

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 13:1-52

Introductory Comment

One of the questions left from the previous section is this: Granted the obvious authority of Jesus' words (5-7) and the marvellous liberation of his deeds (8-9), why is it that most people failed to accept him or profit by his ministry (11-12)?

A key to the answer is found in the parables which underline the fact that God's offer of salvation is never forced, and, to be effective, requires a free response. It requires trust and faith, and a willingness to forgo everything else. The fact that Israel rejected its shepherd Messiah does not imply any failure on Jesus' part. God respects human freedom. Salvation-history is not predetermined. The fault lies in our unwillingness to allow our hearts to be softened by grace, and to take the risk of being loved and of responding in love to God's offer of intimacy.

Introduction

¹ *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.*

² **Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.**

³ **And he told them many things in parables, saying:**

The word 'parable' covers a number of literary forms ranging from simple illustrative analogies to quite intriguing riddles. The appeal of a parable is not so much to the logical mind as to the imagination. In the previous section Jesus has come up against hardened rejection, especially from the Jewish religious leaders. The problem with most of those who opposed Jesus was that they refused or were unable to listen to anything that lay outside the logic of their prejudices.

Therefore, in order to reach the leaders and the crowds over whom they have considerable power, Jesus chooses to bypass such closed logic and to use illustrations and stories to fascinate, intrigue and sometimes to startle his audience. He is faithful to his mission of revealing the Father. By using parables he hopes to break through the defences of their closed minds and entice their hardened hearts to open up to conversion.

compare
Mark 4:1-2
Luke 8:4

Parable of the Sower

Later we will examine an allegorical interpretation of this parable (13:18-23). It is important to listen first to Jesus' story and to imagine it as a parable rather than decipher it as an allegory. We are meant to use our imagination (13:3), and to let the parable carry us in the direction of its central thrust.

Here the central thrust is clear enough. Every detail of the story is a commonplace except the final one. Every farmer listening to Jesus knew that some of the seed necessarily fell on the hardened earth on which he had to walk in order to plough and to sow. Except in the valleys, the only way to retain the soil was to terrace the hillsides with rocks, and inevitably some seed fell in among the rocks and weeds. Even the level ground tends to be very rocky.

According to some scholars, it seems that the one thing that no farmer ever experienced was a thirty-fold crop; certainly not sixty or a hundredfold. It was the size of the harvest in Jesus' parable that would have caught the attention of his listeners, and they would have wondered what kind of seed could produce such an unbelievable crop? Jesus is hoping that his audience might realise that he is speaking about the word he is preaching to them and that he might touch the longings of their hearts and move them to want to listen.

The people had heard many words and had often failed to let them strike home. The learned among them, if they took Jesus seriously, would have to admit that much of their learning was unsoundly based. Jesus is asking them all not to despair over lost opportunities (seeds that have not produced a harvest). Yes, many graces have been lost and many opportunities not taken up. Now, however, through Jesus' ministry God is speaking the word they have been waiting for. It will produce its amazing harvest where it is welcomed.

If they do, they need not fear that their lives have been in vain, for the word which Jesus is preaching is so good that if now they allow it to enter their minds and hearts and lives, they will find that the harvest will be quite wonderful. It will more than make up for the losses that have occurred through past neglect, lost opportunities, or through following false directions. The plea with which Jesus concludes this parable (see also 11:15) calls to mind the opening words of the prayer which was prayed each day by observant Jews: 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4).

^{3b} **'Listen!** [imagine!]

A sower went out to sow.

⁴ **And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.**

⁵ **Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.**

⁶ **But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.**

⁷ **Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.**

⁸ **Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.**

⁹ **Let anyone with ears listen!**

compare
Mark 4:3-9
Luke 8:5-8

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'

¹¹ He answered, '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 those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."

¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen 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 Truly I tell you, many prophets and *righteous people* longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

compare Mark 4:10-13; Luke 8:9-10.

verse 12 compare Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18

verses 16-17 compare Luke 10:23-24

Jesus' purpose in speaking in parables

Two groups are clearly distinguished here. On the one hand there are the disciples to whom 'it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven'. The more open they are to receive, the more God can reveal to them, and the more God reveals to them, the more they are open to receive. They are indeed blessed to have heard and seen Jesus (see also 11:25-27).

On the other hand there are the others who have hardened their hearts or who are unwilling to look and listen. The more unwilling they are to listen, the less capable they are of hearing, till their hearts have become so hardened that nothing can penetrate them.

In explaining his reason for speaking to this second group in parables, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. God is encouraging Isaiah to accept the mission to preach, and not to be dissuaded by the obstinate refusal of so many to listen. God promises Isaiah that his mission will succeed in spite of the blindness and hardness of heart surrounding him. Jesus is facing similar rejection, but he is determined to keep speaking the word entrusted to him by his Father, and so to keep offering salvation to the crowds. Jesus uses parables as a means of facilitating revelation. They remain, however, meaningless riddles to those who are unwilling to repent and who avoid any insights that might urge change upon them.

Furthermore, Jesus does not want those who are closed to his message to be able to use his words against him or to provoke unrest. Jesus' message had the power to undermine the power exercised by the priests as well as by the Roman overlords.

The reference to the 'prophets and righteous people' reinforces Matthew's main theme: that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel.

The Parable of the Sower: an interpretation

If our heart is hard, the ‘evil one’(see also 5:37) can snatch even the word of God from us. This makes it all the more important to pray to the Father, as Jesus taught us: ‘rescue us from the evil one’(6:13). We should pray, too, for the gift promised through Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

We can lose heart when faced with ‘trouble or persecution’, forgetting the blessing pronounced by Jesus (5:10-12), and we can be distracted by ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth’, to such an extent that there is no room in our lives for listening to God’s word. We should read again Jesus’ words in the sermon on the mount (6:24-34).

We will know that we have truly taken the word into our hearts by the fruit that it produces in our lives (see also 7:17-18; 12:33).

¹⁸ *‘Hear then the parable of the sower.*

¹⁹ **When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.**

²⁰ **As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;**

²¹ **yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.**

²² **As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.**

²³ **But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’**

compare Mark 4:14-20
Luke 8:11-15

24 He put before them another parable:

**‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;
25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.**

26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

28 He answered, “An enemy has done this.”

The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?”

29 But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.

30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Parable of the Weeds

Jesus is confident in the good seed that God is sowing through his ministry, and he invites the crowds to look at their own lives and to discover there the good that comes to them from the hand of God. Yes, there is evil. It must be recognised for what it is, but it is not our task to anticipate God’s judgment or to think that we have the wisdom to discern wheat from weed so clearly that we can go around cleaning up the field. This is especially true if the field belongs to someone else.

There is too great a risk that we may uproot the wheat along with the weeds. God knows our hearts, and God cannot be deceived. Let us thank God for the wheat, and let us spend our time sowing good seed. Leave judgment to God.

This is in keeping with Jesus injunction: ‘Do not judge’(7:1). However, as noted in the commentary on 7:1-5, we must discern, and we must also make practical decisions with all the prudence we can muster. That Matthew’s community did not understand this parable as ruling out any kind of discernment is clear from 18:15-20: they found it necessary to excommunicate people from the community. Even then, however, since passing judgment requires knowledge of motivation, it is to be left to God.

The parable of the Mustard Seed

The startling contrast between the tiny seed and the large shrub encourages us not to judge by appearances. God is at work among us. It is his reign that Jesus is preaching, and it is being realised in Jesus' ministry. It may not come up to their expectations. It even seems to have disappointed John the Baptist (11:2-3), but Jesus' deeds are truly those of God's Messiah (11:2-6). If they learn from him they will find rest for their souls (11:29).

Moreover, there is room for all to find a home in the shelter of the community of Jesus' disciples. We recall the splendid image of Ezekiel as he looked forward to the final restoration of Israel:

On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.

– Ezekiel 17:23

The parable of the Leaven

The point Jesus is making is the same as that of the previous passage: do not judge by appearances. Only this time he is addressing himself to the daily experience of the women in the crowd. Three measures of flour would make enough bread for one hundred and fifty people: a veritable banquet! God's largesse is great and there is room for everyone at the feast being prepared by the Messiah.

Jesus' purpose in teaching in parables

We have noted many times Matthew's desire to keep linking Jesus with the sacred Scriptures, pointing to him as the fulfilment of the revelation and the spirituality of Israel. Here he quotes from Psalm 78:2. He recognises as prophetic not only the so-called prophetic books but the whole of the Old Testament (compare 2:23). Jesus' purpose in using parables is to reveal 'what has been hidden from the foundation of the world' (compare Colossians 1:25-26).

³¹ He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

compare Mark 4:30-32
Luke 13:18-19

³³ He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

compare Luke 13:20-21

³⁴ Jesus told *the crowds* all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.

³⁵ *This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'*

compare Mark 4:33-34

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.'

³⁷ He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

The parable of the Weeds: an interpretation

Understanding the parables is possible only for those who are committed to being Jesus' disciples (see 13:10-17). This is made obvious in a dramatic way by Jesus leaving the crowds and going 'into the house' (13:36; see 13:1) - a symbol for the Christian church (see also 2:11; 8:14; 9:10,28). The only way we can grasp the meaning of Jesus' words is to listen to him as he explains them to us. We listen from within the community of his disciples.

The explanation treats the parable as an allegory in which each element has a meaning. The focus is on the final judgment: the judgment of God 'at the end of the age'. This is not the judgment we make of ourselves or of each other within the limited perspectives of this world and its history, but the judgment of God that transcends all boundaries of space and time. We do not have to think of this as an event. The point being made is that whatever exists is known by God. Nothing is hidden from God. In God's judgment 'nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known' (10:26).

God will reveal all the different ways in which we put obstacles in the way, making it hard for people to respond to God and causing them to fall into sin, and we will each suffer or enjoy the fruit of our actions (Daniel 12:2-3). Once again the image of fire is used for the punishment of sin (see also 3:10,12; 5:22; 7:19). This is the punishment which is suffered in 'the age to come' (12:32), 'where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (see 8:12).

Jesus concludes with an urgent appeal that we listen (compare 11:15; 13:9). The terrible finality of God's judgment means that only the truth matters. If the present truth is that we are caught up in sin, and we admit it and seek God's mercy and forgiveness, he will heal us. If we stubbornly refuse to acknowledge our sin, all we can expect is to continue living a lie now and to end up destroying our lives. The final words of the sermon on the mount are relevant here (7:24-27).

The parable of the Discovered Treasure

All that matters is the priceless treasure. It brings joy, but can be purchased only by someone who 'sells all that he has'. Jesus is inviting us to discipleship (see 4:20,22; 9:9; 19:21).

From another point of view, we could think of ourselves as the treasure which Jesus has found. He gave all he had to redeem us (to 'buy us back'). This should not surprise us. Is it not the gospel of Jesus that each of us is a son or daughter of God, loved and delighted in by him (3:17)?

The parable of the Pearl

The imagery here points in two directions. If we picture God as the merchant and ourselves as the pearl, Jesus' words speak of how God looks upon each of us and what God is willing to do to draw us into communion with him. As Paul writes to the Romans:

God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

– Romans 8:32

If we picture ourselves as a merchant, Jesus is calling us to give up everything that hinders us from belonging to the community of his disciples who are committed to doing God's will and who will enjoy the fullness of God's life. Only if we give over all that we possess can we grasp hold of the kingdom. This is what Jesus means by being 'poor in spirit' (5:3). It is what the saints speak of as 'detachment', 'indifference', or 'abandonment'.

Even in our response to grace we tend to want to be in control. We tend to want to settle for what is familiar and comfortable. God, however, transcends all our experiences of him and continues to draw us beyond every expression of religion, however sacred. If we wish to remain open to God, we must remain open to hear a new call from the mysterious God and to seek God wherever God may call us.

We are to seek God in all things and be ready to find God in the most surprising and unexpected places, because God can reveal himself anywhere and can never be contained by us. Whatever we possess is not God and so, if God calls we must be willing to let everything go, however sacred it might appear to be and however filled with God we once found it.

⁴⁴ 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;

⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'

The parable of the Fishing Net

⁴⁷ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

⁴⁹ 'So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The scene described here by Jesus is reminiscent of the scene at the very beginning of this section (13:2). The final judgment is in fact occurring as people listen to Jesus. It is continuing through the ministry of those whom Jesus called to 'fish for people' (4:19). The response we give to his call determines the

The parable of the Fishing Net: an interpretation

This repeats the lesson of 13:36-43. What we do matters. We will find life if we entrust ourselves to the God revealed by Jesus. If we obstinately refuse to believe we will ruin our lives. However unclear this may be here in this world, when God's judgment is revealed it will be manifest.

Conclusion

The disciples are 'blessed' (13:16). They have left everything to follow Jesus and they have listened to Jesus and come to understand 'the secrets of the kingdom of heaven' (13:11). Jesus has said that to be a disciple is also to be an apostle (10:1-2). Like Jesus they are to reveal to others what has been revealed to them (11:25-27), drawing on tradition (the 'old' things of the Jewish law), and open to the new revelations being made by him who has come to fulfil the law and the prophets (5:17). It is not unlikely that the author saw himself as doing precisely this in writing his gospel.

The call is to 'imagine' (13:3), to 'listen' (13:43), while praying for the courage to keep our minds and hearts open to accepting the risk of seeing things which we have never seen before. Nor can we afford to forget that understanding comes only from Jesus and is found therefore only through intimate communion with him.

Through his parables, Jesus directs our attention away from ourselves to focus on God and the power of God's word. He encourages us to take hold of this word with all our hearts and to let it direct our lives. The 'word' is in no way impersonal. It is Jesus himself who is revealing God to us. Fullness of life comes to us if we open our hearts and minds and lives to him.

⁵¹ **'Have you understood all this? They answered, 'Yes.'**

⁵² **And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained [as a disciple] for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'**