

The Kingdom Parables: Matthew 13

In our study of the life of Jesus we have come to a point where His teaching method suddenly changed. From this point onward He only taught the public using parables.

Why did Jesus speak in Parables?

Was it to make His teaching easier for the public to understand? We don't need to guess at the answer because thankfully the disciples asked this question and Matthew recorded Jesus answer for us.

Then the disciples came and asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to people in parables?" He answered them, "You have been given knowledge about the secrets of the kingdom from heaven, but it hasn't been given to them, because to anyone who has something, more will be given, and he will have more than enough. But from the one who doesn't have anything, even what he has will be taken away from him."

(Matt 13:10-12 ISV)

"That's why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but don't see, and they listen but don't hear or understand.' "With them the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says: 'You will listen and listen but never understand. You will look and look but never comprehend for this people's heart has become dull, and their ears are hard of hearing. They have shut their eyes so that they might not see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' "How blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear! I tell all of you with certainty, many prophets and righteous people longed to see the things you see but did not see them, and to hear the things you hear but did not hear them."

(Matt 13:13-17 ISV)

Later in this chapter Matthew tells us:

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables. He did not tell them anything without using a parable. This was to fulfil what was declared by the prophet when he said, "I will open my mouth to speak in parables. I will declare what has been hidden since the creation of the world."

(Matt 13:34-35 ISV)

The parables have been given to Jesus' followers who have been spiritually awakened by the Holy Spirit to give us insights about the kingdom from Heaven. These parables tell us things that were not revealed in the Old Testament. By speaking in parables Jesus is also fulfilling prophecies recorded in Isaiah.

The apostle Paul was also given the role of revealing information that was not revealed in the Old Testament. In Ephesians 3 Paul wrote:

... this secret was made known to me through a revelation, just as I wrote about briefly in the past. By reading this, you will be able to grasp my understanding of the secret about the Messiah, which in previous generations was not made known to human beings as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

This is that secret: The gentiles are heirs-in-common, members-in-common of the body, and common participants in what was promised by the Messiah Jesus through the gospel.

Eph 3:3-6 ISV

The Church:

The revelation that has been given is that Gentiles no longer need to become Jews in order to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is an example of a gentile converting to being a Jew. Ruth was from Moab and she gave up her family, culture and religion when she made this pledge to Naomi:

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Ruth 1:16

Gentiles now remain as gentiles while gaining the benefits of becoming fellow heirs and recipients of the promises available in Jesus by the gospel. Notice that Paul makes it clear that gentiles are co-heirs not replacement heirs in regards to the Jewish people. From this secret which has now been revealed we get the insight that the kingdom parables reveal information about the Church age.

Layout of verses in Matthew 13

	Verses:
1: Sower and the four Soils	3-9
Why Parables?	10-17
Sower & 4 Soils Explained	18-23
2: Tares & Wheat	24-30
3: Mustard Seed	31-32
4: Woman & Leaven	33
Why Parables? (continued)	34-35
Tares & Wheat Explained	36-43
5: Treasure in the Field	44
6: Pearl of Great Price	45-46
7: Dragnet	47-48
Drag Net Explained	49-50

There are 5 other Kingdom Parables to make a total of 12

8: Forgiveness of Debts	Matt 18:23-35
9: Latecomers equally paid	Matt 20:1-16
10: Guests at Marriage Feast	Matt 22:1-14
11: Ten Virgins	Matt 25:1-13
12: Stewardship of Talents	Matt 25:14-30

The Kingdom of Heaven in Twelves

- 12 Kingdom Parables;
- 12 Kingdom Mysteries;
- 12 Apostles will rule over the 12 Tribes. (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30);
- 12,000 sealed from each of the 12 Tribes. (Rev 7);

- The New Jerusalem has:
 - 12 gates
 - 12 foundation stones
 - 12,000 x 12,000 x 12,000 furlongs in size. (Rev 21).

12 seems to be a number associated with the Kingdom.

Today we are just looking at the set of seven Kingdom Parables in Matthew 13.

We have seen that Jesus explained that He was using parables as a kind of coded message to keep information from His enemies but reveal the information to His followers. Using a code to keep the contents of a message secret from your enemies has been a technique used for thousands of years. The method of deciphering a coded message has also been used for thousands of years. This is an example of a simple coded message:

Coded message

τ	Σ	Ω	Α	Ω	T	Ω	υ	X	ψ	ρ

We could try and guess what it means but would not do very well that way. If we have part of the message decoded that can help.

Coded message

T	Ω	υ	X	ψ	ρ
		L	O		D

We might guess that this message says “TO LOUD” based on the shapes of the coded letters. What we need is a key that translates the code into plain text. Jesus translated three of the seven parables for the disciples in private to give them the key to decoding the others. We could represent the situation this way using our example:

Key												
Π	π	Ρ	ρ	Σ	σ	Σ	ς	T	τ	Υ	υ	Φ
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
φ	X	χ	Ψ	ψ	Ω	ω	Α	ά	Έ	έ	Ή	ή
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Coded message												
τ	Σ	Ω	Α	Ω	T	Ω	υ	X	ψ	ρ		
							L	O		D		

We actually have all that we need to accurately decode the message using information from the Bible without having to guess. As we have seen, guessing is very unreliable.

Key												
Π	π	Ρ	ρ	Σ	σ	Σ	ς	Τ	τ	Υ	υ	Φ
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
φ	Χ	χ	Ψ	ψ	Ω	ω	Α	ά	Έ	έ	Ή	ή
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Coded message												
τ	Σ	Ω	Α	Ω	Τ	Ω	υ	Χ	ψ	ρ		
J	E	S	U	S	I	S	L	O	R	D		

Now let's use this same process on the set of parables in Matthew chapter 13.

The first parable is a very popular topic for sermons so you are all probably very familiar with it. Jesus explains this parable so what I want to focus on is the keys He gives us that will help us decode the other parables.

The Four Soils

Then he began to tell them many things in parables. He said, "Listen! A farmer went out to sow. As he was sowing, some seeds fell along the path, and birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on stony ground, where they did not have a lot of soil. They sprouted at once because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, they were scorched. Since they did not have any roots, they dried up.

Other seeds fell among thorn bushes, and the thorn bushes grew higher and choked them out.

But other seeds fell on good soil and produced a crop, some 100, some 60, and some 30 times what was sown. Let the person who has ears listen!"

(Matt 13:3-9 ISV)

Four Soils: Explained

"Listen, then, to the parable about the farmer. When anyone hears the word about the kingdom yet doesn't understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

As for what was sown on the stony ground, this is the person who hears the word and accepts it joyfully at once, but since he doesn't have any root in himself, he lasts for only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes along because of the word, he immediately falls away.

As for what was sown among the thorn bushes, this is the person who hears the word, but the worries of life and the deceitful pleasures of wealth choke the word so that it can't produce a crop.

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the person who hears the word, understands it, and produces a crop that yields 100, 60, or 30 times what was sown.”

(Matt 13:18-23 ISV)

The seed that is sown is the word, the good news message that Jesus is communicating to the world. **Who do the birds represent? In verse 19, the evil one snatches away the seed; “birds” are bad in parables.** Do you remember when Joseph was in prison with Pharaoh’s baker and wine steward? Both had dreams that Joseph interpreted and the birds were bad in the bakers dream.

This next parable Jesus also explains.

Tares & Wheat

He presented another parable to them: “The kingdom from heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the crop came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared, too.

“The owner’s servants came and asked him, ‘Master, you sowed good seed in your field, didn’t you? Then where did these weeds come from?’

“He told them, ‘An enemy did this!’ “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them out?’

“He said, ‘No! If you pull out the weeds, you might pull out the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and tie them in bundles for burning, but bring the wheat into my barn.”’”

(Matt 13:24-30 ISV)

The weeds or “Tares” as they are called in the King James are probably *Zizania* - a plant found in the Middle East that looks like wheat while it is growing, but when it matures it turns black (it shows its true colour). If it contaminates your wheat and you bake bread with it, it is poisonous.

Tares & Wheat: Explained

Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples came to him and asked, “Explain to us the parable about the weeds in the field.” He answered, “The person who sowed good seed is the Son of Man, while the field is the world. The good seed are those who belong to the kingdom, while the weeds are those who belong to the evil one.

The enemy who sowed them is the Devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.

Just as weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so it will be at end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everything that causes others to sin and those who practice lawlessness and they will throw them into a blazing furnace. In that place there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Let the person who has ears listen!"

Matt 13:36-43 ISV

From these first two parables that Jesus decoded we can see the consistent use of idioms.

The sower = Jesus;
The field = the people of the world.
Birds = Satan's workers
Reapers = Angels

There is also the consistent theme of a **battle between good and evil** fighting over the hearts of mankind.

Jesus has given us insights into how His code works so let's apply what we have learnt to the next parable.

Mustard Seed

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom from heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, when it is fully grown it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, and the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."

Matt 13:31-33 ISV

Some people read this parable from a gentile perspective and look at it out of its context as part of the set of parables and fail to apply the deciphering key that Jesus has given us in the earlier parables. Let's take a fresh look at the key aspects of this parable.

Mustard seeds grow into flimsy bushes about 1m or so tall. Birds don't tend to roost in a small bush like mustard because it isn't strong enough to take their weight and not tall enough to give them protection from predators. In this parable the mustard seed grows to become a monstrosity, something much bigger than it was created to be. It becomes so large that birds come and roost in the branches. ***If we apply the key Jesus has given us then the birds are the same ones that picked up the seed in the first parable; they are the ministers of Satan!***

This interpretation should not surprise us because **there have always been 'birds' in the 'branches' of the Church.** For examples, we have:

- Judas among the disciples;
- Ananias and Sapphira in the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:1-11);
- Simon Magus in the church in Samaria (Acts 8:1-24);
- Paul's letters to churches include a lot of teaching to correct the influences of false teachers.

In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 we read:

For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. 2Co 11:13-15 NIV

The next parable uses different idioms to the first ones so we will need to look elsewhere in the Bible to decipher them.

Woman & Leaven

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Matthew 13:33 ESV

Like the mustard seed parable, this one also has had a lot of sermons preached about it based on only a superficial study of it. This is one verse that the NIV and NLT translations do a poor job of translating because they fail to convey the deceitfulness of what this woman is doing. The NIV says she 'mixed' in the leaven but 'hid' is a much more accurate translation of the word. The new ISV translation also uses 'mixed' but does have a footnote saying it is literally 'hid'. The more literal translations like NASB and the King James use 'hid'.

"Three measures of flour" is immediately recognised by both Muslims and Jews as relating to the three visitors being welcomed by Abraham in Genesis 18. Three measures of meal is the amount of the fellowship offering remembering this event. Sarah had to prepare the food quickly so there was not time to allow leaven to cause the bread to rise. It is abhorrent to hide leaven in the three measures of meal so this woman is doing a wicked thing! Jesus is teaching that the Church will not be perfect, it will be impure. Leaven will be introduced and it will grow and contaminate. Remember, these parables are prophecies of what the Church age will be like.

Leaven is recognised as a symbol of sin by both Jewish and Christian scholars because it corrupts by puffing up. The original sin was Satan's puffed up pride that caused him to fall as described in Isaiah 14. In the Passover ceremony Jewish children search the house to find the hidden leaven so the family can be sure they have all the leaven out of the house. Leaven is used as a symbol for sin throughout the Old and the New Testaments.

Usage of 'Leaven' in the Bible

Leaven is always used with a bad connotation in the Bible. The following are three quotes from the New Testament that use the idiom of leaven:

Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." ... "How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?--but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Mat 16:6, 11-12 NKJV

In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Luke 12:1 NKJV

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.
1Co 5:6-8 NKJV

For further study look at:

Old Testament: Ex 12:15; 13:7; Lev 2:11; 6:17;10:12.

New Testament: Mt 16:6,11; Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1; 13:21;1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:7-9.

The next parable is less of a challenge to understand because it uses an idiom from one of the parables Jesus explained.

Treasure in the Field

“The kingdom from heaven is like treasure hidden in a field that a man found and hid. In his excitement he went and sold everything he had and bought that field.”
(Matthew 13:44 ISV)

This parable is NOT saying that we should sell all we have and buy Jesus! What Jesus offers us we get by grace which, by definition, means we can't buy it or earn it. We receive it as an undeserved free gift when we put our trust in what Jesus has done for us. To think that we can add anything by our own efforts to what He has done for us is arrogance. To think that we can add to what God has called 'complete' doesn't make sense.

The treasure is hidden in the field, and Jesus said 'the field' in His parables represents the world. It is interesting to note that in Ex 19:5 and Ps 135 God's people are described as His special treasure:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.
- Ex 19:5 NKJV

For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure.
- Psa 135:4 NKJV

The One that gave up all that He had for the sake of the treasure is Jesus Christ! He wanted the treasure, He didn't buy just one little part, He bought the whole field. He died on the cross for ALL sinners in the whole world. He paid the ultimate price by pouring out His blood on the cross so that everyone can be saved from the consequences of their sin, **if** they choose to accept His offer. He paid the price for the whole field but the whole field does not contain treasure, only a part of it does. If you have accepted Jesus' offer of forgiveness for your sins and made Him Lord of your life then you are part of what God calls His 'special treasure'.

If you are not sure if you are part of the treasure then don't leave here today until you have spoken to someone about it. There is nothing more important to do today than be sure you have accepted Jesus offer of forgiveness.

The next parable is similar, but different in an important way.

The Pearl of Great Price

“Again, the kingdom from heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Matthew 13:45, 46 ISV

Oysters are not kosher; Jews could only eat seafood that has scales. This means that pearls were not prized by the Jewish community. Pearls are distinctly a Gentile ornament, not a Jewish ornament. We know that not all gentiles will be saved so the pearl can't be representing all gentiles. There is one predominantly gentile entity that is saved and that is the church. I believe this parable is Jesus predicting the predominantly gentile nature of the church.

Pearls are the only jewel that is made by a living organism as a response to an irritation. The pearl is removed from where it was grown to become an item of adornment. I believe this parable is also predicting that there will come a time when the church will be removed from its place of origin and presented as a bride adorned in pure white robes to her bridegroom at the marriage supper in heaven.

The last parable has been decoded for us by Jesus. It uses angels as an idiom in a way that is consistent with the Wheat and Tares parable.

The Drag Net

“Again, the kingdom from heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea that gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen hauled it ashore. Then they sat down, sorted the good fish into containers, and threw the bad ones away.”

(Matthew 13:47, 48 ISV)

Drag Net: Explained

“That is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out, cull out the evil people from among the righteous ones, and will throw them into a blazing furnace. In that place there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

(Matthew 13:49, 50 ISV)

Do we understand?

“Do you understand all these things?” They told him, “Yes.” Then he told them, “That is why every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom from heaven is like the master of a household who brings both new and old things out of his treasure chest.”

(Matthew 13:51, 52 ISV)

If only the disciples had said 'no' then perhaps Jesus would have explained all of these parables. Since Jesus left some parables unexplained we have had to decode the meaning of them by consistently applying what Jesus did say along with information from elsewhere in the Bible. It is important to ask ourselves are we “rightly dividing the Word of Truth,” 2 Tim 2:15.

The Seven Kingdom Parables and the Seven Churches of Rev. 2 & 3

It is interesting to compare the kingdom parables with the letters Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. It is suggested by some commentators that there is a parallel in that both lists in the order given to us outline the history of the church age. What do you think?

Sower and four Soils	Ephesus	Apostolic Church
Tares and the Wheat	Smyrna	Persecuted Church
Mustard Seed	Pergamos	Married Church
Woman & the Leaven	Thyatira	Medieval Church
Treasure in the Field	Sardis	Denominational Church
Pearl of Great Price	Philadelphia	Missionary Church
Dragnet	Laodicea	Apostate Church

Let's look at the two most controversial parables; the Mustard Seed and the Woman and the Leaven. In the order Jesus gave these the Mustard Seed parable aligns with the letter to Pergamos. The name Pergamos means 'perverted marriage' and this would represent the time in church history when Christianity became the state religion of Rome. The church married the political system and suddenly became full of people seeking power and influence rather than a relationship with God. The evil birds in the overgrown mustard bush is a fitting metaphor.

Thyatira is the church that had the false prophetess Jezebel who taught the people to do evil things. The wicked woman Jezebel is a good match with the wicked woman hiding leaven in the fellowship offering.

When you have a list of seven items there are over 5000 different possible orders you can put the list in. So there is only one chance in 5000 that the list of parables would be in this order. Likewise with the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 there is only one chance in 5000 that they would be listed in that exact order. The order we have them is the only order that matches church history as it has unfolded. For Jesus to have put both lists in exactly the right order to match the pattern of church history is one chance in 5000 times 5000 which is one chance in 25 million. We could say that it is 25 million times more likely that Jesus purposely chose the order to predict church history than it happening by chance alone.

What can we take away from all this?

If what I have presented today is correct then I think it is reassuring for us that Jesus was able to foretell the ups and downs of church history so accurately. It means that Jesus, in building His church over the last 2000 years, foreknew the problems the church would face so He was prepared for them before they happened. In the same way we can have confidence that Jesus knows what challenges are ahead of us individually and He will help us to prepare for the challenges we will face.

The Bible really is an amazing book; it's been cleverly designed by the Holy Spirit with a rich tapestry of themes woven through it. There are many blessings to be had from diligently studying it. My hope is that you feel inspired and encouraged to dig into God's Word and benefit from the blessings available to you.