

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Clusters of Parables: Matthew 13:1-43

Today we begin a short series of talks which we are entitling "Clusters of Parables".

A parable has been described as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It must have been terrific actually to hear the Lord Jesus tell those stories. We thank God that we have the record of them in the Bible. Each individual parable told by Jesus is a gem in its own right. Like a precious stone, the more a parable is considered, the more delight it gives. When precious stones are placed in a cluster each stone retains its own value but there is also an inter-play between each stone in the cluster so that the over-all impression is enhanced. In a similar way, I trust that we will see in this series that there are added heavenly meanings when God puts a number of parables together in His precious Word.

Our first consideration of these clusters of parables is in Matthew 13 where there is a grouping of seven parables. In the Bible, the number 7 generally speaks of completeness or perfection and so in Matthew 13 the seven parables give a complete view of the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes in the Bible a group of seven items can be divided into four and three or three and four, for example the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. So it is in Matthew 13 where there is a clear break after the fourth parable. Jesus tells the first four parables to anybody who will listen. But in verse 36, He sends the multitude away and the last three parables are then spoken only to the disciples. Those first four parables, then, deal with the external world aspect of the kingdom of heaven and the last three parables with the divine mind on the kingdom of heaven.

We will therefore divide our consideration of Matthew 13 and its seven parables into the first four parables this week and the last three parables next week, God willing.

Verse 11 of our chapter tells us that the subject of the chapter is the kingdom of heaven. So what is the kingdom of heaven? The structure and content of our chapter give us some clues. We will see as we touch on each of the first four parables that the kingdom of heaven is a wide concept not limited to true believers only, not just the Church, but is the whole sphere of Christian profession, encompassing the real born again believers in Jesus as well as those who are not real but professors only.

The end of chapter 12 of Matthew is a real watershed. Up to that point, Jesus has spoken in a straightforward way to everyone. In the last four verses of chapter 12 Jesus indicates that His family is not the Jews or any with whom He had earthly ties, but His spiritual family is made up of all those of whatever nation or background who have a spiritual link with His Father – see verse 50.

When we come to chapter 13, therefore, for the first time in Matthew Jesus speaks many things in parables – see 13:3. Up to now the Lord had used what could be called parables only rarely, for example once in chapter 7 and twice in chapter 9. When, as recorded in Matthew 13 verse 10, the disciples ask why this extensive use of parables now, Jesus explains in verses 11 to 16 that the mysteries contained in the parables are for the ears and hearts only of those in His new family, those with the spiritual capacity to understand these things. Those outside that family have no spiritual perception at all. This message is reinforced by the fact that Jesus goes on to explain the meanings of two of the first four parables, numbers 1 and 2, but those explanations are given only later to the disciples and not to the general multitude.

The first parable recorded in Matthew 13 is the parable of the sower, also recorded in Mark 4 and Luke 8. The words of the parable are contained in verses 3 to 9 and I would like to read those words from the Authorised Version of the Bible: "Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: but the other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."

So, the parable tells of a sower going out to sow seed. At that time, of course, a farmer would spread the seed by hand with the inevitable result that the seed would land on a variety of grounds. Jesus mentions four grounds in His story: the way side or the path side in verse 4, the stony ground in verse 5, the thorny ground in verse 7 and the good ground in verse 8.

The nature of the ground on which the seed landed determined what happened to the seed. The seed that fell on the path side landed on hard ground and would not be able readily to penetrate the soil, so giving an easy meal to the birds. No crop there for the farmer! The seed that fell on stony ground in verse 5 landed on a place where the soil was shallow. The seed germinated and had early promising signs but as soon as the full blast of the sun brought difficult conditions, the poor roots caused by the shallow soil could not support the plant and it withered and died. Again, no crop for the farmer! Thirdly, some of the seed fell on thorny ground. The thorns grew and choked out the plants. Once again, no crop for the farmer! But in verse 8 some of the seed fell on good, fertile ground and produced a good or even excellent crop.

Jesus went on in verses 18 to 23 to explain to His disciples the meaning of this first parable. As with many instances in the Gospels, we have to take together all the three mentions of this parable in the Gospels to obtain a full explanation, because each writer was guided by the Holy Spirit to record only what was necessary for that writer's inspired presentation of a particular aspect of the Lord Jesus and His work. Luke 8:11 states that "The seed is the Word of God". Jesus explains in verse 19 of Matthew 13 that the way side or the path side ground is a picture of someone not understanding the Word and the wicked one, Satan, snatches away what is sown, just like the birds snatched away the seed. In verses 20 and 21, Jesus explains that the stony ground with its shallow soil is a picture of someone who initially receives the Word with joy and it looks at first as though the Word has taken root, but as soon as trouble or opposition arises, that person falls away. Third comes the explanation in verse 22 about the thorny ground. Here the seed or the Word is choked out by the cares of normal life and the pleasure and glamour of riches. But lastly in verse 23, there is the good ground which is like the person who genuinely receives and understands the Word and goes on to bear fruit for God. The reality of taking in the seed is tested by the fruit it bears.

Now, this first parable is the basis for the six which follow. As mentioned a few minutes ago, the end of Matthew chapter 12 is a watershed in this Gospel. Jesus moves from addressing His old family, the Jewish nation, to spreading the Word, like a farmer sowing, to anyone who hears, to use the words at the beginning of verse 19. At the very start of the chapter, Jesus moves out of the limited confines of a house to address openly the wide multitude by the sea side. Seas in the Bible tend to speak of all the nations of the world and all this emphasises the widening of the spreading of God's Word from this point. Those who are going to understand "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (see verse 11) are limited to those who really do receive the Word of God, that is, the seed falling on the good ground, the true believers existing amongst the wider multitudes.

Having established that basis, Jesus goes on to tell another three parables to the multitudes and then a further three to the disciples only.

The second parable in Matthew 13 is contained in verses 24 to 30. It is often referred to as the parable of the wheat and the tares and describes a man who sowed good seed in his field. While people slept, the man's enemy sowed tares or weeds among the good seed. When both lots of seed developed into plants, the servants asked the man from where the weeds had come and the man told them that the source of the problem was an enemy. The servants asked whether they should pull up the weeds but the man said not to do this in case in the process of pulling up the weeds the wheat might be damaged. Instead, he instructed his men to leave the two sorts of plant growing together until harvest time when the weeds would be separated and bound together and burned, while the wheat would be gathered into his barn and kept.

In verses 36 to 43 Jesus explains to His disciples the meaning of this second parable, which is recorded only in Matthew. What a clear explanation it is, leaving no room at all for ambiguity. Jesus said that the man sowing is Himself, the Son of Man, a title Jesus frequently uses of Himself throughout the four Gospels. The field is the whole world; good seeds are the true children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the wicked one; the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; the reapers are the angels. Jesus states that at the end of the world He will send His angels to gather out of His kingdom all offenders and doers of iniquity and they will be cast into a furnace of fire, no doubt the lake of fire mentioned in Revelation 20:15. It would be a time of desperate, hopeless sorrow for them. But on the other hand, verse 43 is a tremendous verse for believers in Jesus because at that time they, made righteous by the blood of Jesus and faith in Him, will, to quote verse 43, "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father".

Please note in verses 38 and 41 further evidence that the kingdom of heaven is a wide concept incorporating both true believers and those who are not true. In verse 38 it says that the field is the whole world, not just the church. In verse 41 those who are not true are gathered out of that kingdom.

So, this second parable in the cluster builds on the first. The idea of the sowing of seed is continued but now there are two sowers. Jesus, the Son of Man, continues to sow the good seed but the other sower now introduced is the devil who sows the weeds. The results of these sowings continue mixed together until the time of harvest when the two shall be separated, each going to a totally different destination.

We now come to the third parable in the chapter, the parable of the mustard seed in verses 31 and 32. In this third parable, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed sown by a man in his field. Mustard seed is tiny but from that tiny beginning the plant grows until it becomes a large tree in which birds come and find shelter.

Around the edges of my garden there are three or four fairly large trees in which a number of birds rest or even build their nests. Some of those birds are very welcome but many, such as magpies and pigeons, certainly are not, causing problems to smaller birds and to my vegetable patch! In this third parable, Jesus was illustrating how the kingdom of heaven would grow and provide a resting place for all sorts of individuals, some of whom would cause problems. Remember in the first parable of the chapter that the seeds that fell by the way side were eaten by birds thereby stopping any crop from those seeds. In verse 19 Jesus says that those birds are like the wicked one, Satan, who snatches away the true seed, the Word of God, before it can develop in the heart. Similarly in this third parable of the mustard seed, Satan will use individuals who are not true believers in the Lord Jesus but who come within the growing kingdom of heaven and are used by Satan to cause problems.

The fourth parable is in verse 33, the parable of the leaven. Here, the kingdom of heaven is said by Jesus to be like leaven, or yeast, mixed by a woman in a large amount of meal or flour until the leaven permeated the whole mixture.

I have a clear picture in my mind how, many years ago, my mother would make bread from time to time. The whole house was filled with the lovely aroma of baking bread. I remember going with my mother to the local chemist's shop where she bought a small amount of yeast which she then mixed thoroughly with quite a lot of flour. You couldn't then see the yeast but the effect of it was certainly there as the baking bread expanded in size.

In the Bible, whenever leaven is mentioned, it always speaks of evil. For example in Leviticus 2:11, "No meal offering, which ye shall bring unto the LORD, shall be made with leaven", in 1 Corinthians 5:6 and Galatians 5:9, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump"; in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened". When it says in Matthew 13:33 that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven it means that the kingdom of heaven is like the whole of this fourth parable, not the element of leaven. Within the kingdom of heaven there is the corrupting presence of evil, not always clearly visible, but its effect is there. We can see it, for example, when we look around the world at the wide group of people who call themselves Christians but some of whom blatantly disobey God's Word in its teaching and/or its practice.

So, to sum up. These first four parables are spoken by Jesus in front of the multitude. In the Bible, the number 4 often speaks of the world, mankind with its weakness. We often use the phrase, the four corners of the earth and there are four earthly dimensions, north, south, east and west. These first four parables of the cluster of seven give us therefore the outward aspects of the kingdom of heaven. In the first, the parable of the sower, the seed, the Word of God, is spread before everyone who will hear. The second, the parable of the wheat and the tares or weeds, shows that at the same time as the Divine Sower sows the Word of God, the enemy, Satan, is sowing false seed and the fruit of the two seeds will be harvested at the end, each fruit having a different destination. The parable of the mustard seed, the third parable, shows how the kingdom of heaven grows to an abnormal size because of the activities of the wicked one and houses those who cause problems. Finally, in the fourth parable of the leaven the evil character of the leaven is shown, it being introduced to the flour by the woman but affecting the whole mixture. We see, therefore, that there is a progression as the Lord reveals further details about the kingdom of heaven as He relates each parable in the cluster.

Can we notice the presence of Satan and evil in each of these first four parables? Satan's work is to "blind the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" – 2 Corinthians 4:4. Putting it bluntly, dear listener, Scripture is telling us that if you are not a Christian, Satan is doing his best to keep you in that position. That is his objective. Like the birds in the parable of the sower, when the seed of the Word of God is spread, he tries to snatch it away before it can find a resting place in your heart. Jesus calls Satan the father of lies (John 8:4) and Satan will use any sort of lie to stop you accepting Christ as Saviour. It is for individuals to respond to God's Word which is why Jesus says in verse 9 of our chapter: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."

But Satan doesn't stop there. As our cluster of parables teaches us, Satan actively sows false teaching. He causes those who are not real believers to shelter within the professing church and to spread that false teaching and the evil attaching to it. There is a solemn warning here to true Christians to be on their guard constantly against this activity of the enemy. We need to know our Bibles and base our beliefs and practices only on what God sets out in His Word. That is a challenge to all of us and we need to be aware of it. You will see from the second parable in Matthew 13 that

the enemy caused the damage “while men slept” – verse 25. May we be preserved from allowing falseness and evil to creep in to our churches because we are not alert!

I trust that the Lord will help us appreciate the wonder of His divine stories, each one amazing, and having added wonder when put together in a cluster. God willing, we look forward next week to looking into the further precious meanings of the final three parables of Matthew 13.

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