

Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

Parables of the Kingdom * Matthew 13

Well, today is a big, big, big day for Harmony Bible Church. Today for the first time ever, we are one church meeting in two locations. And so before we get into our text today I want to give greetings to our Burlington Campus. Of course, I can't see you right now but hopefully you can see and hear me and are just as eager to study God's Word as we are here at the Danville Campus. It's an exciting day for our church, and we really look forward to what God is going to do in the days ahead both in Danville and in Burlington.

So, wherever you are this morning, will you please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 13. Today after a 4-week hiatus we are going to return to our study of the person and work of Jesus Christ. As we do we come to the third of five major teaching sections in this gospel. However, this section is significantly different because for the first time Jesus begins to teach in parables.

Now, I think it's important to note that a number of Jesus' parables are some of the best-known stories in the world. Most people, even if they have little knowledge of the Bible, know the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

Unfortunately, however, although many people are familiar with the parables, their familiarity greatly dwarfs their actual understanding of what they mean. To be honest, it's hard to exaggerate the violence that has been done to the parables, not the least of which has been done by the church itself.

Since this is the case, before we actually get into the parables, I want to take some time to talk to you about how to understand them. Now, I realize you might prefer that I just tell you what they mean, but I hope you recognize that my job isn't simply to explain Scripture but to also equip you to be able to study it yourself. Part of the job of a preacher is to preach in such a way

that his hearers acquire a better grasp of how to study the Bible on their own. So, before we look at them individually, let's talk about a few important matters regarding parables as a whole.

What is a Parable?

First, let's talk about what a parable is. The Greek word for parable simply means *to come alongside*. So, think of it this way. If a paralegal comes alongside an attorney to assist them in practicing law, and a parachurch ministry comes alongside the church to assist it in fulfilling its mission, then a parable comes alongside a teacher to help them communicate truth. Given this, here is a simple definition:

A parable is a story or illustration from everyday life used to reveal a moral or spiritual truth.

In a parable a teacher uses something known to explain something unknown. The known thing is something from everyday life, and the unknown thing is a moral or spiritual truth.

Now, growing up I was taught that parables are earthly stories that have heavenly meanings. You probably were too. And as far as it goes this is an ok definition. But it really is insufficient in that all of the parables have a here and now meaning. Jesus tells the parables, every single one of them, to get something across to His hearers about what they need to know and do right now.

So, get this. One of the most important things we need to understand about parables is that they are meant to spur us into action. The parables are not just cute little stories to entertain us, something akin to Aesop's Fables. What's more, they aren't just trite Bible stories to make us feel better, kind of like Jesus' version of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Rather, they are powerful illustrations that Jesus uses to convince and persuade His hearers to change. This is so much the case that we can say if you don't do something with the parables then you don't really understand them at all.

I think we need to recognize how much we need the parables today. Klyne Snodgrass explains it this way:

*One of the major problems of Christian churches, of Western Christianity in particular, is our stultifying passivity. The parables compel us — for Christ's sake literally — to do something! Parables do not seek the "mild morality" about which Kierkegaard lamented but radical cross-bearing, God-imitating response worthy of the name "conversion."*¹

Just as He did with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expects us to do something with the parables. He is speaking with a purpose and it is our job to determine what that purpose is and to respond appropriately.

Now, since this is the case, let's talk about some things that will be helpful as we attempt to discern what Jesus wants us to do with His parables. In that vein, let me share with you five characteristics of parables.

Five Characteristics of Parables

1. Parables are simple.

First, parables are simple. Jesus normally uses no more words than necessary and gets to the point pretty quickly. And I know what some of you are thinking.... if only. Yes, I am sorry but I am not Jesus. But I think you knew that already. Anyways, the parables usually make one primary point. This means that we have to be careful that we don't get caught up in the details. Sometimes there are secondary truths to be taken from the parables, but we have to be careful that we don't miss the forest for the trees. Find the main point of a parable and stick with it.

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne R. (2008-01-15). *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Kindle Locations 307-310). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

2. Parables are contextual.

Second, parables are contextual. By this I mean we need to understand the context in which they were told. In the parables Jesus uses illustrations from 1st century Palestine, which was an agrarian society. We are going to see over coming weeks that He tells parables about planting, harvesting, seeds, and fishing. Therefore, in order to understand the parables we must understand at least a little bit about how Middle Eastern culture functioned 2,000 years ago.

3. Parables are engaging.

Third, parables are engaging. Jesus uses stories and illustrations that draw us in. What's more, and hopefully you will catch this if you haven't already, Jesus isn't afraid to use hyperbole. He's not afraid to tell a story in such a way that at times stretches the realm of believability.

You know what I'm talking about right? We all know people who add drama to their storytelling to make it just a little more interesting, right? I am married to one of those people. Eva is a great storyteller, and her stories always seem to get better over time. I am always amazed at how our engagement story expands and gets greater with time. If you don't know what I am talking about just ask her and she will be glad to tell you. Similarly, Jesus understood the power of exaggeration, and wasn't afraid to use that power to get an important point across.

This leads to something significant. One of the ways Jesus makes the parables engaging is by asking questions. Almost all of the parables have a question that needs to be answered. Sometimes these questions are posed as part of the parable – but much of the time the questions aren't spoken but rather implied. To give an example, look at the parable of the Pearl in verses 45-46:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Now, we are going to come back to this parable later. But for now just note that there is no direct question here. However, there is a clearly implied one. Do you see what it is? I'm not going to tell you right now, but in just a few moments I will show you how you can find out if you are right or not.

So, when studying the parables always look for the question that Jesus is trying to get you to answer.

4. Parables reveal and conceal.

Fourth, parables both reveal and conceal. Look at verses 10-17:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" 11 And he answered them, "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 the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ""You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." 15 For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear 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 For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17, ESV)

Now, we have to admit that what we have just read is kind of shocking. Jesus says that He speaks in parables to reveal truth to those who are following Him and to conceal truth from those who are not. And yes, you did hear me right. Jesus is using parables so that some people won't be able to understand what He is talking about. That's not the way a teacher is supposed to do it. I know that some of you feel that way on Sunday morning from time to time, but that's not the way it is supposed to be.

However, in order to get Jesus' purpose we have to remember what's going on in Matthew. Early on in this gospel we saw that Jesus was very popular and people were flocking to Him. Many were convinced that He very well might be the long-awaited Messiah. But as time passed and He did not fulfill their understanding of what the Messiah would be, the crowds quickly turned and started opposing Him at nearly every turn. And so now, with hostility mounting, Jesus begins to focus on training His disciples. And He does so by using stories that His committed followers could understand but casual followers or outright opponents could not. Unlike many churches today, Jesus focused on the committed rather than on the consumer.

Very simply, this means that the key to understanding the parables is first and foremost a commitment to following Jesus. A requirement to comprehending the hidden truths in the parables is a belief that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. There are a number of things that are helpful in interpreting the parables, but unless you recognize and follow Jesus for whom He truly is, they will at the most be interesting illustrations; to you they will be little more than Aesop's Fables.

Now, I recognize that there are at least a few people who are listening today who are not followers of Jesus. You might even make no bones about that, and right now are thinking you don't have any reason to listen further. However, I would urge you that this is not the case. Here's why: the parables have the power to make you a follower of Jesus. These are Jesus' words, and as you listen to His words you might just find that you believe they are true and come to understand them in a way that you couldn't only a few minutes before. Jesus seems to be telling us this is the case in verses 34-35. Look at them with me:

*All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. **35** This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." (Matthew 13:34-35, ESV)*

In the parables Jesus is revealing things that have been hidden since the beginning of the world; He is revealing truths that even the Old Testament believers and prophets were unaware of. And it's possible that in your hearing of these things you very well might come to believe they are true.

5. Parables are Kingdom-centric.

Fifth, the parables are kingdom-centric. Now you have to get this one. Are you listening? The central theme uniting all the parables, both here in Matthew 13 and in the rest of the gospels is the kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven. Much like the Sermon on the Mount, the parables tell us what kingdom life is like. They tell us what it means to live under the rule and reign of King Jesus. Basically, they show us what "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" looks like. Now, you have probably forgotten this because it's been so long since we have talked about it, but "on earth as it is in heaven" is the subtitle for our study of Matthew. That's because this is what Matthew is all about. It's about God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

So, this means two things for our study of the parables. First, we need to determine what Jesus is trying to teach us about His kingdom, and then second we need figure out what it means for how we are to live in that kingdom. We need to discern what the main point of a parable is and then apply that truth to our lives.

A Mustard Seed, Leaven, A Treasure, and A Pearl

All right, with that understanding in hand, let's take a look now at four short parables here in Matthew 13 and see what they have to teach us about the kingdom of God.

You will note that we are going to skip around a little bit, because I want to save the longer ones for the coming weeks when we have more time. For today, we are going to quickly look at the parables of the mustard seed, leaven, treasure and pearl. These four parables come in couplets, and they

teach us two huge truths about the kingdom. Let's start by looking at the parables of the mustard seed and leaven in verses 31-33. Follow with me as I read:

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 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 13:31-33, ESV)

The Kingdom has incredible impact.

These two parables make essentially the same point about the kingdom: although it initially appears insignificant, over time it has incredible impact. Did you catch that? Although the kingdom initially seems insignificant, over time it has incredible impact. So, consider a mustard seed. I've got one right here. Pretty small, wouldn't you say? Doesn't look like it could really amount to much of anything. Now, I wish I didn't have to but I probably need to mention that this is not a plant that produces the yellow mustard you put on your hot dog. Rather, it's a common herb that is used around the world for a number of purposes. What's more, if you are thinking Jesus is mistaken because there are many seeds that are smaller than a mustard seed, then you are forgetting something we talked about earlier. Context is important. Jesus is talking about the smallest type of agricultural seed used in His day. Yes, there are smaller seeds than mustard seeds, but Jesus is specifically talking about seeds that were used for agricultural purposes in 1st century Palestine. So, don't be difficult and get with the program.

Anyways, while the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, it grows into the largest of garden plants, so large that it can provide shelter for birds and other animals. In fact, the disparity between the size of the seed and the plant it produces has made the mustard seed proverbial in the Middle East. A mustard seed starts very small, but eventually grows to a height of 8-12 ft.

and becomes incredibly expansive (picture). That big plant comes from this tiny seed. A little mustard seed goes a long way.

Now, consider leaven. Here I've got a packet of yeast. Not a whole lot to it is there? However, just this little bit of yeast can leaven a lot of bread. In fact, the three measures Jesus mentions here in verse 33 could provide bread for over 100 people. This is how it worked in ancient Israel: when a young woman married, as a gift her mother would give her a fresh loaf of bread. That young woman would then take that loaf and use it to leaven bread for her family for her entire life. She would do so by taking a piece from every loaf she baked and using it to leaven the dough for the next loaf. So, just like a mustard seed, a little leaven goes a long way.

Now, do you get the point Jesus is trying to make from these parables? Very simply it is this: the kingdom is like a mustard seed and leaven in that it doesn't look like much initially, but over time it grows into something with incredible impact.

And that, of course, is what has happened, has it not? Although the kingdom started with very obscure beginnings; with a crucified leader and a ragtag band of followers, it has now expanded to every corner of the globe. King Jesus has taken eleven dysfunctional men and grown His kingdom into hundreds of millions of people, a kingdom that continues to grow and expand to this very day.

Now, remember, one of the things we must do with the parables is determine what we are supposed to do with them. We need to consider how what we are learning should change the way we are living. Here's what I think Jesus wants us to do with the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. I think He wants us to be encouraged to persevere in the gospel. I think He wants us to understand that although it might not always look like the gospel is working and the kingdom is advancing, that this is far from the case. I think He wants us to see with eyes of faith that although things may look grim in our world today, He is still building His church and there is nothing that can stop Him from doing so. That although on the outside the

church might look weak and impotent in the face of the onslaught of the world and the devil, in reality the church is growing in numbers and influence. If you don't think this is true, just consider what God is doing in China today. When the communists took over the government in the middle of the last century, they kicked out or martyred virtually every missionary. At the time they did so it was estimated that there were around 1 million Christians in China. However, today, less than 70 years later, China is considered to be the largest Christian nation on earth, with perhaps as many as 100 million followers of Jesus. How is that possible? It's possible because the gospel is like a mustard seed and leaven. A little bit goes a long way. It's possible because the kingdom is powerful and nothing can stand in the way of it growing and making an incredible impact wherever it goes.

And you know what, I think we can even rejoice and celebrate a little today that we can actually see this happening in SE Iowa. Just think about the history of Harmony Bible Church. Did you know Harmony actually started all the way back in the 1850's with just seven families who moved to the Danville area from Pennsylvania? I am quite sure that back in 1850 Harmony Bible Church didn't look like much from the outside. I am quite sure that by human standards there wasn't much to 30 people meeting in small building in the middle of nowhere. However, now 160 years later, from that initial seed of a church, tens of thousands of people have been reached, both here in SE Iowa and around the world, and that reach continues to grow each and every day. How? Well, when those seven families moved here 160 years ago they brought the gospel with them, and over time the gospel has worked like a mustard seed and leaven, and has spread from Danville, Iowa to every corner of the globe. And so my friends, I want to urge us today, on kind of a milestone day for our church, to continue to persevere in the gospel. To continue to speak it and to continue to live in light of it. To continue to minister to a lost and dying world both in word and in deed. Because as we do, the kingdom will continue to grow and make an incredible impact.

The Kingdom has incredible value.

All right, so let's finish up by looking at the parables of the treasure and the pearl in verses 44-46.

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. 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** who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-46, ESV)*

Now, once again Jesus is using two parables to make the exact same point. This time however, the point is not that the kingdom has incredible impact, but rather that it has incredible value.

The parable of the treasure pictures a man accidentally finding a hidden treasure in a field. Of course, this would be very unusual today, but it wasn't all that uncommon in 1st century Israel. Because of the constant turmoil and upheaval in that part of the world, people would often bury their valued possessions in the ground but would then be taken off into captivity or killed in war, and these treasures would be lost until someone came along and found them. This parable pictures that exact thing. A man is working in a field as a laborer and finds a hidden treasure, probably in an old jar. Maybe it's a bunch of gold coins. And so what does he do? Well, he covers it back up and then goes and sells everything he has so that he can buy the field and obtain the treasure. The treasure is so great that he doesn't mind getting rid of everything he has, because he knows that it is completely worth it.

The parable of the pearl is slightly different but makes the same point. This time a merchant is looking for a valuable pearl, and when he finds it he does the same thing as the man who found the treasure. He goes out and sells everything he has in order to buy it. Pearls in Jesus' day were much more valuable than they are today. Just as an example, Cleopatra had a pearl that was worth \$4 billion in today's money. So, we are not talking

about a couple hundred-dollar pearl here. We are talking more like the Pink Star diamond (picture) that was sold for \$83 million dollars back in November. Ladies, how would you like to have that thing on your finger? Anyways, the point is that the pearl is priceless, and the merchant is willing to sacrifice everything in order to obtain it.

Now, of all the parables Jesus told, these are probably the easiest to understand. Pretty much anybody can recognize the point Jesus is making. He's telling us that the kingdom is invaluable. That it's priceless. That it's worth giving up everything in order to obtain it. So let me ask, and this is the biggest question of the day, do you agree with Jesus? Do you believe His kingdom is worth giving up everything for? Do you consider submitting to Jesus' rule and reign as a great treasure, the greatest treasure that can be found?

Let me tell you why you should. The key to understanding why the kingdom is invaluable comes down to one word verse 44. Why did the man go and sell everything he had in order to buy the field? Look at your Bibles and see if you can find the answer yourself. It's one word. Joy. The man willingly gave up everything he had because the treasure gave him joy. He considered the treasure to be so much greater than everything he had that he joyfully gave it all up to gain the treasure. Well, my friends that is why the kingdom is so valuable. That is why it is a treasure above all else. It's the greatest treasure because it offers the greatest joy, a joy far and beyond any joy the world has to offer.

But you might ask how? How does the kingdom give us joy? Well, when King Jesus is ruling and reigning, everything functions, as it should. It's when other kings are ruling, false kings, that everything gets jacked up. Let me use a movie illustration. It's actually a very common theme, particularly in some of our most popular films. Perhaps the best example is the *Lion King*. Why is that movie so powerful, even for those of us who aren't given to sentimental animated pictures? It's powerful because we understand that when the right king is in place, everything goes as it should, and when it's not, well, everything goes haywire. Just think of how many movies have

this plot line...*Camelot, Robin Hood, Lord of the Rings, even The Hunger Games*. When the right king isn't in place, everything gets messed up.²

And that is the way it is in our lives. When Jesus is king, humans flourish and experience the joy and blessings they were created to experience. And when He is not, then we are subject to false kings who make our lives miserable. False kings like sex, money, drugs, power, and religion.

So this is what Jesus is aiming for in these two parables: He wants us to experience the joy and blessing that comes from allowing Him to be king in our lives. Listen, He is not a harsh king. He is not a heavy-handed king. He is a merciful, loving, gentle, benevolent king. A king who came and died so that we could be freed from serving the false kings that are ruining our lives. And so friends, I want to urge you to submit to Jesus' rule and reign today. I want you to see His kingdom as truly valuable, and to willingly give up everything in order to obtain it.

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² Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.