the disciples of Jesus (and thus the church), sent into all the world (Mat 28:16-20). Unsure exactly where the treasure might be hidden in this field, he buys the entire field. Here we see the whole-hearted, generous and joy-filled response which the *kingdom of heaven* engenders in the followers of Jesus. But why does the man who found the treasure, hide it again (v44)? He does so in order that it not be found by others until he has purchased the field. Perhaps this is a reminder to the church to be circumspect in how it shares the good news in all the world—don't be a 'fool who rushes in.' Surely the church has often erred in this respect, using tactics that did more to conceal Christ than to reveal him.
- 2) The man represents seekers who are not yet followers of Jesus. He comes across the treasure (the kingdom, in the person of Jesus— who, through the Spirit, is everywhere present). His response is, with joy, to 'buy the field' so that he may possess this great treasure. Again, the issue is our response to Jesus.

In similar fashion, Jesus then teaches that the kingdom is like a *pearl of great value* (vv45-46). The appropriate response, like that in the previous parable, is to give everything to obtain it. Again, this is a freely given response – one of joy, not of begrudging obligation.

The parable of the *net* (vv41-50) is closely related to that of the weeds (compare vv49–50 with v 40–42). It is a parable about final judgment. The *net* is a dragnet – one dragged through the water indiscriminately gathering everything in its path. The point is that the kingdom, which is everywhere present, impacts everything and everyone. As Jesus says in John 12:32, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw *all men* [lit. *all things*] to myself.” Just as the dragnet sweeps up everything in its path, so too the kingdom impacts *all things* – the entire created order. Everything is included in the sweep of God’s kingdom. We don’t currently see this (it’s mysterious and hidden) yet it’s happening, and in the final judgment it will be seen by all, and at that time everything gets sorted out. In the meantime, we need not worry about making distinctions. Here is how Robert Capon says it: “If the kingdom works like a dragnet, gathering every kind, the church...should avoid the temptation to act like a sport fisherman who is interested only in speckled trout and hand-tied flies. In particular, it should not get itself into the habit of rejecting as junk the flotsam and jetsam of the world” (p127).

In the final sorting out at *the end of the age*, the *good* fish are distinguished from the *bad*. This happens as all people (in a general resurrection, see John 5:28), stand before Christ. Not a single one of these people will be able to claim “goodness” based on their own works or personal merit. But all will be included in what Jesus has done already to reconcile all things to the Father. The question then for each person is this: Do you accept this reconciliation? God forces in on no one, but it has been accomplished for all. Those who embrace it stand in Jesus’ righteousness; those who reject it stand on their own merits, which places them, by their own choice, among the *wicked*. The consequence of this choice to repudiate Christ is devastating, potentially forever.

Conclusion (13:51-52)

51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied. 52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

As Jesus promised (v11), the disciples understand the meaning of these parables (see vv13, 14, 15, 19, 23 for the importance of ‘understanding’). Like the scribes who taught Israel, Jesus, through these parables teaches the way of God – which is the way of the kingdom. The closing parable of the house-owner (v52b) thus challenges the disciples to fulfill their responsibility to be teachers of the kingdom. The truths, revealed in these parables, which they are to teach others, include both the *new treasures* of Jesus’ kingdom teaching and the *old* truths taught by the scribes, which Jesus is now fulfilling (5:17) and thus illuminating.