

## God's Kingdom In The Parables (Part Three)

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As shown in previous articles, the phrases “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” can have a variety of applications, all dealing with the dominion of God—past, present, or future. The church is the chief realm where God’s reign is evident today. However, up to and during Christ’s ministry, His reign included some of the descendants of Abraham. Yet, as He prophesied in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers, “the kingdom of God will be taken from [the leaders of Judah] and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43).

Matthew 13 contains eight parables of “the kingdom,” and commentators generally interpret them all with the church in view. However, Christ spoke the first four to the multitudes (Matthew 13:2, 34, 36), and the setting suggests that His public teaching better suited the degenerate state of the physical nation than the growth of the yet-to-be-established church. Luke 13: 10-20 contains two of the four—the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven—and in that account, Jesus plainly gave them in response to the nation’s existing, degenerate belief system.

Whereas Jesus spoke the first four parables to the folk of Judea and Galilee—explaining two of them to the disciples—He told the last four parables solely to the disciples (Matthew 13:36). This suggests Jesus was turning His focus to a different aspect of the reign of God: the spiritual nation that would bear the fruits of the Kingdom—that is, the church.

However, despite the change in audience, the last four parables still connect to the first four, providing positive instruction to the disciples and now the church. We see the close connection in the parables’ deliberate structure, which few take into consideration.

As with the rest of God’s creation, His Word displays an order and beauty in its organization. The parables in Matthew 13 are arranged in a *chiasm* (also

known as an *introversion* or *epanados*), a structure wherein similar ideas are repeated but in reverse sequence. In plain terms, the first and last parables form a pair because they teach about a common theme. Similarly, the second and seventh, the third and sixth, and the fourth and fifth parables form pairs because their respective lessons closely relate. In general, the first parable of each pair, spoken to the multitudes, presents a problem to which the second, spoken to the disciples, provides the spiritual solution.

The term *chiasm* comes from the Greek letter *chi*, which we know as the letter X. The pivotal point of the X, and the crux of the chiasm, lies at the intersection. Applying this to the parables of Matthew 13, the decisive truth of Christ's teaching is found in the middle of the chiasm, the Parable of the Leaven (fourth parable) and the Parable of the Hidden Treasure (fifth parable). The previous parables lead up to this pair, and the remaining parables build upon their pivotal understanding.

## **Hidden Leaven**

In both parables in this pair—the fourth and fifth, Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to something *hidden*. The fourth parable (Matthew 13:33) shows a woman hiding leaven in “three measures of meal,” resulting in the leaven spreading throughout. The fifth parable describes a man finding hidden treasure and hiding it again. We first see “three measures of meal” in the meeting of Abraham and Sarah and the Lord, when He foretold the birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:6). However, the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham's house degraded over the centuries, and by the time of Christ's ministry, their peaceful accord had become completely debased.

Before examining the fifth parable, we must see how the Parable of the Leaven ties the first three together. The critical issue in the third parable, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, is that a plant with a faithful beginning ends up being a welcome home to demons (Matthew 13:31-32). Symbolically, this is the effect of leavening: false beliefs lead people astray—away from God and toward perdition. Even though Abraham lived by faith and kept God's commandments, “leavening” introduced to (and by) his descendants broke down the spiritual wall and made the nation an environment hospitable to demons. While not every Pharisee, Sadducee, or common Jew was demon-possessed, Jesus forthrightly classified those who opposed Him as Satan's

children (see John 8:44), as did John the Baptist before Him, calling them a “brood of vipers” when they claimed Abraham as their father (Matthew 3:7-9).

The symbolism involved in leavening further explains the second parable, whose conflict is found in the dismaying presence of the tares among the wheat. God did *not* plant the tares. They threatened to diminish the harvest because their origin is satanic rather than divine. At the time Jesus spoke this parable, the tares were embodied in the Pharisees and other religious leaders who were oppressing those with whom God was working. Jesus rebukes them in Matthew 23:13, saying, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you *shut up the kingdom of heaven* against men; for you neither go in yourselves, *nor do you allow those who are entering* to go in” (emphasis ours throughout). Their active opposition to the good seed directly resulted from their corrupt—leavened—beliefs about righteousness.

Taking one more step back, the idea of leavening also plays into the Parable of the Sower, in which most of the soils on which the word of the Kingdom fell could not produce a positive, sustained response. In the first scenario, the birds—a symbol of demons—interfered before the seed had a chance to sprout. The demons were present because, by turning away from God, the nation had essentially invited them in. In the second scenario, the soil was stony, and the sprouting seed could not develop roots to allow continued survival and growth. The nation’s hardness of heart made many slow to believe, which ties to the problem of leavening. Likewise, the thorns—pursuing the cares of the world—are a consequence of a misaligned belief system that prioritizes the material over the spiritual.

As we can see, Christ’s woeful parables to the multitudes reach a climax in the Parable of the Leaven. It explains the underlying cause of the nation’s spiritual problems described in the previous parables, as well as the controversy between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Matthew 12, summarized in Part One.

### **What Is the Hidden Treasure?**

Like the Parable of the Leaven, the fifth parable also speaks of something hidden:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)

In the Parable of the Leaven, what is hidden is a highly destructive element that *negatively* affects God's realm. In the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, what is hidden is a priceless element that *positively* affects the realm of God's rule. As we will see, the treasure is an answer to the leaven.

In the Parable of the Leaven, the principal actor is a woman, who plays a subversive role. In the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, the principal actor is a man, representative of Jesus Christ. While the man also hides something, his actions are supremely noble. He hides something for a beneficial reason, while the woman hides something for a malignant one. The man provides the solution to the problem introduced by the woman.

A common interpretation of the Parable of the Hidden Treasure holds that the treasure is the church, hidden by God in the world. That interpretation contains a significant difficulty, though: Jesus nowhere teaches that the church of God should be hidden. Rather, in the Sermon on the Mount, He tells His disciples that they "are the light of the world." He says, "A city that is set on a hill *cannot* be hidden" (Matthew 5:14). He follows this with a second illustration, teaching that the purpose of a lamp is to give illumination, and that a hidden lamp is useless. His conclusion is, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

Considering the spectacular founding of the church in Acts 2, it is hard to imagine that the extraordinary events of that day would not have spread like wildfire among untold numbers of people. In Acts 17:6, the people in Thessalonica, some 1,000 miles from Jerusalem, say that the apostles had "turned the world upside down." News of God's power through His servants had spread far and wide; the church was not hidden. As Paul told Festus and Agrippa, "This thing was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

Paul writes in Colossians 1:23 that the gospel had been "preached to every creature under heaven." While he employs a measure of hyperbole, the fact

remains that Jesus did not hide the church once He founded it. The church in Colossae suffered persecution because its members kept the Sabbath and holy days joyfully, which their ascetic neighbors looked down upon.

Wherever Christ's followers emulate Him, they will not be hidden. He told the disciples they would be hated by *all* for His name's sake (Matthew 10:22; 24:9), showing that the world would be aware of His followers. He also warned them, "The time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service" (John 16:2), speaking of a time when church members are the focus of attention. On a positive note, He also said that their love for each other would cause *all* people to know that they were His disciples (John 13:35). Finally, if the church is the agent of preaching the gospel in all the world (Matthew 24:14), then it will not be hidden at the end either.

Jesus did not intend the true church to be a large institution, wielding temporal power, so it is not always visible in profane history books. Certainly, the church is not visible to every last person. Yet, wherever God's true people live, they will make a visible witness of God's way of life to their neighbors because the Spirit of our Father generates that witness. But if the assembly of called-out ones is hidden rather than shining as light, it is because it looks too much like the world. Such a state would bring no joy to Jesus Christ.

### **A Multi-faceted Treasure**

While Scripture shows that "treasure" symbolizes several things, the imagery of *hidden* treasure has a narrower usage. In Job 28:1-11, Job describes hidden treasure in the form of undiscovered gems and lodes of precious metal. He talks about the effort men put forth to tunnel into the earth for what is valuable, setting the stage to contrast it with something even greater. In verses 12-28, he turns the focus to the superior value of wisdom and understanding, pointing out the impossibility of finding such hidden treasure without God.

In verses 15-19, Job observes that wisdom's value is so great that no man can purchase it. Verses 12 and 21 assert that nobody knows where to look for wisdom or understanding. He concludes by quoting what God says to man: "Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is

understanding” (verse 28). Thus, hidden treasure is compared to understanding, wisdom, and the fear of the Lord—a collection of valuables.

Solomon speaks in identical terms in Proverbs 2:4-5: “If you seek her [wisdom; understanding; verses 2-3] as silver, and search for her as for *hidden treasures*; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.” Isaiah 33:6 also links wisdom and the fear of the Lord with treasure, and in Psalm 119 the psalmist writes, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You. . . . I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure” (verses 11, 162). These verses likewise show wisdom, the knowledge of God, the fear of God, and God’s Word symbolized by hidden treasure. This symbolism carries through into the New Testament in Colossians 2:3, where Paul writes that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the Father and the Son.

Thus, God likens hidden treasure to a collection of interwoven things: Understanding, wisdom, the fear of God, knowledge of God, and God’s Word, all of which are positive and powerful factors in living God’s way of life. These are all things God must give, and they are hidden until He gives them. However, we must add one more element to this collection, something interconnected with all these symbolic hidden treasures.

Remember, the fourth and fifth parables are paired. The hidden treasure solves the problem of the hidden leaven that corrupted the beliefs and practices of the physical kingdom. The *true* belief system depends on each of the items in the collection. We can, though, be even more specific about the hidden treasure, because the gospels record Jesus finding something that matches this exactly—and it gave Him joy, as the parable describes.

Matthew 8:5-12 records one of Christ’s healings. A centurion had approached Jesus to ask Him to intervene for his servant, who was a distance away. Even though Jesus offered to go to his home, the centurion humbly deferred. Notice verses 8-10:

The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another,

‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not *found* such great *faith*, not even in Israel!”

What Jesus *found* and caused Him to marvel was faith. Faith is inextricably linked with all the elements Scripture associates with hidden treasure: Faith comes by hearing—by *understanding*—and that comes by the *Word of God* (Romans 10:17). Faith is based on the *knowledge of God* and the *fear of God*, and faith and *wisdom* meet in right action. Therefore, when God gives a man these hidden treasures, they are all aspects of faith. God-given faith—which includes both trust in God as well as a body of true beliefs—counterbalances the leaven; it is the solution to corrupt belief systems.

## **A Consistent Response**

Jesus said that the Kingdom would be taken from its current caretakers and given to a spiritual nation with the same faith as Abraham. While Israel, for the most part, was *faithless*, He found faith in the Gentile centurion. In Deuteronomy 32:20, the pre-incarnate Christ described Israel as “a perverse generation, children in whom is no faith,” but as He walked through the world—through this field (Matthew 13:38)—He found little gems of faith that the Father had hidden.

He declares that the work of God is for people to believe—to have faith—in the One He sent (John 6:29). He says the Father would draw people to the Son (John 6:44-45), and that drawing is the result of the Father giving faith. As Jesus traveled, He encountered some instances of genuine belief—in contrast to the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees—and He rejoiced in the rare faith He found. Thus, in Matthew 11:25, Jesus thanked the Father for hiding things from the world’s wise and prudent and revealing them to babes.

When He encountered this kind of faith, Jesus consistently responded by healing or doing some other act of mercy, then He would instruct the faithful person not to tell anyone. In other words, He found faith that His Father had hidden in the “field,” yet He hid it again, just as the parable describes. When a leper came to Him, professing his faith that Jesus could cleanse him, He told him (after the healing), “See that you tell no one” (Matthew 8:4). A little

later, He resurrected a little girl after seeing the faith of her parents, charging them to tell no one what had happened (Matthew 9:35-43). Similarly, Jesus healed two blind men based on their faith, and then instructed them, “See that no one knows it” (Matthew 9:30). All these events, plus the healing of the centurion’s servant, took place before Jesus gave the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, so the disciples could draw upon experience to understand the parable.

This dynamic is especially clear in Matthew 16:13-20, when Jesus asked them whom the people thought He was, and then whom the disciples thought He was. Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and He told Peter that his understanding—that treasure of faith—had been given by the Father. At the end of the conversation, “He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.” They were to keep the matter hidden.

A short time later, when Peter, James, and John saw Him transfigured, “Jesus commanded them, saying, ‘Tell the vision to no one *until* the Son of Man is risen from the dead’” (Matthew 17:9). He likewise “strictly warned and commanded them to *tell this to no one*, saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day’” (Luke 9:21-22).

Christ’s pattern was to respond to those in whom the Father had hidden faith, then to keep that faith hidden until He had purchased the field—the world. In John 6:51, He promised to give His flesh for the life of the world. He was willing to buy all humanity for the sake of the few whom the Father had given faith. After His resurrection, the treasure did not need to remain hidden, and the disciples proclaimed to the entire world that Jesus was the Christ.

## **Treasured Faith**

Christ’s ministry was not about beginning a movement of the masses or taking the crown of an earthly kingdom. He preached repentance, but His purpose was not to bring about a national revival. As a result, He constantly walked a tightrope between living as only God in the flesh can and preventing the reaction to Him from boiling over too soon. His half-brothers

caught on to the fact that Jesus refrained from drawing too much attention to Himself, and it made no sense to them (John 7:3-5).

Along these same lines, Jesus also kept hidden those whom God had given faith until He could fulfill His purpose and purchase them along with the whole world. As He had instructed His disciples,

Therefore do not fear them [persecutors]. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and *hidden that will not be known*. Whatever I tell you in the dark, *speak in the light*; and what you hear in the ear, *preach on the housetops*. (Matthew 10:26-27)

The time would come when God would reveal what had been hidden, but only after the conditions were right—after He had redeemed the lives of His followers from the power of Satan, so they could not be snatched from His hand (John 10:28-29).

In one of His final prayers, Jesus reports to the Father, “While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). This confirms that He was constantly on guard against losing those with faith. This commission is also apparent in John 6:39: “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.” When the guards arrested Him, He told the officers that since they had Him, they could let the disciples go, alluding to His need not to lose them before He could purchase them (John 18:8-9).

What Christ values is the true faith that only God gives (Romans 12:3). Peter calls it “precious faith” (II Peter 1:1), describing it as “much more precious than gold that perishes” (I Peter 1:7). He is still keenly interested in it, for He says at the conclusion of another parable, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really *find faith* on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

He treasures the faith that trusts Him to heal blindness, especially our spiritual blindness. He values the faith that trusts Him to make us cleaner than He made the lepers. He esteems the faith that trusts Him to give us spiritual life and eternal life just as He restored the little girl to life. He

cherishes the faith that trusts in the overarching spiritual reality of His sovereignty, such that when Christ says to one, 'Go,' he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to His servants, 'Do this,' and they do it.

That faith, trust, or belief is so meaningful to the Creator that He gave up everything to purchase the world, so that those with this treasure would become part of His realm. Faith is the basis of the Kingdom "given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matthew 21:43).