

THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Ben Janssen | **Matthew 13:10-17** | December 27, 2020

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “ ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.’ ¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ ¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is striking because it consists of a series of eight parables. Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, we often read of the parables he told. It’s estimated that more than one third of Jesus’s teaching came in the form of parables.¹ Here in Matthew 13:34 we are even told that Jesus “said nothing . . . without a parable.” While Matthew probably means that on this occasion Jesus spoke only in parables, the comment does show us how prevalent the use of a parable was for Jesus. This morning I’d like us to consider why this is so. Why did Jesus use parables? How do parables challenge the audience who hears them? And what is their appeal? What is the outcome that Jesus hopes to achieve by using parables in his teaching?

THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES

So we begin with the same question Jesus’s disciples asked in verse 10. Why did he use parables so much?

An Illustration of Truth

Let’s make sure we have a definition of a parable first. The word *parable* comes from the combination of two Greek words which together would refer to something “thrown alongside” something else. The idea is that a parable is used to accompany something else, to enhance it. In this case, Jesus used parables to accompany his lectures, his public addresses, his teaching. A parable is, to use one definition, “a story or saying that illustrates a truth using comparison, hyperbole, or simile.”²

Illustrations are meant to shed light, to enhance comprehension. An illustration helps people grasp a concept better by being able to see it from another angle or in another way.

When we use illustrations, we’ll often introduce them by saying, “It’s kind of like this.” Or we might say, “In other words,” or, “Another way of looking at it.” An illustration is, like the word parable itself means, something “thrown alongside” to help make things clearer.

The Moral of the Story

Here in Matthew 13, we find Jesus sitting down in a boat, a crowd standing on the beach, and Jesus begins the parable of the sower without any introduction. The parable—the illustration—is all he gives. Down in verse 18 we find Jesus explaining the meaning of the parable to the disciples. But when he first gives it, it seems he does so without any explanation. Would the crowd understand the parable the way Jesus meant it to be understood? Would we know the meaning of the parable without Jesus's own commentary in verses 18-23? Highly unlikely.

So while parables are given in order to illustrate a truth, we often do not know what that truth is when the parable is given. Parables are similar in this way to the fable. When the story is over, we are left to ponder the so-called moral of the story.

A parable is a kind of illustration, but it is not just that. You'll notice that Jesus's answer to the question why he speaks in parables is not, "To help people understand a truth." In fact, it sounds like the complete opposite. Look at Jesus's answer in verse 11: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." And then in verse 13 he says that he speaks in parables to the crowd "because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." So we see that while a parable does indeed shed light on a subject, it doesn't do that for everyone. Some see the point. Others don't. And *that* is the point of a parable.

The Parable's Trap

Recall the most famous parable in the Old Testament. The prophet Nathan told David a story about a rich man who stole and slaughtered the one lamb that a certain poor man owned (2 Sam 12:1-4). The story brings to light how awful it is to abuse power and how deserving of judgment such an abuser would be. But the real meaning of the parable doesn't come to light until after David responds to the story. He expresses outrage at the abuse of power. He says that the rich man deserves to die and must make restitution for his wrong. Nathan then drives home the point, saying to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7).

A parable is meant to trap its hearers into a dilemma to which they must respond. When the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-36). The story is a trap, intended to show the lawyer how far short he has fallen in loving his neighbor. After hearing the story, the lawyer is challenged to go and treat everyone like the Samaritan treated the man who was wounded by the thieves. He either will or he won't. He cannot sit on the fence.

That's what a parable is; that's what a parable *does*. It leaves its audience in a quandary about what they will do with what they have heard.³ As Jesus says at the end of many of his parables, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt 13:9). A parable is meant to challenge us not only to discern the meaning in it but then to respond appropriately to that meaning. Only by doing so will we, in fact, truly grasp the meaning of the parable, because the meaning of the parable cannot be grasped only with the head. It requires the heart.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE PARABLES

Once we understand the purpose of parables, we can see that they present us with a challenge. The parables of Jesus challenge the mind, but they also challenge the heart. And they force us to make a decision.

“About what?” you ask? Here in Matthew 13, all the parables are explicitly said to be about the kingdom of God. But it’s not just our present chapter; it has long been theorized that the kingdom of God is not just *a* theme of Jesus’s parables but *the* theme.⁴ The preponderance of the parables, coupled with the fact that so many of them, if not all of them, are parables about the kingdom, implies that Jesus’s greatest challenge to us who listen to his words is the challenge of the kingdom of God. How does the kingdom of God challenge us?

Comprehending the Kingdom

It challenges us to comprehend it, to see it as reality. Here we remind ourselves that a parable is a type of illustration. A parable is given to make things known. Jesus did not tell parables to keep people in the dark but to bring things to light.⁵

Jesus says here, in verse 11, that to some “it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom.” But this knowledge does not come about because these have access to some mysterious higher knowledge. Jesus spoke openly about the kingdom of God, as did his disciples after him (Acts 28:30-31). The kingdom of God is not a hidden reality in the sense that you have to be an insider to know about it. The gospel is good news about the kingdom and it is to be made known to everyone.

Jesus spoke in parables, verse 14 says, so that people would hear about the kingdom even if they never understand it and so that people would see it even if they never quite perceive it. The kingdom of God is right in front of our eyes and the church’s job is to speak it out loudly and point it out clearly. There should be no excuse for not comprehending the kingdom of God, for not perceiving it to be the ultimate reality.

Desiring the Kingdom

But we know that it is not enough to simply be told about the kingdom of God. These parables challenge us to understand the parables, verse 15 says, with the heart. The reason why people do not comprehend the kingdom is because we do not desire the kingdom. The parables challenge us to desire it so that we can truly comprehend it.

The challenge to desire the kingdom is found in the fact that, in our fallen condition, our hearts have become dull. So unless something is done to sharpen our hearts, to awaken us to the splendor of the kingdom of God, all the information about it will accomplish nothing. Spiritual matters will simply not register very high on the priority list because we will desire pretty much anything more than the kingdom of God.

Turning to the Kingdom

But the parables challenge us to not be ok with this heart problem. They invite us to turn away from our sad condition and turn to the kingdom.

At the end of verse 15, we see the sad result for those who do not desire the kingdom of God. The dullness of heart prevents people from truly understanding the kingdom of God, even if they've heard the same words, heard the same parables, heard the same sermons as others who respond positively. The kingdom of God is not a theoretical concept; if it is comprehended with the heart—that is, if it is *desired*—then the result is salvific. We will “turn” and be healed. Healing, as the life of Jesus has demonstrated, is central to life in the kingdom of God.

So again, the reason we don't experience the healing powers of the kingdom—a healing that includes physical healing at times but is also so much more than that—is because we don't turn to the kingdom. The lack of repentance and the loss of healing comes not because God will not allow us to come to him but because of our own self-hardened hearts.⁶ We don't come, we don't find healing, because we don't want it. And because we don't want it, we live in ignorance of what the kingdom of God truly is, because you can't truly know it from outside of it.

THE APPEAL OF THE PARABLES

This means we are all in quite a pickle, aren't we? What can be done about the sad state we are in? Well, we can listen again to the parables of the kingdom, for in them God makes his appeal. And his appeal will have its effect. Some, because of these parables, will come to know the secrets of the kingdom, and, Jesus says in verse 12, “to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance.”

So, let's listen again to God's appeal. The eight parables in Matthew 13 give us a composite picture of the kingdom of God. They are structured in a way in which the first corresponds to the last, the second corresponds to the next to last, and the middle four correspond to each other.⁷

A Pervasive Treasure

Let's begin with the middle four, which are very short. The parable of the mustard seed and the leaven (vv. 31-33) teach us that the kingdom of God begins small but will in the end have a massive and comprehensive impact.⁸ So it is like a hidden treasure in a field (v. 44), or like a pearl of great value (v. 45-46). If you can see where the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus is heading, then you will do whatever you can to have it. It will look like a sacrifice, a radical sacrifice in fact, but you'll actually be doing it out of sheer delight, with no sense of obligation.⁹

In, Not Of

But the second and next-to-last parables, the parable of the weeds (vv. 36-43) and the parable of the net (vv. 47-50), teach us that the enemy of the kingdom, Satan himself, will do everything he can to keep us from possessing the kingdom. He will sow imposters among the true citizens of the kingdom. Genuine believers will live among false believers until the day of judgment. But none of

that is contrary to God’s purpose for his people. Though at times we may struggle to see the glory of God’s kingdom, one day a sorting will be made and God’s people will “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43). Thus, let all who truly belong to God persevere in their faith in him and not be duped by the siren call of Satan’s crumbling kingdom.

Soils and Scribes

The first and last parables go together. The parable of the soils (vv. 3-9) is explained by Jesus himself (vv. 18-23) and tells us that only those whose hearts are “good soil” are true citizens of the kingdom of God. But it would be a mistake to ask, “How can I get a heart like this?” for Jesus has told us in verse 11 that you have to be given it. Apart from divine initiative, we all have shallow, rocky, and thorn-infested hearts.

Do you understand this? That’s what Jesus asked his disciples in verse 51. If so, then Jesus says you are not just a citizen of the kingdom but have “been trained for the kingdom of heaven.” You have not just been “instructed *about* the kingdom” where you merely comprehend it, but you have become a disciple of the kingdom, with all your allegiances having now been transformed.¹⁰

In other words, you are “like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (v. 52). True disciples of Jesus, the real citizens of the kingdom of God, possess new and old treasures which they can bring out for the benefit of others. To understand and discern the kingdom of God is a gift, a gift that ought to now be shared with others.¹¹

As we enter into this New Year, let’s see what these treasures are. Let’s enjoy them and share them with one another and with the whole world.

¹ David Seal, “Parable,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), [n.p.](#)

² [Ibid.](#)

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), [530](#).

⁴ C. H. Dodd argued persuasively in 1935 that it is the kingdom of God that is the central topic of all of Jesus’s parables. See Seal, “Parable,” [n.p.](#)

⁵ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, [530](#).

⁶ [Ibid.](#), [515](#).

⁷ A chiasmic structure, as explained by D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), [303-04](#).

⁸ Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation,” in *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [116](#).

⁹ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, [541](#).

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” [332](#).

¹¹ Yarbrough, "Kingdom of God," [126](#).