

Week 15: *Matthew 13*

Hook



Main Point: Jesus used parables to teach His disciples about the kingdom: its value, its nature, and how God will sort the wicked from the good.

From its inception, cinema has been an incredibly popular entertainment medium. Even during the early 1900s, silent films would draw large crowds to observe their stories. The United States film industry alone earned more than 43 billion dollars in 2017¹. The film industry, to a great degree, harnesses the human desire to be moved by stories. Stories are vehicles by which individuals learn, grow, and change. They typically deal with themes that go beyond the characters to pose interesting scenarios to help the audience understand life in ways that can be mysterious. In other words, telling stories is a powerful thing.

Q: What stories have made the biggest impact on your life? Why?

Transition: Jesus Himself utilized the power of storytelling consistently throughout His ministry. When Jesus told a parable, He intended to teach the deep truths of God through a context that people could grasp more readily through a practical application of truth.

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Book

Main Point: Jesus used parables to teach His disciples about the kingdom: its value, its nature and how God will sort the wicked from the good.

Matthew 13:1–23 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Not everyone will accept the Gospel.

Q: What makes the good soil good?

Q: Why does the farmer sow seed in places he knows it won't grow well?

This chapter contains several parables about the kingdom of God, each of which tells us something different about the kingdom. Parables are unique kinds of stories. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, authors of *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, explain that parables function like jokes. They all have a “gut punch moment” that you have to “get,” like a punchline. While you can understand them if they are explained to you, it’s not the same experience as hearing a joke and laughing in the moment. Parables, like jokes, work by surprise. They elicit a response from the hearer — laughter, surprise, tears, a punch of guilt. The hearers are suddenly surprised by a spiritual truth.ⁱⁱ

Many of the parables are about the kingdom of God, since Jesus’ whole ministry goal was to proclaim the kingdom, but this chapter contains a special set of parables that literally open with “The kingdom of God is like ...” These parables are intentional teaching metaphors to explain the kingdom of God to us. The parable of the sower is the key to the others. Jesus explained to His disciples that the four kinds of soil correlate to people’s responses to the message of the kingdom. But the point of the parable, when seen in context with the other parables, is the *urgency* of the message. Judgment is coming, so we really want to be that good soil!ⁱⁱⁱ

Most of Jesus’ parables involve characters and situations that were familiar to His audience, in this case, a farmer and a field. The odd detail of this story, which His hearers would have noticed from the get-go, is that the farmer didn’t sow his seed all in the good soil. Farmers normally till and prepare a field, then only sow where the field is ready to receive the seed. A typical farmer wouldn’t sow seed on the path or even in the weeds or rocky places. The audience would have likely been thinking, “What a dumb farmer!” or “What a waste!” Jesus was making a strong point. He shared the Gospel with everyone, whether they were ready to hear it or not, whether people might have thought it would be a “waste” or not. The Gospel is not just for those who are sitting in church, ready and waiting to hear it. It is also for those who are far from God and actively running from Him. It is for those who are oblivious to Him and just living their own lives their own way. It is for those who have been hurt by the Church and

are off licking their wounds. You name the situation or the person, and the Gospel is for them. Jesus spread the seed of the Gospel everywhere. So should we.^{iv}

- The path – one of the footpaths around or through a field that a farmer would use to get to the plants in the middle. In today’s terms, sowing seed here would be like throwing it on your concrete driveway and expecting a plant to grow. It never took root at all. Jesus’ own explanation tells us that this soil is the one who hears the Gospel but doesn’t understand it. This isn’t about the preacher not doing a good enough job making the message understandable or relevant. The same seed was sown in all four places; it’s the soil that is different. It’s simply making the point that some people’s hearts are hardened and will not accept the message.
- The rocky soil – is most likely part of the field, just not the best part. In Palestine, a lot of the land is like this—shallow soil over rock. It was common for seed in these places to spring up quickly but then die because it cannot put down deep roots. If we don’t take the time to dig deep roots through Scripture, prayer and other spiritual disciplines, our faith won’t last.
- The thorns – Jesus explains that the thorns are the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth. Thorns grow up around all of us. We all live in the world. Jesus wasn’t advocating removing ourselves from the world but not letting the world choke us.

The implication is that the disciples are the good soil — they have heard the message and understood it (vv. 11–16). The Pharisees are the path. They heard the message but didn’t understand (v. 13). Their hearts were hardened like the “soil” of the path. Like the people of God in Isaiah’s time, they would hear but never understand. Their hearts had become calloused (vv. 14–15).

Some in the large crowd who followed Jesus were more like the rocky or the weedy soil. But Jesus’ disciples would prove themselves to be the good soil. Though they weren’t perfect, when persecution would come, they would not fall away (v. 21), they would endure it all the way to death. They even rejoiced and considered themselves blessed and honored to suffer for Jesus’ name (Acts 5:41).

The measure of good soil is whether it produces a crop. This is consistent with other passages in which Jesus said we will know people by their fruit (Matthew 7), that those who abide in Christ will bear good fruit (John 15), and that those who walk in the Spirit will bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5). Fruit is something that grows in good soil or on a healthy branch. It is not something we manufacture ourselves. It grows in our lives because we are planted in the right soil, because we are connected to the right vine. Jesus ended this parable with “He who has ears, let him hear” (v. 9). Those who do not have hardened hearts will hear the Gospel. Those who are the good soil — not shallow faith that quickly burns out or is choked by the cares of the world — will not only hear the Gospel but will bear fruit.

Q: In what particular ways does the world threaten to choke you like weeds?

Q: How can we prepare and fertilize our soil so the seed will grow?

Q: In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit's growing fruit in your life right now?

Matthew 13:24–52 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The kingdom is already here but not yet in its fullness.

Q: How do these parables describe the final Day of Judgment? How does that make you feel?

Q: Why is the Gospel worth trading everything else we have?

This section contains six parables: the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the hidden treasures, the pearl, and the net.

The Weeds: This parable describes how and why the world is filled with both the good and the wicked, growing side-by-side until God separates them at the end. The weeds here are *darnel*, a poisonous weed organically related to wheat, that looked so like wheat from the outside that it was next to impossible to tell the difference. The workers offered to try to pull out the weeds, but the owner was afraid they might damage the good wheat in the process, so he waited until they were both fully grown, at which point they were easier to distinguish.^v In the world, there are both wheat and weeds, growing together. On the Day of Judgment, God will separate them and burn up the weeds. But God's workers (the disciples and us) cannot tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds. We are not God. It is not our place to judge, not our place to decide between the good and the wicked, believers and unbelievers. God endures the wicked in His field in order to give all who would receive Him enough time to become His followers (Romans 9:22–24; 2 Peter 3:9).

The Mustard Seed and the Yeast: These parables describe the “already-not yet” of the kingdom of God. The kingdom has already arrived in Jesus, but it has not yet come in all its fullness. At the time, people wondered if Jesus' ministry really was the kingdom of God. It seemed so small and insignificant. Keener writes, “Jesus' initial arrival as a meek and politically inconspicuous servant rendered His mission as opaque as His parables, except to disciples bearing the insight of faith.”^{vi} Like a mustard seed, the kingdom starts out small, but will become extremely large. The mustard seed was the smallest seed known to the Jews of Jesus' day and was often used proverbially to talk about small things. The disciples will multiply themselves much, much more than a hundredfold.

Like yeast in a dough, the kingdom changes the whole world around it. The kingdom of God wasn't just about Israel. It would spread throughout the whole world. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells His disciples that the Gospel of the kingdom would be preached to every nation on earth and then the end would come (Matthew 24:14). The amount of bread the parable describes is enough for over 100 people, much more than any one woman would make for her family, nor could she physically knead that much dough by herself.^{vii} Keener writes, “The unnatural magnitude of the illustration probably suggests that the kingdom far exceeds daily examples to which it may be compared.”^{viii}

The treasure and the pearl: Both parables teach us the same truth — the kingdom of God is worth everything you have. The kingdom may be hidden to the world, like a treasure hidden in a field, but to the one who recognizes its value, it is worth everything he has. It is even worth it all to a wealthy pearl merchant. Those who really understand the value of the kingdom are willing to give up everything, take up their crosses and follow Jesus.^{ix}

The net: Like the parable of the weeds, this describes the Judgment at the end of the age, when Jesus will usher in the final kingdom, the consummation. As God separates the wheat from the weeds, He will separate the good fish from the bad fish, the wicked from the righteous. In both parables, the wicked are burned in the fiery furnace, where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth (vv. 42, 50).

Jesus closed these parables by saying that every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom is like a wealthy man who displays both his new and old treasures (v. 52), representing the old and new covenants. Both are valuable treasures. The new covenant brings us Jesus, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life in the kingdom, while the old covenant is valuable in the way it points ahead to the new. The Pharisees and scribes did not see value in the new (Jesus), but only in the old. Jesus brought and proclaimed a new kingdom but encouraged His disciples to not forget the old.^x

Jesus described a kingdom that was coming in judgment, a separation of the righteous and the wicked. This idea of judgment would not have been new to His original audience. But there was hope — the message of Jesus, of the Gospel, of salvation in Him. This message was worth giving everything for. It may not have seemed like much in the moment, but one day it would change the world. The question that remains at the end of this chapter is which one will you be? The good soil or the bad? The wheat or the weeds? The good fish or the bad? Will you be the man who trades everything he has for the Gospel? Or will you let the message of the Gospel pass you by?

Q: What would it look like for you to give all you have for the Gospel?

Q: Does God really expect us to do all that? Why or why not?

Matthew 13:53–58 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Jesus was not accepted in His hometown.

Q: Why didn't the people of Nazareth believe in Jesus?

Q: Why didn't Jesus do many miracles in their town?

When you think about it, Jesus' lack of acceptance in Nazareth isn't really surprising. He even spoke the lesson of it like a proverb — a prophet is not accepted in his hometown. These are the people who grew up with Him, who knew His parents. Some of them had probably changed

His diapers. They may have thought He was a nice guy and likely didn't have anything against Him. (He was without sin, after all!) But to believe He was the Son of God? The Messiah? God Himself? Imagine if someone tried to tell you that about a person you grew up with. Even if he were the nicest guy you had ever known, it would still be a hard sell.

Jesus didn't fit any of the images they had of what the Messiah would be. He was just a carpenter's son (v. 55). He was born in humility (Philippians 2) and lived in humility while He was with them — for 30 years! He really wasn't anyone special in their eyes. He hadn't done any miracles until He started His ministry, and they were shocked at His wisdom and mighty works (v. 54). Nazareth was a small, unimportant town. No one would expect a prophet to come from there (John 1:46). Again, God shows us that He uses the humble and the meek, that His kingdom is upside-down from the world. God's own Son walked among them for 30 years, and they thought He was just another guy. He didn't come in pomp and circumstance, riding in on a warhorse. He came in humility, as a baby born in a feed trough to an everyday family in an obscure village. And yet, that mustard seed would become a massive tree and, like yeast in dough, He changed the whole world.

Jesus was not surprised. He spoke a common proverb, one the Nazarenes themselves were familiar with — “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”^{xi} At first, even His own family didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). Even His relative John had some doubts when he saw the kind of ministry Jesus was carrying out (Matthew 11:3) — the same John who had known Jesus His whole life, from in the womb, and whose mission was to point to Jesus as Messiah. Jesus wasn't what any of them expected. But those who had ears to hear would recognize that He was a hidden treasure, a precious pearl, and would give all that they had to follow Him (Matthew 16:24–26).

Q: In our culture today, what false images do people have of who Jesus is and why He came? How do those images affect the way they live?

Q: If you really believe Jesus is who the Bible says He is and one day the righteous and the wicked will be separated, how will it affect the way you live?

Week 15: *Matthew 13*

Took

Main Point: Jesus used parables to teach His disciples about the kingdom: its value, its nature, and how God will sort the wicked from the good.

Jesus used these parables to communicate very difficult truths in ways that His people could understand. Rather than saying not everyone will accept the Gospel outright, Jesus illustrates the reasons, which allows His followers to understand the truths more deeply. Because of the nature of these stories, we, as believers, need to pay close attention to interpreting and understanding these stories.

Q: What resources are there to help enlighten your perspective on these parables?

Q: How can we internalize these truths to make sure we are living in light of them?

CHALLENGES

THINK: What do I still need to give up in order to follow Jesus fully and completely? What things am I still holding onto? In what ways am I still ruling my own life instead of giving my all to Jesus? What would happen if I went all in and gave it all up for Him?

PRAY: For an evangelistic heart, opportunities to share the Gospel, and bravery to do it. Because we don't know the soil.

ACT: Meditation. Spend time meditating on God's Word this week. Let the message of the Gospel sink deep into the soil of your heart. Choose just one passage to read over and over, slowly, really chewing on it and letting it speak to you in a new way. Think, pray, and meditate on it day after day throughout the week.

Hook, Took & Editing by Hayden Seeley

ⁱ <https://deadline.com/2018/07/film-industry-revenue-2017-ibisworld-report-gloomy-box-office-1202425692/#comments>

ⁱⁱ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

^{iv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

^v T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

^{vi} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

^{vii} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

^{viii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

^{ix} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

^x John Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

^{xi} Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).