

3 Kingdom Parables, Sower and the Seed

I want to focus on this parable first. The Sermon on the Mount will help us understand this parable. The parable of the sower also explains the purpose of a parable according to Jesus. This parable of the sower and the seed can be found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. We have all heard this many times, so hopefully I can say something new that we have not heard yet!

First, let us examine the reason Jesus spoke in parables, according to Jesus:

Matthew 13:11-13

Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

Both Mark and Luke have a very similar, albeit shortened, form of the verses above. Jesus remarks that those who hear his parables do not really hear much of anything, but those disciples who privately inquire are blessed to have these truths, as they are explained to them. Do we see the irony here? I will come back to this ironic statement in the end, but first let us explain a bit more about parables. Ultimately, Jesus spoke in parables because those who are seeking will seek the understanding of the parable. Those who are not seeking will not seek. The rabbis around the time of Jesus also spoke in parables often. This is an accepted and well known teaching method within Judaism at the time of Jesus. Jesus is not doing anything new or out of the ordinary here; rather, he teaches the people important truths through parables they are not hearing from anyone else. Remember that Jesus influenced the Jews of his time to reconsider their own motives and that the teaching of motive and morality is important.

So, what exactly are parables? Parables are stories. Jesus uses scenarios and characters to suit his point. A parable is all about what the story teaches – not necessarily the story itself.

That was what Jesus was always doing with his parables. He told a story, the meaning of which anyone could see, and the hearers could not help passing some kind of judgment even as the story was being told. Then, Jesus demanded that they take that judgment and pass it on to something to which they had been blind (Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, pg 13).

A *maschal* (the Hebrew word for parable) defines the unknown by what is known. The *maschal* begins where the listener is but then pushes beyond into a new realm of discovery (Young, *The Parables*, pg 3).

The storyteller is not concerned about the "literal truth" of the story; he is not retelling a specific event in the past. Oftentimes, these parables have over the top exaggerations – for example, the Master who lends his slave a hundred and fifty thousand years worth of salary (Matthew 18:24, footnote in NASB). It is no surprise the slave could not pay him back! That the slave could not pay the master back is a major point of the parable. And what master lends a slave money, let alone that much? What master even has that much? I want to give us a parable that we have never heard before, so we are looking at it with fresh eyes.

[Rabbi] Hillel tells his disciples that he is going to perform an important religious duty. They ask him what the commandment is he is going to do. They probably thought that he was going to visit a sick person or give charity to a needy individual. But Hillel tells them that he is going to the bathhouse. They are shocked. Does taking a bath constitute the performing of a mitzvah? Hillel tells them a story. A king hires a laborer to wash his statuary. If a human king pays his laborer to care for his statue, how much more value is a person created in the image of God worthy of care! The one washing oneself must acknowledge the divine presence.... This type of rabbinic illustration shares much in common with the teachings of Jesus (ibid, pg 23).

The parable is essentially a sword to stab men's minds awake - Barclay, The Parables of Jesus pg 16.

The ordinariness of the parable is transformed by a surprising twist. A consciousness of God and of His way of viewing the world enters the commonplace scene to communicate the divine message (Young, The Parables, pg 5).

Parables are designed to force the hearers into thought and action! So, what is this parable about? The picture is about a farmer spreading seed and what happens when the seed falls onto the ground. Only four types of ground are described; yet, we know in nature there are thousands more – jungle, forest, mountain, desert, tundra, riverside.... We could go on. Remember parables are not trying to depict all of reality in all its specific detail. So again, what is the parable about? The parable is about the reception of the "word of God" – the gospel of the Kingdom. Matthew 13:19, Luke 8:11, and Mark 4:14 use the phrases "word of the kingdom," "word of God," "word," which are all equated to the seed which is sown – the gospel. We should understand that the phrase "word of God" is in reference to the gospel of the Kingdom. The word "Scripture" is always in reference to the Bible.

We understand that the parable is about the reception of the gospel. In the parable, three out of four reject the gospel. That is a surprising statistic. Jesus often makes reference to a person's fruit. We will see this over and over. A person's fruit, his offspring, what he produces as a result of this gospel, is what Jesus and God look for. Notice in the last article we went over this verse:

Matthew 7:17-19

"So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

The fruit is what Jesus and God look for when they judge. The judgment of the unrepentant is a recurring theme throughout all of Jesus' parables. What might the fruit be? Surely, we can go back and look at the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and other principles. Humility, grace, love, prayer, persecution, peacemakers, these are all examples of fruit. One of the beautiful things about all these Kingdom parables is that they all weave together. These are all stories that Jesus describes about one singular topic – the Kingdom of God and entrance into it. These Kingdom parables ultimately present a unified vision of the Kingdom. They all come from the mind of Jesus. He mixes and matches his phrases and often gives the same meanings in different ways to different people.

Ok, are you ready for the irony? One example of the fruit of the parable is exactly what the disciples did. They asked Jesus what the parable was about. They were good ground. They exhibited the properties of good ground by seeking the truth behind the gospel parable preached by Jesus! That is why they were blessed. Because they were good ground, they would now hear the truth. This is not some odd depiction of divine election of Jesus' disciples. The many are not blessed because they are **not** interested in the truth. They were not those who heard the words of Jesus, and maybe they did not want to hear what he had to say. But some did not respond; rather, they went back to their desires (stony ground). Nor were they among those who maybe liked what they heard, but could not endure. Those did not wholeheartedly repent at Jesus' words, and their desires got to their hearts (weeds). The parable was fulfilled in the very moment Jesus finished it! His disciples, who had let go of every other thing in their lives, their families, their jobs went after the gospel words Jesus spoke. Why did Jesus say this is the most fundamental parable to understand? Because it exemplified this exact truth about disciples! Note that he said the following.

Matthew 6:33

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

This parable is what we are talking about. Do you seek first the Kingdom? Have you left your family, your job, that you may seek the Kingdom first? Are they second to the gospel? We all have priorities in life. God

demands that He Himself and His Gospel be number one! Jesus paints the picture very clearly. There are ultimately two groups – those who have no fruit and will be burned and those who bear fruit. In all the pictures of "fire" in the preaching of Jesus and John the Baptist we have seen so far, the good crop goes into the barn, while the bad is burned. The barn is the peace and beauty of the Kingdom. The fire of judgment comes with the Kingdom as we have seen from the Old Testament. Therefore, this parable focuses on what ultimately happens to a person at the arrival of the Kingdom. Those who bear fruit will not be burned. "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!" (2 Corinthians 13:5). Where is your fruit? Does your fruit match the description in the Sermon on the Mount? Do you earnestly ask and seek the Teacher Jesus for understanding? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expressed to us that our present condition will determine our Kingdom condition. Our fruit is our present condition. What is our fruit? Bad fruit means we are a bad tree. Do you know what happens to bad trees when the Kingdom comes?