

The Parables of the Kingdom, Matthew Chapter 13

Everyone needs to know certain basics about reality in order to understand life and how to pursue it. I refer to such existentially important matters as, How did I get here? Why am I here? What is life for? And, What happens to me when I die? And although not usually asked but no less important is, What is going on in this world? The media and its heavy load of commentators try to answer this, but they dwell in total darkness. All they can offer is opinion and conjecture derived from their pagan values and godless understanding of things. We who have Scripture can do better. We need to understand Matthew 13.

Yet, as important as this chapter is, an abundance of diverse and often contradictory commentary introduces confusion. So most people pass over it because of all the different views. Nevertheless, the basics of the chapter are clear (to me, anyway), so the effort has to be made, and it's necessary to do it.

First, what's a parable and why tell them? *Para* means alongside, so a parable is a story that has alongside it another story, that is, a moral or more spiritual meaning. What's known, ie, the story of the parable, is key to understanding what's unknown but being revealed, some new truth. And the reason for telling parables is what happened in Chapter 12, where the leaders of Judah rejected their own king and Messiah, alleging that he was working miracles in the power of Satan. So these parables are for the disciples to understand certain truths, but so that the Jews rejecting Him would not understand. That's why Jesus said, "Whoever has will be given more . . . whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (v.12). Faith in Christ leads to understanding. But the Jews (even those today) rejecting Jesus have no – that is, *zero* – understanding of the Messianic kingdom, even though the Scriptures have abundant material on it. Jesus is using His prerogative as deity in revealing this new era.

Second, Jesus referred to these parables as revealing "secrets" (v.11). The importance of this Chapter is that Jesus is now revealing material previously unknown, material not found in the Old Testament. The writing prophets anticipated a kingdom when an exalted and powerful king of Judah, of the house of David, would deliver Israel from threatened annihilation and then would be enthroned in Jerusalem reigning over all the earth. It would be a time of peace, prosperity, and righteousness for everyone – even the animals. It would be an era when Israel would be spirit-filled and faithfully serving God as they were at first supposed to do. It would be a time when even the Gentile nations on earth would honor Christ and worship the God they never before knew. This is the kingdom that Jesus came offering to His people (4:17 for example), but they didn't want *Him*. Rejecting the King means rejecting the kingdom He's offering. So Jesus is now revealing by means of these parables that a new, previously unknown era is going to take place instead, until the kingdom promised by the prophets is realized in the yet distant future. A previously unanticipated, interim "kingdom of heaven" is being introduced here in this chapter. This new period of time will intervene between the rejection documented in Matthew and His Return when a future generation repents and accepts Him. Once more: the "kingdom" here is not the promised millennial Kingdom but an inter-advent period necessitated by Israel's rejection of their Messiah/King. The Church Age occurs within this period and is the current expression of this interim kingdom.

There are 8 parables. Most people find only 7 because the 8th is so brief, but the significance of that last one is inversely proportional to its length. Let's examine these parables. I'm assuming my readers will have the text open, so it won't be necessary to go thru each verse by verse. What I offer in this lesson (I hope) is understanding, not detailed exposition. One more thing before starting: These parables are not information! We don't study them as an intellectual exercise. Rather, Jesus gave them as a challenge to hearers (readers) for their response. It's how we respond that is supremely important.

1. **The Parable of the Soils.** In this first parable, there are 4 different kinds of "soils." Each "soil" represents a different type of person, a different attitude, a different way of responding to the kingdom invitation, ie, to the Word of God. There are 4 kinds of results (the "path," on "rocks," among "thorns," and "good soil"): uncomprehending; initial but not enduring interest; no commitment because of circumstances; and faith that not only endures but produces abundant good fruit. Most people who hear the good news of the invitation to the kingdom don't respond positively. They're hard-hearted, or superficial, or worldly, or unconcerned about spiritual matters such as God's existence, sin, and redemption, and/or have other (secular) priorities. There's no love for God with all their heart, soul and might. Nowhere in the O.T. was this result anticipated.

By the way, many readers attempt to find "saved" or "lost" in this parable; that is NOT the intent of this parable. Notice that there are various levels of fruitfulness in the 4th soil; that's because people mature spiritually at different rates and to different degrees. These in the 4th "soil" category love God as we all are commanded to do. The person who loves God will respond to the invitation to enter the Kingdom.

What, by the way, demonstrates that a soil is “good”? The fruit! Fruit is what life produces. It’s how life reproduces. It’s righteousness. It’s what results from the Holy Spirit’s indwelling. It’s what God expects from His people, and it’s what glorifies God (see John 15); it’s what He wants from us. *Fruit is what proves that we’re disciples of Christ.*

2. The Parable of the Weeds. In this parable, there’s a prediction of good and evil co-existing during this new era. Who knew this would happen in the prophesied kingdom? This is breath-taking! The time to defeat and do away with all evil is yet off in the distant future. (It doesn’t occur until the end of the narrative in Revelation.) Jesus says here that He is the One who, all thru this newly revealed age, the one we’re in, is sowing the good news, yet we know He has ascended to heaven. So how is He doing it? Christ is doing His work *thru us*, His disciples, who are to be inviting people into the Kingdom. And *where* are we doing this? The whole world! There’s an on-going conflict between Satan and his agents and us, thus Genesis 3:15 continues to be operative. And at the end of this age there’s going to be a judgment (the “harvest”).

These parables cover the time period from the First Advent until His Return, when He will establish the prophesied Kingdom. During this interim age, the King is absent, yet the kingdom exists in this newly revealed form. And during this age, which includes the Church Age, there are those who are real (the “wheat”) and those who are wicked (the “weeds,” counterfeits!), and they co-exist on earth until the time of the end when Jesus in judgment separates them. (John’s Book of Revelation expands on this age and especially on this end-time period.)

Whether the “weeds” are phonies in the Church, those who simply make a profession (the fruiting head on the wheat distinguishes them), or they’re Christ-rejecting but otherwise nice and well-behaved people isn’t clear. It may be, though. Satan is a sneak, doing his dirty work of counterfeiting unnoticed so that his “weeds” introduce confusion. Obviously, the post-millennial view (and the amillennial one, for that matter) held by very many in the church is wrong. The Bible is pre-millennial and dispensational.

Totally distinct from the Kingdom the writing prophets anticipated, this age we’re in is one of admixed truth and error, goodness and wickedness, true and false Christians – a totally confusing entity! For 2,000 years Satan has been so thoroughly corrupting the church that, were they here now, the Apostles would not recognize today’s Christendom. They’d be shocked, I suspect, at how glibly we call ourselves Christians even as we have the Word of God in front of us to instruct what following Christ means. I’m writing this lesson to encourage us to do our part to live out biblical Christianity as it should be lived, to God’s glory.

3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed. A tiny mustard seed grows into a plant 12-15 feet tall. Jesus predicts that the kingdom era He’s here describing would grow from an insignificant beginning into something huge. The meaning of the birds that nest in the tree is unclear. It could mean that a very great kingdom eventually will result (see Daniel 4:7-23 for just one example of this common metaphor in the Hebrew Scriptures). Or, the birds could mean that some other people, viz., Gentiles, will take refuge in or populate the kingdom/Church.

4. The Parable of the Yeast. Yeast continues to work unnoticed until all the dough is affected by it. Once the process starts, it can’t be stopped. It’s hidden yet dynamic! So, nothing is going to stop Jesus’ work of bringing people into the kingdom, and there’s going to be a lot of people. It’s possible, however, that this parable refers to the spread of biblical values into the pagan world, civilizing it.

5. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure. A man wants this treasure for himself and to do that he had to make a huge sacrifice, the treasure was so valuable to him. Israel is God’s “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5 and Psalm 135:4). So possibly this parable anticipates the atoning sacrifice that Christ made to redeem Israel. Redemption implies a purchase. So the cross and what followed (resurrection, ascension and Return) may be in view here. Alternatively, and more likely, this parable refers to us, that is, if we treasure knowing and being in the Kingdom, we’ll make whatever sacrifice is needed, because it’s worth it. The ambiguity may be deliberate because followers of Christ identify intimately with Him, so both understandings here are valid.

6. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value. This is coupled with the previous. Why this redundancy? Perhaps because whereas in the previous parable Israel may have been the treasure, here the Church is in view. Pearls come out of the sea, and the “sea” is a metaphor commonly used in the Hebrew Scriptures for the Gentile nations. If so, God has two special categories of people, Israel and the Church. And if correct, this means that Israel continues to exist, and the Church exists along with it for the duration of the Church Age. Or, this pearl-seeker refers to us, and this is likely because in these parables, the focus is not on Jesus but on the disciples. So this parable means that the losses and the suffering involved in

discipleship are nothing compared to what we gain by being in the Kingdom. Aren't we willing to pay any price to have a part in the kingdom? (This would not be "works" salvation, by the way.)

7. The Parable of the Net. This "kingdom" age is a time of judgment, of separating those who are good from those who are evil. And there are only these two options: The "good fish" are saved and blessed; the "bad fish" (all kinds of bad) are disposed of in terrible judgment. This parable states the purpose of this new time period being introduced, this inter-advent era, and the purpose is to identify and separate people, *all* people, into (i) those who are "righteous" and evidently will inherit the prophetic Kingdom; and (ii) those who are "wicked" and are to be judged. (A resurrection must be involved, because of how long this period lasts, although it's not stated here.) What is the differentiating key that serves to separate and identify? How people respond to the kingdom invitation that Jesus (and His disciples continuing His mission) brings. This must grip us! We're in an exceedingly dangerous era in history, in which everyone is being tested for their ultimate destiny by their response to the Gospel proclamation. It's the very purpose of this era.

8. The Parable of the House Owner. Almost universally missed is this prescriptive prophecy that the interim kingdom Jesus is inaugurating is to be characterized (better, governed) by new precepts and principles *as well as by those of the Old Testament*. The Kingdom of heaven is only interim, so it continues the revelation in the previous era although with new elements added. Do we understand how important this is? We don't find what we need to know to live the Christian life only in the New Testament, but in all the Bible! Much of the O.T. that is relevant to the kingdom has been incorporated into the New Testament, but not all. Previous Sunday School lessons have explored some of them. There's a lot that's important in the Hebrew Scriptures for us that we ignore at our peril.

Paul carefully taught that what, in Galatians, he called the *stoichea*, that is, the rites and ceremonies, special feast days, circumcision and the dietary rules for Israel don't apply to Gentiles in this era. But the essentials of loving and serving God and showing love to others, salvation by repentance and trusting obedience, necessity of adherence to God's revealed will, expectation of the future fulfillment of promises God had made, the strict avoidance of idolatry, the absolute necessity of both holiness and humility, a bestowal of grace and forgiveness of sins, a vicarious atonement for sin, God's mission to save Gentiles, the certainty of a resurrection, a corporate unity of God's elect and identification of the elect body with God's chosen king, the anticipation of a future judgment, and much more, are all continuations from the Hebrew Scriptures into this new era. What's new is . . . Jesus! And the gift of the empowering Holy Spirit to believers.

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So what does all this mean? We are living in a unique period of time, when the Times of the Gentiles, the Church Age, and the Kingdom of heaven are all in effect. The Times of the Gentiles began with Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Judea and will end when Christ returns. The Church Age began at Pentecost and will end at the Rapture. The Kingdom of heaven . . . well, hard to say exactly what its time points are, but we're in it now. The Church is the current expression of the Kingdom of heaven. Israel's Exile began with the fall of Judea and continues until Christ returns, although those Jews who trust in Jesus the Messiah exit the Exile and enter the Kingdom of heaven (the Church). Gentiles who refuse to believe in Christ are arrested at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and live in darkness and godlessness; but those Gentiles who trust Christ directly enter the Kingdom (the Church).

Why the abrupt ending of the Book of Acts? Because Acts is on-going. We're still living it today. With the Incarnation of Christ, the Kingdom has come to earth. A new era in human history has been introduced. All people everywhere now are being tested on the basis of their response to the invitation to enter the Kingdom. We need to form a biblical worldview and then live it. Biblically, we're living out Matthew 10 and the Book of Acts. Never mind what's going on in America politically, culturally, economically, or whatever. We're on mission with Jesus fulfilling these parables by inviting people, everyone and anyone – neighbors, family, friends, or people in distant lands – into the kingdom by proclaiming the Gospel. They all may be nice people, but they're being tested. Their destiny hinges on their response to the kingdom offer.

Mission is why we're here. Our unbelieving neighbors, perhaps even all the rest of America's entire population, may be living to be happy, and they may want to engage in current affairs and in all that our culture and our complex modern society puts on offer. But we're not to emulate their life-styles or share their values, ideals or traditions. We have a radically different and unique calling. By design, we – each of us – are God's agents of testing. Our lives are to be committed to pursuing God's will for us, which is carrying out His mission. That's our responsibility. We're unworthy of the privilege of being Christ's servant, and we'll probably fail from time to time. But . . . If we're the "good soil" that we think we are, our faithfulness in inviting people to the King will result in fruit, *good* fruit, to the glory of God.