

Many Things in Parables

Matthew 13:1-23

Jesus is famous for teaching in parables. Parables have been described as little stories with a big point, and in Matthew 13 there are seven of them. On one level the parables are simple: the sower scatters seeds, they fall on four different types of ground, making for different results. The seed is “the word of the kingdom” (v. 18), the sower is the one preaching the word, and various kinds of people respond differently to what they hear. As usual in Scripture, there’s much more going on than meets the eye. Jesus says He teaches in parables to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven to those with ears to hear, but to withhold them from those who won’t listen. Those who hear will be abundantly fruitful.

Seven Parables

The Pharisees want to see a sign, but Jesus said the only thing they’ll see is the sign of Jonah. Knowing God isn’t about having the right traditions or education or social circles or socioeconomic status or the right family—even being within the natural family of Jesus. It’s about doing the will of the Father (12:50). Jesus leaves house where was teaching and pushes out from shore in a boat to teach the multitude gathering (“synagoging”) around Him on the land (13:2). A new Israel within Israel comes together to hear the Lord, but they will grow fill the earth. The seven parables can be grouped into three sections in different ways. Peter Leithart posits: 1) Sower (vv. 1-9), explanation of Jesus’ use of parables, and then interpretation of the Sower (vv. 18-23); 2) The Parable of the Wheat and Tares (vv. 24-30), two complementary parables (Mustard Seed and Leaven vv. 31-33), and then Jesus’ interpretation of Wheat and Tares (vv. 36-43); 3) The Parable of Hidden Treasure (v. 44), two complementary parables (Pearl of Great Price and Dragnet, vv. 45-48), and a final reference to treasure (vv. 51-52). A different breakdown by Dale Bruner sees three sets of two, concluded by a solemn seventh: 1) Two Field Parables of the Sower and Weeds; 2) Two Seed or Little-Power Parables, The Mustard Seed and Leaven; 3) Two Gem Parables, The Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price; a concluding Warning Parable of the Dragnet. The parables encapsulate Matthew’s gospel: the way seed is received and what results (Sower); how to be patient and wise as the gospel takes root (Weeds); the weak and small appearance of the kingdom which masks its enormous transformative power (Mustard Seed and Leaven); the immeasurable worth and immediate demand of joy and pursuit of Christ (Hidden Treasure and Pearl); the final judgment to come and the way to live wisely in light of it (Dragnet and the trained steward).

More & Less

The disciples want to know why Jesus speaks to *them* in parables (v. 10). He didn’t begin this way. He taught, called to repentance, and healed openly, but now that He has been accused of casting out demons by Beelzebub, slandered as a Sabbath-breaker, rejected by Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and plotted against for murder (12:15), He moves to bless His friends while depriving His enemies (vv. 11-12). Those who have will receive more, and those don’t will have even less. It sounds harsh only if you completely ignore what’s going on. Those attacking Jesus don’t want Him to forgive sinners. They don’t want the blind to see and the lame to run. They don’t want people brought out of sexual bondage and the grip of greed. They don’t want Matthew working for the Roman government collecting taxes, but they’d rather have him doing that than serving Jesus. Why? Because they’d have to humble themselves and repent. Milton had it right that Satan would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven. Jesus speaks to them in parables because they are culpably blind, gladly deaf, and sinfully foolish (v. 13). They fulfill Isaiah’s

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prophecy who was told to keep prophesying to Israel, to speak things they will not and cannot understand (vv. 14-15). In the verses following the ones Jesus' quotes, Isaiah asks "'Lord, how long?' And He answered: 'Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate'" (Is. 6:11). Jesus said He didn't come to bring peace, but a sword, and that people even in the same family would be set against one another as a result of following Him (Matt. 10:21). Jesus does not try to prevent division, but increases it by telling parables. He's not separating Chevy drivers from Ford or making mountains out of mole hills, but revealing those who are against God and those who are for Him. Right now we are seeing deepening divisions in our country. People ask, "Should I leave this school?" "Should I leave this church?" Are they listening to you? Do they want—are they even open to—real information? If the answer is no, if the church isn't even talking about the existence of a line that could be crossed where they would then disobey government orders, and if a school is prohibiting free speech and teaching people to hate their country and judge people not by the content of their character but by the color of their skin, then leave yesterday. "But it will make that place worse." That's right. It will become more of what it is, not unlike the man who becomes even worse after the first demon leaves (Matt. 12:43-45). Do you want to swim with water wings or wrist weights, with flippers or with a ball and chain around your ankle? Should Jesus spend His time trying to placate those who refuse to hear and not speak the truth to those who are starving for it? Jesus is the new Solomon speaking in parables to the blessed who want to hear. The word for proverb in Hebrew also means parable, and the verb form means "to rule." The book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom, parables, and sayings given to a prince to learn how to live wisely and rule in the world God made. Blessed are the eyes that see and ears that hear what Jesus says, what all the prophets and righteous wanted to hear for millennia (vv. 16-17).

The Four Soils

The seed falls by the wayside when it is heard but not understood, sown into one's heart but then snatched away by the wicked one (v. 19). The second soil, stony places, receives the word immediately with joy but has no depth and therefore stumbles when persecution comes as a result of the word (vv. 20-21). It comes up quickly, but soon withers from external pressure. The third soil receives the seed among thorns, where the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and deter its natural course to bear fruit (v. 22). Jesus doesn't say the plant totally dies, but it's choked, as many Christians are massively deceived about what really matters. Money seems really important as does all the busyness of life that keeps you distanced and distracted from loving God and your neighbor, from disciplining your children, from boldly following Christ. The one who receives the seed on good ground hears, understands, and bears fruit: some by a factor of one hundred, some sixty, and some thirty (v. 23). One tree makes thirty apples, but each apple has many seeds. The word of God is prolifically fertile. This parable is like that, and it's the key to all the parables: "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mk. 4:13). Embrace suffering for Christ, don't covet stuff, be generous, treasure the word of Christ, and your branches will be heavy with fruit. And not just you. In the prophets "sowing" means return from exile (Hos. 2:23; Ez. 36:9; Is. 61:11). Jesus was sown, planted in the earth, and resurrected with eternal life. He is sowing now, and the good ground will receive it and fill the world with abundance.