

JESUS TEACHES IN PARABLES

Matthew 13:1–58

By Andy McClish

Introduction

As Matthew 13 begins, we see that on a certain day (the same day in which chapter 12 concludes) Jesus, in keeping with His Divine mission and tireless spirit, is instructing the multitudes regarding matters of eternal consequence. As will become obvious from the text, His teachings in this chapter center around “the kingdom of Heaven” (vv. 11, 19, 24, 31, 33, 44–45, 47). Verse 3 tells us that on this occasion, He “spake unto them many things in parables....”¹ The idea of a parable may be grasped fairly well on the basis of etymology alone. The word “parable” is a transliteration of a Greek compound word (*parabole*) meaning “to cast [or throw] along-side of.” This suggests a process of comparison; so then the parable is a form of teaching in which familiar (i.e., material) concepts are “cast along-side of ” unfamiliar (i.e., spiritual) ones.

While parabolic teaching certainly did not originate with Christ, it cannot be denied that He elevated this figure of speech to unprecedented heights of beauty and potency. His reasons for beginning to teach in this manner are explained in some detail in verses 10–17. In summary, however, we may note that the parables are uniquely suited to serve a variety of purposes. (1) Their effectiveness is almost completely dependent on the condition of the hearers (i.e., those interested in the Truth are able to find it, and those blind to the Truth remain blind). (2) Parables are also very effective in gaining mental assent to Truth before the personal nature of the application is understood. (3)

Furthermore, parables are a vehicle for presenting spiritual Truth in a particularly accommodative, practical, and memorable form for all time.

EXEGESIS AND EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 13:1–58

Chapter 13:1–2: Context and Setting

Verse 1: In considering any passage of Scripture, it is always beneficial to know something of its setting and context. In the previous chapter (Mat. 12) we learn that Jesus had healed a demon-possessed man, which prompted amazement in the multitudes and blasphemy by the Pharisees (vv.22–24). The scribes and Pharisees pushed the Savior for a sign and were rebuked for their hypocrisy (vv. 38–42). Toward the end of the chapter, the Lord’s family tried to get in to see Him, but were unable because of the crowds. Jesus took the opportunity to stress that His true family members are those who do the will of the Father (vv. 46–50). From verse 1 of chapter 13 we learn that this particular discourse of Christ occurred “by the sea side” immediately following His departure from someone’s house. Although this house is not further identified in Scripture, it is assumed by a number of commentators that it was the home of Peter and Andrew, near Capernaum.² That being the case, the events and teaching recorded in this chapter would have taken place at the northwestern shore of the sea of Galilee. The case for this location is quite plausible, when we consider how prominently the city, the sea, and the region figured into our Lord’s earthly ministry.

Verse 2: As on numerous other occasions recorded in Matthew’s Gospel account (cf. 4:25; 8:1, 18; 15:30; 19:2), Jesus had on this day “gathered unto Him great multitudes” (v. 2). Luke tells us further that the people had come from all of the surrounding cities (8:4). Christ’s obvious popularity may be seen as arising from a

variety of factors, all of which contributed perfectly to His mission on earth and His central role in the scheme of redemption: (1) He had astounding miraculous powers which confirmed (to any open mind) His “being on an equality with God.” (2) His teaching had the full force of the authority which derived from the miracles and from His infinite knowledge of the Scriptures. (3) Both His style of teaching and His compassion were particularly appealing to the common people (which classes make up the bulk of any population). However, it is worth remembering that, while He frequently commanded the attention of thousands of people, Jesus was never hesitant to teach individuals or small groups as well.³ The crowd of people on this occasion apparently made it expedient for the Lord to enter into a boat and address the people as they stood on the beach.

Chapter 13:3–8: The Parable of the Sower

Verse 3: The idea of a sower at his task was a perfectly natural illustration for this culture and time period—one which would be quite familiar to all of those present. Farmers often lived some distance from their fields, so that a literal “going forth” was required in order to sow.⁴ The clear picture which is brought to mind is that of a man walking along, carrying a sack of grain, and broadcasting it (somewhat indiscriminately) by hand. The exhortation to “behold” (i.e., “look at”) and use of the definite article (i.e., “**the** sower,” emph. AM) may even indicate that Jesus referred to an actual person who was within sight of the audience.

Verse 4: In the natural course of the work of a sower it was inevitable that the seed would fall into various types of soils. Verses 4–8 describe the effect of the type of soil on the produce of the seed. For this reason, this parable is sometimes referred to as “the

parable of the soils,” although Jesus called it the “the parable of the sower” (v. 18).

Some of the seed landed “by the way side.” This indicates hard-packed earth, perhaps a well-trodden path or road, running through or around the field. This soil would not allow any of the seed to sink in, much less take root. The result was that this seed quickly became bird food.

Verses 5–6: Another portion of the seed “fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth.” This language might seem, at first glance, to suggest soil mingled with small rocks. This, however, does not explain the fact that the plants which sprang up “had no **deepness** of earth” (emph. AM). McGarvey described this type of ground as “a ledge of rock covered with a very thin coating of soil.”⁵ In this shallow soil, it was only natural that the seeds sprouted and “sprang up” very quickly. With the rising of the sun, however, these plants were unable to withstand the heat. Without a sufficient root system to provide moisture or nourishment, they soon withered away.

Verse 7: Still other seeds found their way into soil that was full of impurities, namely thorns. Although the seed was able to take root and grow in this type of ground, it was no match for the head start and the extremely hardy nature which the thorns enjoyed. Over time, this seed was deprived of everything essential to its growth and, as a result, was choked out of existence.

Verse 8: Of course, the aim of the sower was to deposit his seed “upon the good ground.” “Good ground” in this instance is defined fairly well in terms of the **unproductive** types of soil already mentioned—good ground is soft; good ground has depth; good ground is free from impurities. Once the seed found a home in soil which had been properly conditioned (assuming the seed was not flawed), fruit would

inevitably be produced. It should be noted also that, in the final analysis, there were only two types of soil in the story—that which produced and that which did not. Even in the good ground, though, the harvest was not strictly uniform. Some of the seed reproduced itself one hundred times over, some sixty times, other thirty. The Lord's explanation of this parable will be discussed when it appears later in the chapter (vv. 18–23).

Chapter 13:9–17: The Design of Parables Explained

Verse 9: Jesus concluded the parable of the sower with a proverbial expression that He often employed to provoke serious thought among His listeners: “He that hath ears, let him hear.” The intent of this warning was and is to encourage the people to study this apparently superficial illustration (and, by implication, all of His parables) for a deeper, more significant meaning. The emphasis is on man's duty to employ his God-given faculties in pursuit of the Truth.

Verse 10: The disciples inquired as to Christ's reason for speaking in parables. From Mark 4:10 we learn that the question was asked in private. It seems to imply that the use of parables (at least to the degree seen on this occasion) was somewhat unprecedented and that the disciples were surprised by this change in His method of teaching.

Verse 11: The answer which Jesus gave the disciples beginning with this verse was certainly comprehensive but can be distilled to one overriding purpose: to separate the spiritual-minded listener from the secular-minded one. The parabolic form, as used by the Savior, was the perfect vehicle for accomplishing this end. His disciples, because of their interest in the Truth and their willingness to be taught, would have “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” revealed to them. To the majority of the

Jews, however, these Truths would remain hid-den. Misconceptions and abuses surrounding the word “mystery” are abundant in the religious world. It is very important, therefore, to understand how the Word of God uses the term. Albert Barnes made an excellent observation concerning this term:

The word **mystery**, in the Bible, properly means a thing that is **concealed**, or that **has been concealed**. It does not mean that the thing was **incomprehensible**, or even difficult to be understood. The thing might be **plain** enough if revealed, but it means simply that it **had** not been before made known. Thus the **mysteries of the kingdom** do not mean any doctrines incomprehensible in themselves considered, but simply doctrines about the preaching of the gospel and the establishment of the new kingdom of the Messiah, which **had not** been under-stood, and which were **as yet** concealed from the great body of the Jews.⁶

Verse 12: It might be argued that this verse was the origin of the expression, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” This statement by our Lord may appear rather cold on the surface, but in reality it is a very practical expression regarding God’s blessings, their availability to man, and man’s responsibility to utilize them. Those who make good use of the knowledge and opportunities which they have are blessed with more of the same. Those who make no effort to improve their lot lose what little they have. Surely no clearer illustration of this truth can be found than in the parable of the talents (Mat. 25:14ff). In Ro-mans 1:20ff Paul taught that every accountable human being who has ever lived, simply by virtue of being conscious and a part of this world, has had all the evidence necessary to **know** that God is. In other words, all men are on equal footing with regard to knowledge of God’s existence. Those who have applied this knowledge in the right way and reached for more have, without exception, been blessed (cf. Acts 8:26–39; 10; et al.). Those who have refused this knowledge, though, have been given up “unto a reprobate mind...” (Rom. 1:26, 28).

Verse 13: Why did Jesus speak to the people in parables? “Because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” The majority of the Jews were perfectly content with their misconceptions about the Messiah and His kingdom and had no intention of entertaining any teachings to the contrary. It is significant that just previous to this discourse (Mat. 12) the scribes and the Pharisees had made it plain that whatever the Savior did or said, they would interpret it as evil. They saw only what they chose to see and were blind to all else.

By the use of parables, Jesus dealt with the people precisely according to their character and their interest in the Truth. Those who would ignore, abuse, or pervert the Truth could find nothing to work with in the simple narratives of every day events. At the same time, Christ’s parables contain a wealth of invaluable knowledge for those who care enough to search for it and embrace it. For this reason, the parable has been aptly described as “a shell that keeps good fruit **for** the diligent, but keeps it **from** the slothful.”⁷ This method of teaching by our Lord cannot be construed as unfair in any way. The only people who could not perceive the Truth within the parables were those who had conditioned themselves not to perceive the Truth.

Verses 14–15: Here Jesus employed a prophecy from Isaiah 6:9–10 to elaborate further on the spiritual condition of most of His hearers. The thrust of the prophecy is in the phrase, “and their eyes **they** have closed” (Mat. 13:15, emph. AM). The Jews of Christ’s day, just as the Jews of Isaiah’s day, had made themselves immune to the effects of God’s revealed Truth (cf. Acts 7:51–53; 13:46; 28:26–27; et al.). Their hearts and minds had become sluggish (“waxed gross”) from lack of proper use. They had completely closed their ears and eyes (in effect, all of their senses) to God and His Will.

As a result of their willful ignorance, they were insensitive to the only message which could bring about repentance, conversion, and healing (i.e., forgiveness).

Verses 16–17: In a sharp and encouraging contrast to the unbelieving majority, Jesus' disciples were open and receptive to the Truth, whatever the method used to convey it. Their senses ("eyes and ears") were functioning on the spiritual level and were being used as God intended. Therefore, they are called "blessed" (v. 16). Furthermore, because of their faith in the Lord, these disciples would be permitted to know Truths concerning His kingdom that even the devoted servants of the Old Testament ("prophets and righteous men") were not permitted to know (v. 17).

Chapter 13:18–23: Jesus Explains the Parable of the Sower

Verses 18–19: From Luke's account of this day (Luke 8:9), we see that the disciples requested an explanation of this first parable. Mark's account (Mark 4:13) implies that by explaining the parable of the sower Jesus intended to provide some guidance as to the interpretation of parables in general. Although the language of Matthew 13:19 clearly implies that the seed in this parable represents the Word, both Mark and Luke recorded explicit statements to that effect (Mark 4:14; Luke 8:11). This being the case, the sower obviously represents one who teaches the Word of God and, ultimately, the One who **is** the Word of God (cf. John 1:1–14). The sower, the seed, and the goal of the sower are all constant in this story. As the Word is broadcast, however, it encounters different types of human hearts (represented by the four different soils) and produces varying results.

The wayside soil (Mat. 13:19) is analogous to those who are exposed to the Word but who fail to understand it and, therefore, are unreceptive to it. It is important to realize

that this type of heart has the very same opportunity as all the others. It comes into contact with the Word. Because of its callused condition, though, the Truth cannot penetrate, sink in, or germinate in this heart. As a result, the devil (“the evil one”) quickly removes the potential influence for good lest it should have any effect. In many ways, this is the type of heart which our Lord discussed earlier (vv. 13–15)—the type of heart which prompted the use of parables in the first place.

Verses 20–21: The rocky soil stands for those who hear and understand the Word, but only on an emotional, superficial level. This type of heart is quite receptive to the Word (it “straightway with joy receiveth it,” v. 20) but is not mature enough to produce anything of lasting value. Its shallowness results in a quick, eager conversion and a correspondingly rapid falling away because no thought is given to the cost of obeying the Word. Since this heart, by its very nature, does not allow the Word to take root (v. 21), it has no stability. It has, therefore, no basis for enduring the trials and persecution (represented by scorching heat) which inevitably come because of the Word.

Verse 22: The thorny soil represents the hearer who clearly has the capacity to bear fruit. This heart is open to the Truth and deep enough and fertile enough for the Truth to take root and grow. This heart, however, is also full of powerful distractions which are allowed to compete against the Word and eventually “choke” it out of existence. In short, the problem with this type of hearer is that spiritual and eternal concerns are subordinated to secular and temporal concerns. The Truth of God’s Word and all the good which it is capable of producing is given second place behind “the care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches.” Preoccupation with the matters of this life (whether cares or riches) is, by nature, an exercise in self-deceit. The promise of

meaningful happiness or security will never be fulfilled by anything tied to the material world. Furthermore, the pursuit of material wealth as an end in itself will only distract the heart from its true purpose and render it unfruitful (cf. Mat. 6:24, 33; 1 Tim. 6:9–10; Jam. 4:4).

Verse 23: Finally, the Lord tells us that the good soil in this parable depicts the person who receives the Word, takes it to heart, and is productive. Luke described this category as “the honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). Honesty is manifested in the sincere reception of the Truth. Goodness is seen in the practical application of the Truth, so as to bear fruit. The fact that even when the Word reaches the good heart, the yield may vary is easily understood in light of the unique set of circumstances surrounding each individual hearer. Differences in such factors as innate ability, upbringing, education, life span, and sphere of influence will quite naturally result in different degrees of productivity.⁸

Chapter 13:24–30: The Parable of the Tares of the Field

Verses 24–25: In keeping with the theme of sowing and reaping, Christ next likened the kingdom of Heaven to “a man that sowed good seed in his field” (v. 24). In this case, however, an enemy sowed bad seed among the good. This bad seed is labeled as “tares” or “darnel,” and refers to a common weed which very closely resembled the wheat which was planted. In a manner characteristic of criminal activity in general (cf. John 3:19), the enemy carried out his evil work under the cover of darkness, “while men slept,” and then fled the scene (Mat. 13:25).

Verses 26–28: In time, the tares inevitably sprouted along with the wheat (v. 26). Since the servants of the householder knew that he had sown only good seed in the

field, they questioned the origin of the tares (v. 27). The simple answer given by the householder seems to indicate a practical resignation toward the realities of life: “An enemy hath done this” (v. 28a). At this point, the servants were ready and quite willing to eradicate the tares, but were restrained from doing so in order to prevent any damage to the wheat (vv. 28b–29).

Verse 30: The problem of the tares was not ignored, but rather postponed until such a time as it could be dealt with perfectly. The householder instructed his servants to let the two plants grow together until harvest time. In this way, a clean separation could be made which would cause no harm to the wheat. The tares would be gathered up first to be burned, and the wheat could then be gathered into the master’s barn. As with the par-able of the sower, Jesus’ explanation of this story will be discussed where it occurs later in the text (vv. 36–43).

Chapter 13:31–32: The Parable of the Grain of Mustard Seed

Verses 31–32: In the parable in these verses Jesus again compared the kingdom to the realm of agriculture. This illustration concerned the planting of a small, seemingly insignificant seed and the impressive size of the tree which grew as a result. The seed in this case is identified as “a grain of mustard seed...which indeed is less than all seeds.” The point here is not that this seed is literally the smallest in existence (because it is not), but simply that the mustard seed is extremely small (a hyperbole). This is especially the case when it is compared with the plant it produces, one which “is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree....” The reference to birds lodging in the branches of the tree is most likely nothing more than an incidental indication of its ultimate size (v. 32).

The message of this parable is very direct and simple, but is also prophetic with regard to the origin and development of the kingdom of Heaven. Though this kingdom (i.e., the church) may have had an apparently insignificant beginning, its growth, its influence, and its impact have been phenomenal. It has been well stated: “The wonder of how the kingdom began in an obscure province by the birth of a child to humble and obscure parents in a stable, and how the kingdom grew to encompass people of every kindred and nation is aptly illustrated by this parable.”⁹

Chapter 13:33: The Parable of the Leaven

Verse 33: The kingdom of Heaven was here compared to “leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.” Leaven, or yeast, is the active ingredient in bread making. Hence, the domestic realm of the woman adding leaven to a common quantity of meal supplies the framework for the story. Because of its *modus operandi*, leaven serves as an apt figure to represent the idea of influence. Although the Bible uses this figure almost always to denote an evil influence (cf. Mat. 16:5–12; 1 Cor. 5:6–8), in this parable Christ used it to symbolize good (“the kingdom of heaven is like...”).

The thrust of this parable is quite similar to that of the previous one. It is about the amazing growth which would characterize the kingdom. The focus now, though, seems to be on the **nature** of the kingdom’s growth, rather than merely the degree of that growth. The point is that the message of the kingdom (i.e., the Gospel) would have a gradual but undeniable influence in this world. This influence would be small in the beginning (as though “hidden” within the meal), but would gradually diffuse throughout the individual and throughout humanity in general.

Chapter 13:34–35: Parables and Prophecy

Verse 34: On other occasions, Jesus employed very direct and explicit language to get His message across (cf. chapters 5–7, 19, 23, et al.). In this instance, however, His teaching was exclusively via parables.

Verse 35: After recording the first four parables, which were delivered to the multitudes, Matthew paused to note that our Lord’s activities were in perfect harmony with the prophecies of the Old Testament. This was a common characteristic of Matthew’s record, with the words, “that it might be fulfilled...” (or their equivalent) appearing in almost half of its chapters. This verse reveals that Matthew had in mind Psalms 78:2 as the passage fulfilled by Christ’s use of parables. The “things hidden from the foundation of the world” are simply matters pertaining to Christ’s kingdom which were being taught for the first time. These things were discussed earlier in the chapter in conjunction with “the mysteries of the kingdom” (cf. vv. 10–17).

Chapter 13:36–43: Jesus Explains the Parable of the Tares

Verse 36: Jesus now left the multitudes and entered into a more private setting with His disciples (perhaps the same house mentioned in v. 1). Given the fact that there has been throughout history a considerable degree of misunderstanding about the parable of the tares, it should come as no surprise that the disciples asked the Lord for assistance with it. The concise and straightforward manner in which each significant element of the story is listed and then explained seems to anticipate the attempted abuses which would later come. Those elements which Christ did not bother to explain are, by definition, insignificant.

Verses 37–39: The parable of the tares is about ultimate Judgment and eternal

separation between good and evil. In this world (for the field of this parable is explicitly defined as the **world** and not the church, v. 37), there are people who may be thought of as “good seed” and people who may be thought of as “tares.” Those who were described as good seed exist and grow by the Lord’s design and with His approval. They are “the sons of the kingdom,” sown by the Son of Man. There are also, however, those described as the tares, “the sons of the evil one” (v. 38). These are those whose existence is a result of the devil, his enmity against all that is good, and his efforts to pollute the world (v. 39). Here, as in many other passages, we see that God knows of **only two** classes of people, serving **two** opposing masters, destined for **two** mutually exclusive ends.

Verses 40–43: At the end of the world (“the harvest”) we see that in a single act of perfect Judgment Christ will direct His angels to cull “all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity” (vv. 40–41). Just as the tares were gathered up to be burned, so are the people they represent destined to be cast “into the furnace of fire” (42a). This can be nothing less than a literal description of the everlasting punishment of Hell, where there will be unimaginable remorse, sorrow, and suffering (v. 42b; cf. v. 50; 25:41; Mark 9:43–49; Luke 16:23; Rev. 20:10,15). **In the same moment** (contrary to premillennial theory) that the wick-ed are gathered for eternal damnation, the righteous will “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mat. 13:43a). Obviously, this is a reference to the glorious nature of Heaven and all its inhabitants. Jesus concluded His explanation by repeating the admonition to give serious consideration to the lesson (“He that hath ears, let him hear” [v. 43b]).

No present-day discussion of the parable of the tares would be complete without

touching on one of the most common abuses of it. The fact that the servants in this story are forbidden to uproot the tares (v. 29) is offered by many as an argument against “church discipline” (withdrawal of fellowship, in particular). There are at least two insurmountable problems with this line of reasoning. In the first place, Jesus’ explicit statement that “the field is the world” (v. 38) cannot be denied or explained away. The prohibition, therefore, applies to attempts to remove evil men from the **world**, not the church. This point corresponds perfectly with what Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians:

I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators; not at all meaning with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.... For what have I to do with judging them that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth (1 Cor. 5:9–13).

Furthermore, if Christ were teaching in this passage that we are not to endeavor to keep His church pure, He would be directly contradicting Himself (Mat. 18:15–17) as well numerous Scriptures in which Christians are commanded to exercise judgment and discipline upon erring brethren (cf. Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 The. 3:6–15; et al.). In the final analysis, the argument is nothing more than a transparent attempt to force a “doctrine of convenience” into a text (and a Bible) which has absolutely no room for it. The subject of “church discipline” was simply not under consideration in this parable!

To suppose that Jesus meant to teach that good and bad men must be permitted to live and work together in the church with no discipline by withdrawal is a perversion of the simple meaning given by Jesus of this parable...There is no hint in the parable that his thought is upon church discipline.¹⁰

This parable also exposes the false, extremely damaging, and far-reaching theory which denies that alien sinners are amenable to the law of Christ. This theory alleges that the new covenant of Christ (i.e., His law, the Gospel) applies only to those who are in His kingdom, and that alien sinners are therefore not accountable to His law. Teachers of this doctrine then dogmatize that since Matthew 19:9 (Christ's law on marriage, divorce, and remarriage) is part of His "covenant" it therefore applies only to those in the church. Thus (so they teach) before people obey the Gospel, they may marry, divorce, and remarry indefinitely with-out committing adultery, and they may continue to live with whatever spouse (number 2 or number 20) they have at the time of their "conversion." However, in the parable of the tares, the "field is the world," which demonstrates the truth that the **en-tire world** (not the church/kingdom of Christ solely) is amenable to His law, the Gospel. This being so, **all men everywhere** are accountable to the authority of the Son of God, which He exercises through His Word, His written law (Mat. 28:18–19), by which all men will be judged at last (John 12:48). Indeed, all men everywhere are accountable to Matthew 19:9!

Chapter 13:44: The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

Verse 44: Since there is nothing in the text to indicate a change of setting from verse 36, Jesus apparently addressed the next series of parables to His disciples alone rather than to the multitudes. In the first of these, the kingdom is likened "unto a treasure hidden in a field...." As it was somewhat common for people in that culture to hide their treasures in the earth, it is usually supposed that the parable has reference to this practice. Some commentators, however, prefer the idea of a mine which could not be removed from the field and so necessitated the purchase of the field.¹¹ In either

case, the thrust of the parable is unchanged.

The hidden treasure was discovered (unintentionally, it appears) by a man who immediately took steps to purchase the field. This parable does not condone the man's dishonesty in hiding the treasure again and failing to disclose it to the owner of the field. Christ was merely taking a page from the everyday behavior typical of human beings. The point is that this man recognized the value of what he had found. He gladly and eagerly sold everything else he had in order to possess that treasure. The spiritual application is obvious: The kingdom of Heaven is more valuable than any treasure man can imagine. Once the Truth of God's kingdom is found, no sacrifice should be considered too great in obtaining it.

Chapter 13:45–46: The Parable of the Costly Pearl

Verses 45–46: As in the previous parable, the central theme of this lesson is the supreme value of the kingdom of Heaven. It is clearly worth whatever a man must give in order to have it. Here, however, there is added emphasis upon man's interest in and pursuit of the Truth. Whereas in the parable of the treasure the man found it by accident, the merchant in this parable was deliberately and diligently "seeking goodly pearls" (v. 45). Once again, though, when the "one pearl of great price" (i.e., the treasure, the kingdom) is found, everything else is considered expendable by comparison (v. 46). So should be our attitude toward the kingdom of Heaven. It, above all else, is worthy of man's most earnest searching and willing sacrifice (cf. Mat. 6:33; Rom. 8:18).

It is worth noting here that in the two parables just discussed there is an implicit message regarding man's responsibility in entering into the kingdom (i.e., the church or

the saved state). An undeniable conclusion warranted by both of these lessons is that the kingdom of Heaven is something for which man must pay a price. Obviously, there would be no treasure for man to find if God had not made it available (and if Christ had not made the ultimate sacrifice). It is just as clear, however, from these two parables (even if there were there no other passages on the subject) that God expects (yea, requires) man to put forth effort and to make sacrifices both in finding the kingdom and in laying hold of it. This arrangement may simply be thought of as a “design characteristic” of God’s plan of salvation. Man’s response, though it does not merit God’s grace, is a necessary part of the equation. The popular and oft-told lie that “We do not contribute one whit to our salvation...,” is a flagrant denial of this and every other passage of Scripture which touches on the subject.¹² There **are** things which man **must** do in order to be saved.

Chapter 13:47–50: The Parable of the Drag-Net

Verses 47–48: In this final parable of the chapter Christ compared the kingdom to the work of fishing, something which would be quite familiar to many of His disciples. A typical fishing net (or drag-net) was constructed with floats along the top and weights along the bottom so that when it “was cast into the sea” it spread out vertically and horizontally “and gathered of every kind” (v. 47). Once the net was filled, it was pulled up onto the beach and the contents were sorted. The “good” were collected in vessels, but the “bad” were merely “cast away” (v. 48).

Verses 49–50: It is interesting that in this passage there is no break between the parable and the Lord’s explanation of it. The drawing of the net onto the shore represents “the end of the world.” At this time the angels will “sever the wicked from

among the righteous,” with the wicked being subject to the horrors of Hell. This parable is similar to that of the tares in a number of ways (cf. vv. 24–30, esp. vv. 41–42). It is about good and evil existing together for a time, yet moving ever closer to a point at which the final, irrevocable separation will be made.

Though there have been many discussions over whether the net represents the church per se or “simply the inevitable progress of all things towards eternity,” the question makes little or no difference in the practical application of the parable.¹³ The point our Lord made here is the same one that is emphasized throughout the Bible. There **is** a day coming in which good and evil men will be clearly distinguished and rewarded appropriately—a day in which the wicked will no longer be able to make a pretense of righteousness, a day in which it will be too late to “change camps” and avoid consequences.

Chapter 13:51–52: Admonition to Use the Truth Properly

Verse 51: After all the Truths which Christ had presented this day in the form of parables, He was naturally concerned with how well His disciples were comprehending. The question, *Have ye understood all these things?* was designed primarily to elicit serious consideration and reflection. The disciples believed that they understood and answered accordingly (v. 51).

Verse 52: Here the Lord made use of parabolic form once again to deliver a charge that the disciples make proper use of their knowledge. The phrase, “every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of Heaven” (v. 52), refers to those who know and understand the Truth. Though a “scribe” originally meant one who transcribed the law, it came to be a common term for a teacher of the law as well (cf. Ezra 7:6, 10).

Since His followers had stated that they understood the Truth, the instruction here is to make use of that treasure at every opportunity. The comparison Christ made conveys the idea that: “As a householder graces his banquet with things already in the house, and with other things which have just been provided, so a religious teacher must refresh his hearers out of both his past and his present experiences and study.”¹⁴

Chapter 13:53–58: The Response of Jesus’ Own People

Verses 53–54: Having completed His teaching on this occasion, Jesus departed for “his own country,” which would have been Nazareth (v. 53). Here, true to form, He never missed the opportunity to teach. From Mark’s record (Mark 6:1–6) we learn that this was on the sabbath, when there was customarily an open invitation in the synagogue for guests to address the assembly (cf. Luke 4:16ff; Acts 13:13–15). The people were astonished at His abilities and His wisdom, as well they should have been (v. 54). Amazement in itself, however, is never a sufficient response to the revealed Will of Heaven. The people of Nazareth, because of prejudice, arrogance, familiarity, and en-vy, could not (i.e., they would not) reconcile the powerful teacher they now saw with the humble upbringing they remembered.

Verses 55–56: The contemptuous questions they asked about the Savior all focused on His humanity and denied His Divinity. Because of this contempt, there were no answers. They could not understand how a carpenter’s son, who grew up in their village, whose family they all knew (even to that day), could be capable of the things they had seen and heard of Jesus (“Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works?” (v. 54), “Whence then hath this man all these things?” (v. 56). The obvious conclusion demanded by the evidence was that Jesus was much more than just a

carpenter's son from Galilee.

The language regarding Christ's family members (v. 55) is so clear and so plain that any attempt to escape its meaning evidences an ulterior motive. The words in these verses obviously have reference to the half-brothers and sisters of Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph (not "cousins" or some other distant relations, cf. Mat. 12:46; Mark 3:32; John 2:12). The only problem one might have in understanding this simple fact arises from the untenable Roman Catholic dogma that Mary should be considered an object of worship because she supposedly remained a virgin throughout her life.

Verse 57: The concept that Jesus might be more than merely one of them was unthinkable to the people of Nazareth. Hence, "they were offended in Him." In other words (for the reasons already noted), they stumbled and fell at the notion that Jesus might be anything more than what they had determined Him to be. The tragic result of the people's unbelief is seen in the proverb which Christ applied to the situation ("a prophet is not without honor...").

Verse 58: The unbelief of the people also resulted in His cessation of the production of the only evidence (mighty works or powers) which could validate His teachings and confirm His Deity. The sad irony is that the people of Nazareth had opportunities which were unique to all of human experience. The Son of God, God in the flesh, chose to live in their town while upon the earth. They observed and associated with Him for some thirty years. They had the Scriptures which foretold His coming. They heard His teachings and saw His miracles. In spite of all these blessings and advantages, they sealed their own fate in an act of blind, foolish prejudice which caused even the Christ to marvel (cf. Mark 6:6).

Conclusion

To those familiar with the life of Christ, it should come as no surprise that even His enemies were forced to concede that “Never man so spake” (John 7:45–46). Without question, His abilities and His impact as a teacher will never be equaled on this earth. Centuries after the parables in this chapter were given, they still serve so perfectly to demonstrate and to elucidate the many facets of the kingdom of Heaven. Inherent in the teaching of this kingdom are the principles of dissemination of God’s Truth, preparation of man’s heart, growth, productivity, sacrifice, and separation of good and evil.

At the same time, Christ’s reasons for teaching in parables are still relevant today and must not be forgotten. God has ordained everything about our existence so that our response to Him requires the free exercise of the will and the intellect. He will not overwhelm us with His Will. Because of this we have the freedom to “see without seeing” and “hear without hearing.” We are capable of dulling our senses to the Truth and placing ourselves in precisely the same category as those who condemned themselves to eternal punishment (the unbelieving Jews, the tares, the bad fish, and the people of Nazareth). That same Truth, however, has always been available to anyone who is willing to love and respect it, search for it, sacrifice for it, and use it to the glory of God.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. E.g., DeHoff, Clarke, and Dummelow.
3. J. K. Gossett, “The Mysteries Of The Kingdom” in *The Book of Matthew*, ed. Garland Elkins and Thomas B. Warren (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1988), p. 373.
4. J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *The Fourfold Gospel* (Cincinnati, OH: The Standard Pub. Co., n.d.), p. 329.

5. Ibid.
6. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Matthew and Mark*, ed. by Robert Frew (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 140–41.
7. A. Lukyn Williams, *St. Matthew* in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. by H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1961), p. 47.
8. Wayne Jackson, *The Parables in Profile* (Stockton, CA: By the Author, 1978), p. 18.
9. James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1974), p. 193.
10. H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on The Gospel According to Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1952), p. 300.
11. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, (New York, NY: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), 5:150.
12. Rubel Shelly, "ARBEIT MACHT FREI!" in *Love Lines* (Nashville, TN: Woodmont Hills Church of Christ, 10/31/90).
13. Williams, p. 43.
14. McGarvey and Pendleton, p. 341.

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