

God's Kingdom In The Parables (Part One)

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch,"

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed

Mark begins his record of Jesus Christ's ministry in this fashion:

Now after John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

Though many today conclude that the essence of Christianity is the forgiveness of sins or the wonder of God's love, a considered reading of the gospels reveals that Christ's message centered on the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven). His ministry began with preaching repentance and the good news of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23; 9:35; Luke 4:43; 9:11; Acts 1:3).

His forerunner, John the Baptist, preached the same basic message (Matthew 3:1-2), as did the apostles (Matthew 10:7; Luke 9:2, 60; Acts 8:12). The Kingdom theme accompanied Paul on his travels (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31) and lights up his epistles (Romans 14:17; I Corinthians 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:50; Colossians 4:11; I Thessalonians 2:12). Though Christianity comprises many principles, the essence of Christ's message is the Kingdom of God. Grasping God's purpose for humanity begins with comprehending the Kingdom.

A Word of Many Usages

The same Greek word for "kingdom," *basileia*, is used in all these references, and its basic meaning is "dominion." However, the Bible's writers do not always speak of the divine Kingdom in the same way, so understanding the Kingdom of God depends on recognizing its different applications.

- A common usage of *basileia* is future-oriented: The great hope of true Christians is Christ's return to bear rule over the earth (Revelation 11:15; Daniel 2:44).
- The Kingdom of God is also a present spiritual reality, such that those God calls in this age are figuratively translated into that Kingdom (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 1:13), even as they live out their lives in, but not of, the world. God has dominion over the church, making it a component—though not the fullness—of the Kingdom of God now.
- A third usage of *basileia* refers to Christ Himself as the King of His Kingdom, such as when He told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God was in their midst (see Luke 17:21).

Basileia is used in yet another, often-overlooked way that is necessary to understand a large measure of Christ's ministry. This disregarded usage appears most clearly in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:33-44). At the end of the parable, Jesus says, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (verse 43; emphasis ours throughout). This refers not to the future establishment of Christ's Kingdom on earth, but to a dominion then in existence.

The context of this parable begins in Matthew 21:23, indicating that its audience (and that of the Parable of the Two Sons in verses 28-32) was “the chief priests and the elders of the people.” Verses 45-46 show their reaction:

Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, *they perceived that He was speaking of them*. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

Even though God had not given the religious leaders the means to understand all the mysteries of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:11), they could still perceive that Jesus aimed several of His teachings directly at them.

The chapter break obscures that Jesus continued speaking to the same leaders in the Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14), another parable of “the kingdom of heaven” (verse 2). The king sends out invitations to the feast in batches. The first two sets are declined, signifying the response of the physical nation of Israel. Only after the “king . . . sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city” (verse 7)—foreshadowing Jerusalem’s destruction forty years after they rejected the gospel of the Kingdom—does a third call go out, and his servants find suitable guests for the wedding.

This third group of guests represents those whom Christ later gave, not only entrance to the wedding feast, but also authority to rule. As He had earlier told Peter, a representative of the spiritual nation, “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom” (Matthew 16:19). The stewardship of the Kingdom would be transferred.

Likewise, Jesus foretold of a future time when His followers would receive greatly increased authority: “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). Even as Jacob supplanted Esau, so God would make certain that Jacob’s descendants would likewise be supplanted (though not forgotten) because of their unfaithfulness.

A National Kingdom

In these two parables, we can see another facet of God’s dominion. Jesus considered the chief priests, the elders, and the Pharisees part of God’s Kingdom, and also certified that they would have the Kingdom taken from them. They, like tenant-farmers, had a measure of responsibility over that national Kingdom because of their leadership positions within it. They wielded religious power that Jesus acknowledged (Matthew 23:2-3), which had its source in God (Romans 13:1).

In the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers, the vineyard is the Kingdom of God, and the vinedressers are those tasked with attending to it. Jesus prophesied that stewardship would be transferred because the original caretakers had proven themselves unfaithful. Psalm 80:8-19 also represents the Kingdom of Israel as a vineyard (as does Isaiah 5:1-7), and the shared symbol confirms that the Kingdom of Israel *was* the Kingdom of God at that time, though not in its fullness.

Similarly, the Parable of the Wedding Feast, though a parable of the “kingdom of heaven,” deals at length with Israel, specifically Judah. It illustrates the physical descendants of Abraham as not acting

like Abraham at all (see John 8:30-38). God told Israel even before she made the covenant, “You shall be to Me a *kingdom of priests* and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), revealing that His original intent for Israel was to be a Kingdom.

Israel’s first human king, Saul, was unfaithful, and the Kingdom was taken from him and given to David. After the people contributed for the Temple, David praised God, saying, “For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; *Yours is the kingdom, O Lord*, and You are exalted as head over all” (I Chronicles 29:11). Similarly, Abijah refers to the house of David as “the Kingdom of the Lord” (II Chronicles 13:8). Both Asaph and Isaiah proclaim that God was still Israel’s King, even though earlier the nation had requested a king “like all the other nations,” rejecting God (Psalm 74:12; Isaiah 33:22; see I Samuel 8:4-8; Deuteronomy 17:14).

I Chronicles 29:23 records that after David’s death, “Solomon sat on *the throne of the Lord as king* instead of David his father.” When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she rightly perceived the true Sovereign over Israel: “Blessed be the Lord your God, who delighted in you, *setting you on His throne to be king for the Lord your God!*” (II Chronicles 9:8).

From these examples, we can see that the Kingdom of Israel was an aspect of the *basileia*—the sovereign dominion—of God. It was a Kingdom with its origin and authority in heaven.

At the time of Christ, the Kingdom was still in existence, though in an unusual configuration. Its royal line ruled in the British Isles. Its throne—which God promised would never lack a man to sit on it—was not in Jerusalem. Many of its subjects were scattered all over Europe, and some of them, still living in Judea and Galilee, were looking for a savior—a “son of David”—to return the Kingdom to its former glory.

When Jesus’ parents brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to God, “there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for *the Consolation of Israel*” (Luke 2:25). Even after Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection, the widespread beliefs of the time were so ingrained in the disciples that they asked Him, “Lord, will You at this time *restore the Kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6).

When John the Baptist came preaching about the Coming One, expectations were high. There was enough curiosity and even fervor that “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5-6). His announcement caught their attention because the Kingdom was on the minds of the people of Judah and Galilee. Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom were generally lost on the common man, yet at times, His references to it were understandable in national terms.

Context Is Key

With this additional understanding of the “kingdom of heaven,” we can now consider some of the best-known parables, those found in Matthew 13. Their symbols make several of them difficult to interpret, but understanding that the dominion of God included the nation of Israel helps to bring clarity. To grasp why Jesus gave these foundational parables in Matthew 13, however, we must see what led to His giving of parables, what He was responding to, and what audience He was speaking to.

These parables follow a confrontation in Matthew 12, which began with Jesus healing a demon-possessed blind-mute (verse 22). He established His authority as the One who had power and dominion. Everything that transpires from this point sets the stage for the subsequent parables, and this context is critical for grasping why Jesus spoke these parables. After the miraculous healing, many wondered if He might be the Son of David (verse 23), the One who would restore the Kingdom. However, the Pharisees, in their usual defiance, attributed the healing to the power of Satan (verse 24).

Jesus responds that, if exorcism manifested Satan's power, then the Pharisees must admit that their "sons" (disciples) were likewise in league with the Devil, for they were doing the same thing (verse 27). But if God's Spirit had performed the exorcism, then the Kingdom of God—the dominion of God—had come upon them (verse 28). He could rob the demon of its possession only if He bound it first, showing that He had authority over the spirit realm (verse 29). There is no neutrality; a person is aligned either with God's dominion or with Satan (verse 30).

He continues His unwelcome correction by contrasting Himself with them. After warning about blaspheming the Holy Spirit (verses 31-32), Jesus draws on the principle of examining fruit to determine whether a tree is good or bad (verse 33). He calls His opponents a "brood of vipers," saying that their blasphemy proved the evil within (verses 34-37).

Since the people expected a conquering king to come and restore the Kingdom to its former glory, Jesus' assertion that the authority of heaven was working through Him challenged the current leadership. The scribes and Pharisees ask Him for a sign—some proof of His claim—prompting Christ's words about the sign of Jonah (verses 38-42). His answer focuses on the timing of His death and resurrection, which only the Most High could bring to pass. It also includes the example of a major Gentile city that repented at the preaching of Jonah, while the current "Kingdom of God" would not repent at the preaching of One greater. He also refers to the "queen of the South" (Sheba) who came to hear the wisdom of the man sitting on the Lord's throne, yet He was greater than Solomon—not only in wisdom, but also because Solomon's throne belonged to Him!

Jesus follows this with another lesson, warning that unless something positive replaces the evil that is cast out, the former evil—and worse—will return (verses 43-45). He foretells that this *would* happen "with this wicked generation" (verse 45). All the repentance, baptisms, healings, and exorcisms that had been taking place would do no good if the people did not make their lives inhospitable to the evil influences.

In verses 46-50, Jesus teaches that flesh-and-blood family is of less importance than the spiritual Family, which He defines as those who do the will of the Father (or those "who hear the word of God and do it"; Luke 8:21). The matters of parentage and family relations came up frequently during Christ's ministry (for example, John 8:39-59) because the Jews felt secure in their position before God because of their physical descent from Abraham. Though not obvious, His clarification of "family" in spiritual terms appears throughout the parables of Matthew 13, as Jesus contrasts Abraham's physical descendants with his spiritual ones.

Matthew 13

All of this leads to the eight parables in chapter 13. Verses 1-3 continue with no break in the flow and show the context and setting for Christ's teaching:

On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And *great multitudes* were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and *the whole multitude* stood on the shore. Then *He spoke many things to them in parables*. . . .

While it is easy to read over these details, they are crucial for grasping Christ's meaning because they show that Jesus spoke the first four parables (the Sower, the Wheat and the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven) to "great multitudes." Verses 34-36 confirm that He preached to the people at large at this point rather than strictly to His disciples:

All these things [the first four parables] *Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables*; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world." Then Jesus sent *the multitude* away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field."

In the first four parables, Jesus is speaking primarily to the physical nation, the remnant citizenry of the earthly Kingdom of God. Even though they could not grasp the parables' full depth, He was still responding to the attitude and approach of the nation shown in the previous chapter, particularly of the leadership that continually rejected the dominion of heaven.

While Christ's teachings apply on multiple levels, it is paramount to grasp the primary meaning before looking for other applications. The complete fulfillment of the Kingdom was far beyond what the folk of Judea and Galilee could comprehend, yet He still spoke to them. The parables were not exclusively for His disciples, just as His prophecy, "The kingdom of God will be taken from you" (Matthew 21:43), was not spoken to His disciples. In short, the King had a message for the subjects of the physical Kingdom that He had established. He was giving them a testimony—a final chance—and when they rejected it, He focused on the budding spiritual nation that had Abraham's *faith* rather than merely his *blood* (Galatians 3:15-29).

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed

His first parable to the multitudes concerns a sower and his limited success in receiving fruit from the earth:

Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:3-9)

Recognizing the context and audience reveals that this parable was a rebuke of the nation. It testified of the citizens' inability to receive "the word of the kingdom" (verse 19)—the gospel of the Kingdom of God. It aptly describes what John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles experienced in the first century. They saw within the people some interest—and even some willingness—to repent (after a fashion) and to be baptized, but there was little depth because their hearts were so far from their King. In three out of four scenarios in the parable, the ground produced nothing of value.

Only the good soil—“he who hears the word *and understands it*” (verse 23)—bears fruit. All the types of ground receive the Word, but God prepares the soil only of some. The masses lacked ears to hear, despite claiming Abraham as their father. They looked for a messiah who would improve their political condition while leaving their religious system and moral state unchallenged.

We see this even within the context of the Parable of the Sower. The critical factor is whether the “ground” heard and received the “word of the kingdom”—that is, whether God had given those hearing the Word the means to respond properly. In Jesus’ explanation of the parable to His disciples, He refers to the multitude before Him when quoting Isaiah 6:9-10:

Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.

The people to whom He gave the parables were fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy. They were living proof of the truth in this first parable—they could not receive the truth. In contrast, He had prepared His disciples to hear and respond properly. They were the good soil that would yield an increase (Matthew 13:16-17; see John 15:1-17).

In Part Two, we will continue to look at the parables in Matthew 13 and see how their basic meanings become clear through understanding their audience and Jesus’ use of *basileia*.