

Matthew 13:1-23 – “Parables and Paradoxes”

We come now to a chapter in Matthew known as the Kingdom Parables. This is an obvious shift in the ministry of Jesus. Everyone in Israel had been waiting for the kingdom to be ushered in at the arrival of their Messiah. Jesus, the Messiah, was present with them but they rejected Him. In so doing they rejected the kingdom and it's King. This is what we saw throughout Chapter 12. They even attributed the works of Jesus to Satan. In so doing they were blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and sealing their fate.

So, since Israel rejected the kingdom of God, Matthew 13 introduces us to this interim age – a period of time where the kingdom is in postponement. It's the period of time we're still in. The kingdom will come when the King returns and Israel accepts her King.

- Though these are called Kingdom Parables, this is not detailing the time of the kingdom.

Chapter 13 sets out to show the mystery of the Kingdom of God through these parables. He's revealing a mystery – something that was once concealed but is now revealed. And the mystery is that Jesus is going to be at work during this interim period, this postponement of the kingdom, and it's going to look very different than what people may have previously imagined. It's going to look very different than how Israel in that day imagined it would be. So, just to be clear, this age does not represent the kingdom of God. We're living in the church age. And in the church age the gospel is going out and it will have an effect, but it's not going to usher in the kingdom on its own.

Interestingly, there are three main discourses given by Jesus:

1. The Sermon on the Mount – Israel's Past
2. The Kingdom Parables – Israel's Present
3. The Olivet Discourse – Israel's Future

1. A Preview to Parables

13:1-2 - *On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. ² And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.*

Matthew points out clearly that this is all happening on the same day. The same day we saw Jesus enter a house and heal a demon possessed man and restore his sight and hearing, the same day the religious leaders have been accusing Jesus of being in partnership with Satan, the same day they are blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and the same day His own family is questioning His sanity. This is what's been going down in Chapter 12 and it was a chapter revealing the rejection of Jesus by Israel. A rejection of Jesus is a rejection of the kingdom.

And so it's on this day that Jesus now leaves the house and ends up going out on the sea.

That statement packs some pretty big truths. This is revealing this shift in the dispensation of God. Jesus came to the house of Israel, but now He is going out of the house. Many see in that the rejection of Jesus by Israel, and a rejection of the kingdom. There will be a notable shift now in the focus of Jesus' ministry. Israel will be set aside, and the church age will be ushered in. This is the age we are living in right now. Israel is not forgotten, but they are blinded in part until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in (Romans 11:25).

And where does He go? To the sea. The sea throughout Scripture is a picture of the Gentile Nations. Jesus came for the lost sheep of Israel, but now that Israel has largely rejected Him, this truth is going now to all people. Gentiles have always been a part of the redemptive plans of God, but now they will become a focus. The Gentiles will be used to draw Israel to jealousy, just as they were to initially do for the Gentile nations (Romans 11:11-12).

Keep in mind, **great multitudes** are still following Him. The religious leaders and pious Jews are turning on Him and away from Him, but there are still many that are tracking with Him.

13:3 - Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow."

Here in Matthew 13 we begin to see Jesus speaking many things in parables.

What is a parable?

- A parable is a way of conveying a spiritual truth alongside a story with an everyday or earthly context. This is what the very name Parable means.
- It comes from two Greek words: **Para**, which means alongside, and **Ballō**, which means to throw or hurl.

- Vine's Dictionary defines a parable as: "a placing of one thing beside another" with a view to comparison. ¹
- The idea is that through these short stories, Jesus the master storyteller was casting some real important and relevant spiritual truths, but they were kind of coated in these earthly stories. If you weren't really interested in hearing what Jesus had to say, you wouldn't be picking up was being thrown down.

And He begins 7 times with the words (or a form of): ***The Kingdom of heaven is like...*** (vv. 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52).

So, these parables are casting a truth about this interim period between Jesus' first and second comings. These parables interestingly did not cast their truth on the surface, but it was meant to be unpacked and would be understood by those who were seeking clarity and who were perceptively pressing its meaning. We'll discuss this a little more in a minute.

But Matthew 13 begins with a real physical picture of what is taking place on a larger scale.

13:4-9 - And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. ⁸ But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

This parable has often been referred to as the Parable of the Sower. But the Sower is not really the focus. He remains the same in each condition, as does the seed. The variable we have in this account is the soil. That's the focus. So, this is more a Parable of the Soils.

Jesus doesn't begin this parable with, ***the Kingdom of Heaven is like...*** as He does with the rest of the parables in this chapter. But this parable is illustrating for us Kingdom principles.

¹ Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W., Jr. (1996). *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Vol. 2, p. 457). Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

- In Mark's gospel when Jesus finished saying these words, the disciples came to Him to ask why He speaks to them in parables. And Jesus said: *"Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"* (Mark 4:13).
- Jesus was using this parable to sort of give a key to unlocking the truths in other parables. It's going to reveal the different condition of the hearts of those that were able to hear and receive the truth of Jesus' words.

And we're not left to try and figure out this parable or uncode it's meaning. Jesus is going to explain it clearly for us in vv. 18-23. So, we'll look at this then. But let's look at the reason why Jesus spoke in Parables.

2. The Purpose of Parables – 13:10-17

13:10-12 - *And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"* ¹¹ *He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.*

These parables were to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Biblically, mysteries are not something that needed to be figured out by following some kind of clue. Jesus wasn't speaking these parables to keep people in the dark.

- Now we can experience that with other people sometime. My wife can speak mysteries very well. I often need a decoder just to know what she's saying. She can say: the garbage is looking pretty full. Now I'm getting to know that this is not just an observation she's making. She's asking for the garbage to be taken out. At first I thought we were just playing a fun game of Jenga and seeing how high we can get the garbage stacked up before it topples over.
- But Jesus is not a woman, He's not speaking in riddles.

You see, mysteries were something that were once concealed but are now revealed through divine revelation. They're known to those who are in Christ. So, these parables are revealing aspects of the Kingdom that weren't previously understood. Namely that the Kingdom would be advancing by a small seed. This seed is the Word of God (Mark 4:14). It would not be a forcible advancement of a political kingdom, but more so it would be a gradual birth in the hearts of people.

- This is why the image of a seed was so practical and true.
- It would begin as an internal spiritual reign of Christ in the hearts of people. This would be the interim form of the Kingdom before the physical Kingdom would be established on earth.

This is the idea behind the ***mysteries of the kingdom of heaven***. These truths would only be understood by those whose hearts are open to receive it. Some will not because their hearts are like the hard pan path, or the rocky ground, or there's too many other things that are choking out the truth. But those that have a good heart – where the soil is receptive to the things of God – there's going to be some dynamic growth.

Jesus says that those who hear and understand will gain even more. But those who have not been open to receive these things (like the religious leaders in Matthew 12) even what they have will be taken from them.

This was all tied to, and fulfilled, what Isaiah said previously.

13:13-15 - Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; ¹⁵ For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10 where some are hearing but not hearing. Some are seeing but not seeing. Now this is confusing stuff isn't it? What is meant by that?

The idea is that some people were hardening their heart to the truth. The Word of God was going out, but some people didn't want anything to do with it. If Jesus continued to speak plainly, then people would be held accountable for what they knew and for what they opposed. The more that people openly resisted what Jesus was saying, the more they'd reach a point where their hardened hearts would not allow them to receive the truth of God.

- Jesus spoke in parables so as to not cause them further condemnation or judgment for their rejecting of God's truth. Parables were in a sense a show of God's mercy in bringing His message to those who wanted to receive it,

but allowing others to walk away thinking they just heard some interesting story without any spiritual ramifications.

- Parables both revealed truth and concealed truth. That depended on the condition of the heart (which is what the Parable of the Soils points out).

Now to say, ***lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears*** almost sounds like the Lord is purposely preventing them from understanding. When Isaiah was famously asked in Isaiah 6:8 *who shall go for Us?* He answered, *'Here am I! Send me.'* And Isaiah was given this word about the people hearing but not understanding.

- Now understand, this wasn't his goal, this was just the inevitable result. Though Isaiah would come with a message of hope and salvation, the people had hardened their heart. They would be ever hearing, but not understanding. The more the word went out, the more they rejected, and thus judgement was being stored up in a greater way.

This passage in Isaiah is quoted 6 times in the New Testament to speak of the rejection of Jesus by Israel (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:25–28; Romans 11:8). God does not deliberately make sinners blind, deaf, and hard-hearted; but the more that people *resist* God's truth, the less able they are to *receive* God's truth.

But our job is not to get worried about that. Our responsibility is to proclaim the gospel to all. We can only bring Christ to men, it is God who brings men to Christ.

Jesus reminds His disciples that they are blessed because they have opened their heart to His truth.

13:16-17 - But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; ¹⁷ for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

These disciples were in a very privileged position. They are witnessing the Messiah, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world. Many would have longed to have seen this day. And though the Kingdom will be postponed due to Israel's rejection, those that will receive what Jesus is revealing will be blessed. They will be blessed through the gospel, through the realization of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with the Father. They will be blessed with abundant life in Christ, and a blessed hope of better things to come.

3. The Point of this Parable – 13:18-23

13:18-19 - “Therefore hear the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

So what Jesus is revealing in this parable is that the word is going to go out. The word is the gospel or the **word of the kingdom**. Now many people are going to hear it, but the results are going to vary based on the condition of the soil, or the condition of your heart.

Four conditions are given:

1) Hard Heart:

Fields were to be left with paths along the perimeter for people to travel through. These paths became very compacted dirt. They were hard and the seed would sometimes get scattered or blown on these paths and the birds would quickly swoop down and pluck them up. Those seeds were just easy pickins.

In the same way, as we share the word of God, there are those who are not very receptive. They may listen, but the seed or the word that was sown is just as quickly snatched away by the devil. He comes and deceives them, tells them a lie, and before they even have a chance to ponder those truths, the devil has stripped it away.

2) Shallow Heart:

13:20-21 - But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Some fields, especially around Israel, were filled with rocks, or there was a big bedrock under the soil. Now the seed may get planted, but there’s no real root that can grow in this type of terrain. It might fight for a time, and you might see some indication of life, but it’s not lasting.

Notice, this persecution came as a result of the Word. Perhaps you’ve seen people give their life to the Lord, but then they start getting bugged by their friends. They’re finding they’re not as popular as they thought they’d be as a Christian. Or perhaps the idea of having to take up your cross and deny yourself

was something they didn't really grasp when they received the Word. And now they're thinking, *why didn't I read the small print on the contract?* And so, when the pressure comes, they stumble.

- Too often people come to Jesus out of a false expectation. They think Jesus will help advance their agenda, and they see Him as a life enhancer rather than a Saviour who rescues them from the pit of despair. There's no way but up with Jesus! He may not do what you expect, but He'll do the better thing!
- This is why discipleship is so important. It gives the opportunity to cultivate the soil of the heart, to break up any hard ground or misconceptions. It allows the Word of God to take root.

3) Crowded Heart:

13:22 - *Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.*

Those of you that love gardening know how problematic weeds can be. In every field and every garden you're going to encounter them. And you know that weeds tend to grow very rapidly and they hinder the growth of that which you want to see grow – to the point where these weeds will kill off that which is good.

It's the same way for people who receive the Word of God yet focus on so many other things that come in and choke out the Word from growing. It's not wrong to do *'things'* or to have *'things'*, but if they are not healthy and not of the Lord, they will be destructive in your life.

Jesus lists some situations that will be a destructive force to the seed coming in, taking root and being fruitful: ***the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches...***

You see, if we are giving our life to Jesus, then He is to be our life! He is to be our primary passion. We're not to get sidetracked by the cares of this world to the point where it squeezes out our devotion of Christ. We're not to be of this world, our citizenship is in heaven. So, when the concerns and the cares of this world mount, remember, this is not our home, it's all temporary.

And in the same way we're not to be living with a desire for riches. Having money is not wrong, but that money is not going to make things better, or save you, or make you happy. This is why it's deceitful. We think it will, but all these things are to be found in Jesus!

4) Receptive Heart:

13:23 - *But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*

This is those that hear the Word, understand it, receive it, and live it. These are the people that will go on to bear much fruit in their lives. And living fruitful lives for Jesus is what it's all about.

This interim age we're in is about advancing the word of the Kingdom. Receive it's truth and share it's truth. Be fruitful. This is the life that honours our King Jesus!

Psalm 1:1–3, *"Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ² But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper."*