



Session 2: Matthew 13

for the week of September 26th

The Parables of the Kingdom

If you've grown up in a church or are familiar with the gospels of the New Testament, you've probably come across what seems to be one of Jesus' favorite teaching methods: the parable. I've heard parables defined a number of ways in my lifetime: as teaching illustrations, allegory, earthly stories with heavenly meanings, etc. There's some truth in all of these definitions. In fact, the Greek word for "parable" (*parabolē*) is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word *māšāl*. This Hebrew word can refer to a number of vivid expressions including metaphor, simile, allegory, fable, and more.¹ So, yes, Jesus is using purposely illustrative language when he teaches in parables.

However, we must be careful about reducing Jesus' use of parables to a mere teaching tool to aid his listeners in their understanding. There are much deeper things at work in the parables for the one who, to put it in Jesus' terms, has ears to hear.

As we come to Matthew's collection of Jesus' parables in chapter 13, Matthew presents Jesus as being intentionally elusive with his use of parables. When asked by his disciples why he was teaching the crowds in this way, Jesus responds: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom, but to them it has not been given."² Mounce writes of Jesus' time: "It was not uncommon for rabbis to use the parable in controversy so as to veil the answer to the public and then explain it later to their followers."³ Given the increasing hostility to Jesus' ministry in the preceding chapters, Jesus' use of parables, and the subsequent explanations to the disciples in private, deescalates hostility while also drawing his disciples into a deeper knowledge of who he is. Throughout this chapter, there is a clear distinction between the disciples who have embraced Jesus as the Messiah and are thus learning the mysteries of God's kingdom and others who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and are being given over to their stubbornness.

These parabolic stories of Jesus are also set within the context of other Jewish stories. N. T. Wright argues that when we approach the New Testament "It must be read so that the stories, and the Story, which it tells can be heard as stories, not as rambling ways of declaring unstoried 'ideas'."⁴ In other words, just as we view the world around us through the lens of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of reality, the people of Jesus' day (including Jesus himself) had certain stories that shaped their understanding of things. So, as Jesus shares these parables, there are images, motifs, metaphors, allegories, and more at work which would conjure up other stories of reality that God had revealed in Scripture. For instance, consider another story about a farmer and a field, the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5. God uses this vivid story to rebuke the people of Judah for their "unfruitfulness." How might such a story be related to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 and the unfruitfulness of those who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah? While we must be careful not to over-allegorize a parable of Jesus, especially one that he doesn't offer an explanation to, we should take time to consider how the parable might call to mind certain images and metaphors in other Jewish stories and how that might influence the meaning of the parable.

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 124.

² Matt 13:11.

³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 6.

Throughout all of the parables in Matthew 13 Jesus explains the mysteries of the kingdom to his disciples, including the mystery of why the Jewish people are rejecting their Messiah and the mystery of how the kingdom (i.e. God's reign on earth) will expand in unexpected ways. To understand these parables is to realize how the "new" of what God is doing in the person of Christ fits within and ultimately fulfills the "old" of the redemption history that God has been working out since the beginning of time.⁵

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Discussion⁶

- 1) Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1–9 and explains it to his disciples in 13:18–23. What do the seed and soils represent? What is the fundamental difference between the first three kinds of soil and the fourth? In what way does Jesus' explanation of the purpose of parables in Matthew 13:10–17 expand our understanding of this difference?
- 2) How does the Parable of the Sower speak to the possibility of hearing the gospel of Jesus without truly embracing Jesus? What does it reveal about the dangers of an unwillingness to change, a shallow faith, and a distracted heart? How can we pursue an open heart as we hear and sing the gospel each Sunday and remind ourselves of the gospel each day?
- 3) According to this parable, what (or who) is the source of fruitfulness in God's kingdom?
- 4) How does this parable encourage us as we continue to proclaim the gospel to the nations?
- 5) For those who are able to receive Jesus' message, his parables explain the unexpected nature of the kingdom of God (see 13:11). What is the central point of each of the following parables: the parable of the weeds (13:24–30; 36–43), the mustard seed (13:31–32), and the leaven (13:33)? How does each clarify the nature of the kingdom?
- 6) What are some of the unexpected and strange methods that God uses to grow his kingdom in contrast to the methods used by the kingdoms of this world? Consider Jesus' description of kingdom life in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7).
- 7) What do the parables of the hidden treasure (13:44) and the valuable pearl (13:45–46) teach about the kingdom? What greater clarity does this add to the call for self-denial in 10:38–39?
- 8) How can we learn to treasure God's kingdom above all other allegiances, even when the kingdom appears hidden, operates in unexpected ways, or calls for great sacrifice?

Prayer

Spend some time in prayer together, praying for each other's needs and that the Spirit will grant us a deeper understanding of the goodness and authority of Christ and empower us for living as representative of his kingdom in this world.

⁵ Matt 13:51-52.

⁶ Some questions adapted from *Knowing the Bible: Matthew* by Drew Hunter.