

## Parables

Once upon a time there were two monks. They worked in a monastery that supported itself by weaving baskets and selling them. One day, when they had gathered a large number of baskets, they set out for the marketplace of the town nearest to their mountain home. The two monks parted ways at the center of piazza, one to the north and one to the south. They each agreed to sell baskets separately and meet at the end of the day to return to the monastery together. At the end of the day the first monk had sold all of his baskets and came to wait by the fountain for his friend. He waited all that night. His friend did not return. All the next day he waited and the next night, and finally the last hour that he would wait, his friend arrived, disheveled, dirty, and shame-faced. He said, “Brother, I cannot return to the monastery with you. I have sinned. I have succumbed to temptation. I have broken my vows. I have spent the money; I’ve committed fornication.”

The first monk listened and then said, “Come, my brother. We will return to the monastery and tell them that we have sinned. We will repent together and deliver at least half the money, and they never need know which of us spent the rest.” And so it was.

This parable might be troubling to some. Consider this interpretation of the parable’s meaning: One, when one person sins, all share in it. Sin is not entirely an individual act. Two, we are responsible for the sins of our brothers. The innocent monk takes responsibility for some of the sin, suggesting that if he had been there for his brother, he might not have yielded to temptation. Three, the potential for doing or committing almost every sin lies within each of us. Given the right circumstances, we could all commit almost any sin. So it is better to identify with our sinning brother than to judge him. Four, when our brother sins we need to stand by him, forgive him, and restore him.

Some may find this interpretation helpful. Others may find it problematic. Drawing forth theological deductions about sin, individual and corporate responsibility, community, and the extent to which we are made new might be more than is necessary. Maybe it is better to simply ask, “Which monk am I?”

The point of presenting this parable is to demonstrate that parables are often problematic because their meanings are never completely clear. Sometimes, the interpretations of parables are spelled out for us, and we still wonder what Jesus meant. Perhaps we need to stop focusing so much on interpretation and just listen to the story. If it is a story you can apply personally in your life, then do it. If it is not, then determine what you are to do with the information presented in the story.

As we consider parables, we first need to understand that it is very logical for Jesus to speak in parables at precisely this point in the narrative. For instance, if I truly wanted to communicate to you that the potential for every sin lies within you, and that apart from God’s preserving of you there is no sin that you can conceive of that you couldn’t commit if the circumstances were right, I might want to do it in a subtle way, warming you up for it a little, instead of just attacking you. Jesus was speaking to people who had proven to be highly unreceptive, so it makes sense that He would start to teach them about the way things are in parables. Furthermore, not only are they unreceptive, but some of them are downright hostile. If He explicitly explained His beliefs, they may have simply used it against Him, as they were prone to do. Jesus was protecting Himself to a certain extent by speaking in parables. But certainly once it’s clear that there is settled and heavy opposition to Jesus, parables appear. One-third of all the teaching in the synoptic Gospels is parables, and it begins right after the opposition is established.

In the group of parables in Matthew 13, Jesus addressed two groups. Some parables were for the crowds; others were only for the disciples. In Matthew 13:44 and following are parables just for disciples. The earlier ones are for everybody, to some extent at least. The topic is the kingdom and responses to the kingdom and it begins with this foundation, the parable of the sower. The parable begins in Matthew 13:1 with the phrase, "That same day," Presumably the same day that Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan. It was the same day that the Pharisees said, "Show us a sign; prove that You are the Messiah." It was that same day He spoke to them in parables, parables about the kingdom because He had to explain this great riddle. How could the Christ, the Savior, show these signs of the kingdom, show that He's defeating Satan, and only get opposition for it. How can it be? The disciples who loved Jesus had to be asking the question, "How can it be that the Redeemer has come, is performing the miracles by the hand of God to prove He is God's agent, and all He gets for it is hatred, accusation, and murderous thoughts?" This is a burning question that must be answered.

To this day a zealous Christian will still want to know how it can be that the Christ has come, that the Lord of the universe has come, that free and full salvation is offered, yet so many people are not only indifferent to it, but even actively against it. How can it be? Jesus told a story to explain it. The farmer, or the sower, went out to sow, and he scattered the seed. Some fell on a path, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocks and sprung up quickly because it had very little soil and the sun came and scorched it. Still other seed fell among thorns, and they grew up and choked the plant. Finally, other seed fell on good soil where it produced 100 or 60 or 30-fold. It is important to understand that this is the way things were done in the ancient world. Seed was scattered first and then tilled. Today tilling is first, and then seeds are planted, which works better. At least one translation says the seed was thrown on the road. The road here simply refers to the path. There weren't any cars. There were no asphalt roads. They walked from place to place. Most roads were dirt, and most roads just went through somebody's backyard. So it is understandable that some of the seed ended up in "the road."

The uncommon element in this parable is the yield. A yield of 100 or 60 or 30-fold is fairly typical today. But in antiquity, the yields were commonly 6 or 8 or 10 grains for every one sowed. So the amazing thing in this parable was how much fruit was yielded. And then Jesus said, "He who has ears let him hear." Today this parable tends to be considered the easiest parable of them all. It wasn't so easily understood for the people who first heard it.

Was it possible that the people who were there took a simple, moral lesson out of it and then went home? Some people probably did. In fact it seems most people didn't try to figure out what it was about. In Matthew 13:10, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Jesus explains that it is in order to give to some and to take from others, meaning that the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven had been given to the disciples but not to all the people. He didn't tell them who did the giving. God did the giving. Jews didn't use the word "God" any more than they had to. So "It has been given to you" means "God gave it to you." God had given the secrets to the disciples, but not to all the people. This is the mystery of God's sovereign decision. However, it's not simply the sovereign decision. Why does one person believe and another does not? Why do the Pharisees not respond, but the disciples do? On the one hand, we say faith is the gift of the God, no one can conjure it up, work it up, convince themselves. On the other hand, Jesus would not allow that truth to lead anyone into passivity and fatalism. It's true that it's a gift. It's also true that Jesus speaks in parables to punish unbelief. These were not people who came to the parables as a blank slate, but people who had already seen and heard plenty. Some judged Jesus' teaching and works as satanic. Others called it interesting, but didn't know what He meant. They wanted Him to explain things to them and they got an answer because they wanted one. Others actually followed Jesus.

Jesus said in Matthew 13:12, "Whoever has will be given more." Verse 13 explains why Jesus spoke in parable. I translate it this way, "Because seeing they do not see, hearing they do not hear or understand, so what little they have will be taken away because they didn't make use of what they did have." This is stressing that they failed to understand what they already had, and, therefore, the parables are going to punish those who failed to hear. He's going to punish them by hiding the Word from them or taking it away from them. Like in Amos 8:11, they will have a famine for the Word of God. Of all the punishments God can give, one of the most frightening is to say, "I will speak to you no more." This relates to the passage about "shake the dust off your feet and move on." Jesus was restating the message that God is not always going to wait on people to come to Him, even after the 4,000<sup>th</sup> offer.

Mark 4:10-12 states it a bit differently, and it is important to understand this slightly different spin. Jesus probably said both what is in Matthew and what is in Mark. He probably said a lot of things about why He spoke in parables. The Greek translation from the Aramaic, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may mean the two passages were just translated a little differently. Mark writes that Jesus said, "The secrets of the kingdom have been given to you, but to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving." In Matthew it's because they failed to hear. So Matthew is putting his emphasis on the idea that Jesus taught using parables as a punishment, while in Mark He's stressing the consequence. The consequence of parables was that those who were hard-hearted would see but not understand.

Some people today say that God is just begging you to come to Him. However, this is not fair to the overall testimony of Scripture. God is not begging us. God is Lord. He doesn't beg. He invites, but He doesn't beg. The parables take from some, and they give to others. How do parables take? They take by simply not giving us plain prose. Jesus didn't say overtly exactly what He meant all the time. Some people may have dismissed Him for that and simply left. How do parables give? First, they're vivid; they're memorable. Who could forget the parable of the Good Samaritan or the lost sons? They're graphic. Second, they are often open-ended. They prompt us to think. They move us to ponder. They're like a really good question. Third, sometimes they disarm us.

What does the parable of the sower mean? It means that there are different kinds of responses to the Word. Some are flat unbelievers. Nothing happens at all; there's no response whatsoever. Others are counterfeit believers. They look like temporary believers, like people who believe for a few days or a few minutes. They spring up and think Christianity sounds great. Then, as soon as the first thing goes wrong, they're gone. Others would appear to be believers, but they're defeated or they're fruitless, which is a contradiction, of course. They seem to possess some life but no fruit ever comes; they're choked. What does that mean? What a paradox, what a strange thing! Are they really believers or not? It's not quite clear, but if they are, they're very strange believers who don't produce anything. Finally, there are true believers who produce a wonderful harvest, 100 or 60 or 30 times what is sown.

That's where the parable ends. It doesn't fully explain it. It is incomplete. Only the application remains, and application is part of interpretation. The application is the question, where do you fit? What kind of soil are you? While the parable is called the parable of the sower, it is really about soils, different kinds of soil and their responses to the sowing of the Word. It is about whether there is an abundant harvest or not. But it is also a parable about the kingdom. Yes, it is about us and how we respond, but it's also a parable about the way the kingdom comes. Remember Jesus' words: "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom has been given to you." This parable teaches us about the kingdom. We asked, how can it be that the kingdom is here and yet there's no response? One answer is that some people are just unresponsive. But the other answer is that the kingdom comes into the world in a quiet, hidden form. It does not come like an army, but like a seed. Jesus did not say the kingdom of God is like a tidal wave,

like an army with a million men or even a thousand men, but like a sower scattering seed. The mystery is that it comes here so quietly, so invisibly. The disciples wondered how it could be. And Jesus told them to wait—it's like a seed, let it grow; more is coming, there's a harvest coming. He told them not to despair. They needed to know that the Christ in whom they had put their faith was in danger of dying and His whole work was in danger of being discredited. Jesus told them to relax because this was part of His plan. This is what the kingdom is like. It comes quietly.

It's also a parable about Jesus, who comes quietly like a sower, not like a general, not like somebody in an army, not like a wave, not like a mountain. He comes like a sower, just scattering seed.

The parable has several layers of meaning. It asks us who we are. It asks us if we know what the kingdom is like. It asks us to be sure we understand who Jesus is and how He comes and how God does His work in the world, not by compulsion, not by might, but by His Spirit. That's the way God works.

The next parable Jesus told also explains the way the kingdom is. It is called either the parable of the wheat and the tares or the parable of the weeds. It is also very foundational, and it presupposes and builds upon the parable of the sower, upon the idea of the Word coming quietly like a seed and being scattered and growing. Diverse responses and quiet growth and so forth are all assumed, but something else is presented. Jesus begins with a familiar idea: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed seed in his field." But then He adds something new: "The enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away, and when the wheat sprouted and formed, then the weeds also appeared and people were baffled. They wondered if they should tear out the weeds. They were told not to tear out the weeds because of the danger of rooting up the wheat as well." Any time there are weeds among good plants, a gardener has to be careful because the weeds can get tangled up with the good plants at the roots. The gardener has to wait and perhaps trim back the weeds until the harvest when he can separate them properly. So it is with this case. Jesus told them to let the wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest and then collect the wheat, put it in bundles, and then burn the weeds.

There are two perspectives of what this parable might mean. One view is that it is about the church. In the church, God, or Jesus, scatters His seed, and it's growing but somebody comes and wreaks havoc, polluting the church by scattering in unbelievers so the church will be impure. The point of the story is that church discipline may be valuable, but you can never root the unbeliever completely out of the church. This view seems unlikely because Jesus says in Matthew 13:41 that the one who sowed is the Son of Man and the field is the world. So the field is not the church; the field is the world and the good seed stands for the sons of kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the harvest is the end of the age. Verse 41 says that the Son of Man will send His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and evil.

Now those who say this is about the church appeal to verse 41. They say this is about rooting weeds out of the kingdom. However, the kingdom and the church are not the same thing. The kingdom is broader than the church. The church is significant; it's the vanguard, the starting point, the focal point, but it's not the whole. The kingdom is broader. God rules and that's what this passage is saying. He ultimately rules over the entire world. The field is the world, and when God roots the weeds out of His kingdom, He's rooting them out of the entire world. The point of this parable, which was vital then and is vital now, is that in this age, although we might wish that the kingdom would grow up and dominate and there would be no pollution, it's not so. There is still evil in this world. In this age the two grow up together; the evil, unrepentant people are flourishing and living right among us in the field, the world. And it's only at the end of this age that they will finally be rooted out. Our maturation takes place while we are growing up along side unbelievers. It is important for the disciples to realize that this is the nature

of the age in which we live. We live in an age of opposition, in a world that will have much pollution and never will they be separated out until the end. Then at the end, the evildoers will be cast into the fiery furnace and the righteous will shine like the sun. This message was important for the disciples then, and it is important for disciples now.

Although the kingdom was growing quietly, imperceptibly, slowly, and with much evil alongside it, Jesus went on to tell four more parables to offer hope and encouragement to His disciples then and to us. He didn't simply offer the hard message that life is tough and expect His followers to just deal with it. He didn't simply offer the counsel of despair nor the counsel of standing firm in the face of this tough existence. In Matthew 13:31, the parable of the mustard seed suggests to us that the kingdom starts off very, very small, but it grows. Though the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, when it grows it's the largest of garden plants. In fact, it becomes like a tree with the birds of the air perched in its branches. The fact is that a mustard seed is a very small seed, perhaps the smallest of the common seeds that an Israelite might plant (yes, smaller seeds do exist, but Jesus was not giving a botany lesson here). The mustard seed can grow to be a great bush, even 10 feet high. It's virtually a tree. It can be shocking to see how big it gets. That's the way the kingdom is. It starts off really small, but it's astonishing how big it gets in the end.

Jesus says the kingdom is also like yeast. This is kind-of a strange analogy because yeast is ordinarily a sign of corruption, which causes things to decay and so forth and the yeast needs to be removed. But Jesus is allowed to shake people up. He says yeast is similar to the kingdom in that it is another small thing that grows into something bigger. When bread made with yeast starts off, it is a small lump of dough, but the yeast makes it rise into something more substantial. Only a small amount is needed—as little as a teaspoon transforms the whole thing. It also works imperceptibly, just like the kingdom. It works quietly, imperceptibly and it changes everything.

Jesus went on to discuss more with the disciples. He said the kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. It may come in small form, a surprising form, but it's worth everything you have. He also said that the kingdom is like a pearl. Some people say the parable of the pearl is almost identical to the idea of the field, but there's one difference. A pearl is small and valuable, and like a gem it is scrutinized and examined for imperfections, and then purchased. So if you take the time to scrutinize the kingdom, you will find that is indeed truly worth all that you have.

Jesus concluded by asking the disciples if they understood all that He had told them. They answered that they had understood. In response, Jesus didn't quiz them on their understanding or tell them how little they really understood. He encouraged them instead (Matthew 13:52). He said that every teacher of the law who been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house, who brings out of his store room new treasures as well as old. He was saying to His disciples then and to us now, "There are wonderful treasures from the old covenant and you must not neglect them. You must bring them out of the storehouse and make use of them. But I am giving you new treasures as well, that you are to treasure, and bring out. Share them all, both sides, the new and the old. And then you'll be joining Me in My kingdom work.