

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

by David C. Grabbe

*Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch,"*

Biblically, the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” can apply in different senses, though it always describes God’s dominion in some way. When Jesus responded to Judah’s leaders or spoke to multitudes, the “Kingdom of Heaven” referred to the nation/kingdom God founded through Abraham. We can easily see God’s rulership in the patriarch and his descendants. However, Jesus prophesied in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers that “the kingdom of God will be taken from you [the leaders of Judah] and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43)—referring to the church, which Peter calls “a holy nation” (I Peter 2:9).

Part Three showed that even though Jesus spoke the last four parables in Matthew 13 only to the disciples, they continue and build on the first four parables spoken to the multitudes. Together, the eight parables create a structure known as a *chiasm*, where the first and eighth parables form a pair, as do the second and seventh, the third and sixth, and the fourth and fifth.

The crux—the pivot point—of the chiasm is in the fourth and fifth parables, those of the Leaven and the Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:33, 44). They both involve something hidden that affects the realm of God’s dominion either negatively (the leaven of corrupt doctrine) or positively (the hidden treasure of God-given faith). The fifth parable’s hidden treasure solves the problem of the leaven in the fourth parable. The nation’s overall problem was a lack of faith, produced by a twisted, demonic belief system that left many citizens in direct opposition to their King and Savior. The solution—the work of God (John 6:29)—was His intervention in the lives of some so they could truly believe.

### A Seed and a Pearl

We turn now to the pairing of the third and sixth parables, the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Pearl of Great Price. The Mustard Seed parable

describes a plant with the humblest of beginnings, representing the Kingdom's beginning with Abraham by faith (Matthew 13:31-32). Its growth relative to its initial size sets it apart from other plants.

Hebrews 11:12 describes the same effect but with a different metaphor: "Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore." A mighty increase occurred from what God began with Abraham. However, the parable concludes with birds—used as a symbol of Satan and the demons (see Matthew 13:4, 19)—nesting in the branches, which shows the spiritually unclean state of the Kingdom at the time of Jesus' teaching.

Just as the Parable of the Mustard Seed concerns a single plant, so the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price focuses on a single, precious gem: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

The Mustard Seed shows growth relative to a humble beginning. The Pearl of Great Price illustrates this also, as a pearl's value largely depends on how big it grows (in relative terms) over the years as layer upon layer of nacre accretes over a minuscule irritant. What people seek even more than size are a pearl's quality and perfection: A smaller, flawless pearl is worth more than a larger, marred, misshapen one.

The New King James Version's "beautiful" in Matthew 13:45 is translated as "goodly" in the King James Version. The Greek word, *kalos*, carries a sense of beauty, but it refers to *moral* goodness and virtue, not simply aesthetics. It is the same word underlying "good works," "good fruit," "good seed" and "good ground" (as in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares), "fitting," "better," "good shepherd," as well as "honest." The pearl was beautiful because of its exquisite qualities, not merely because it caught the eye.

The contrast between these two parables lies in the result. The latter end of the mustard plant is an abode for birds, just as the nation at the time of Jesus was rife with unclean spirits. In contrast, the pearl is a symbol of purity. It caught the attention of a merchant, who specialized in seeking "goodly" pearls. For the merchant to conclude his search with this singular, superlative

pearl proves its great worth in this expert's eyes. Whereas the Parable of the Mustard Seed ends with spiritual uncleanness, the Pearl of Great Price concludes with satisfaction over superb quality and worth. The merchant spends everything he had; he could buy no other, nor did he desire to.

### **An Uncommon Interpretation**

As with many of the previous parables, the most common interpretation of this parable lacks scriptural support. The popular reading asserts that the pearl variously represents salvation, the Kingdom, or Jesus Christ Himself. In this view, the merchant represents the individual Christian, willing to give up everything to purchase these things of inestimable worth.

While true and admirable sentiments exist in this view—a follower of Christ certainly must count the cost of discipleship and be willing to sacrifice all—the fact remains that human beings have no currency with which to purchase salvation, the Kingdom, or the Savior. They can accept or reject these gifts, but they can never procure them by wealth, works, or good intentions.

The merchant does not represent ordinary men. In the paired Parable of the Mustard Seed, the man represents Jesus Christ, symbolically sowing a tiny seed in the world, initiating a physical nation/kingdom. Likewise, the merchant in this parable represents Jesus Christ, who first surrendered His divine position to become human and then sacrificed His sinless, physical life. His sacrifice paid the redemption price for those with the faith of Abraham—the faith that is a gift of God and is demonstrated by works of obedience (Genesis 26:5; James 2:17-22; John 14:21; I John 5:2-3).

God's promises to Abraham are fulfilled in both the physical nation of Israel and spiritual Israel, the church, and this pairing of parables captures this overlap. One—the Mustard Seed—shows the biological family growing large, while the other—the Pearl—reveals the spiritual Family supremely valued. Abraham's faith facilitated the fulfillment of God's promise of an heir and thus the first increase of the Kingdom (see Genesis 17:5-7). However, the apostle Paul explains that physical heritage, while important in some aspects (Romans 3:1-2), matters far less than receiving from God the same faith Abraham had:

Therefore know that *only those who are of faith* are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are *of faith* are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:7-9; emphasis ours throughout)

Those with this faith are “bought at a price” (I Corinthians 6:20; 7:23); they are of “the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Peter writes that God redeemed us “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (I Peter 1:19). Truly, Christ sold all He had to purchase this pearl He found so valuable. In contrast, the purchase price for the children of Israel was Egypt’s firstborn (Exodus 13:13-15; Numbers 3:13)—the blood of animals and men, but not that of the Son of God.

Though the Israelites descended from Abraham, they had hearts of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12, 19). They heard the word, but it was not mixed with faith (Hebrews 4:2). As the Parable of the Hidden Treasure illustrates, what makes the church so precious is the presence of His gift of faith. By giving up His position and life to purchase this unique, spiritual nation, Jesus proved the great worth of an assembly of people in whom faith is active. Jesus prophesies that this group—the spiritual nation, the church—will receive the Kingdom.

At first glance, it appears that the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price simply reiterates the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. While similarities exist, one distinction helps us to appreciate more of God’s work. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure displays Christ’s willingness to purchase the entire world for the comparatively small amount of faith that the Father had hidden in it. “Treasure” typically connotes a *grouping* of gems, gold, and other precious items, rather than a *single*, valuable item.

The Parable of the Pearl, though, describes Christ’s pursuit of a singular, precious pearl. Other pearls of lesser quality were available, but Christ’s focus was on a spiritual nation, one that had been growing very slowly for a long time, with God adding to it a person here and there. Individuals, though, are not represented in the symbol of the pearl. What Christ values is the

wholeness and seamlessness of the spiritual nation God is working with. The Hidden Treasure, then, shows God hiding faith in a few individuals; the Pearl shows the collective value and beauty of faith working in concert.

### **All Kinds of Fish**

Within the inspired structure of the parables, the next one—the Parable of the Dragnet—pairs with the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, discussed in Part Two. The wheat and tares represent peoples of opposing spiritual origins: The wheat plants are the “sons of the kingdom,” while the tares are the “sons of the wicked one” (Matthew 13:38). At the time Jesus spoke the parable, the Pharisees were the clearest examples of tares.

The Parable of the Dragnet reiterates this distinction between two classifications of people, but with a significant added detail:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50)

Both parables in this pairing describe a gathering that occurs at the end of the age, as well as the future separation of the wicked from the righteous (or the just). Both speak of the wicked being burned, and both involve “wailing and gnashing of teeth.” However, the parables differ in Jesus’ deliberate description of the dragnet collecting “some of *every kind*.”

In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, He distinguishes two different types of plants that appear nearly identical for most of their growing cycles. In the Parable of the Dragnet, though, the dragnet—representing the preaching of the gospel—brings in “some of every kind,” after which a sorting process occurs. The latter parable teaches that God does not base His judgment on race or ethnicity. A person does not have to be of the physical Israelite “kind” to obtain favor in God’s eyes, just as fishermen will accept multiple kinds of fish to sell.

The analogy Jesus uses here sounds a warning that is not apparent in the Wheat and Tares, where the focus is simply on whether God or Satan has “planted” an individual. When the fishermen searched through the dragnet on shore, their sorting would have included multiple criteria for determining which were good and which were bad. They would have discarded any unclean fish, a type of those who may have an enthusiastic interest in the gospel of the Kingdom yet have not been cleansed by Christ’s sacrifice. (We can also see this spiritual condition in the improperly clothed wedding guest in Matthew 22:11-14.) However, even among the *clean* fish, the fishermen would not have kept every specimen. If a fish had not grown enough or were obviously diseased, it would also have been burned—it held no value to the fishermen.

In the judgment at the end of the age, God requires more than just coming under the blood of Christ. To reiterate this sobering principle, Jesus uses a different analogy in John 15:2-6:

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

Even those who have been cleansed can still be thrown into the fire if they do not bear sufficient fruit. The branches do not—indeed, cannot—bear the fruit independently; it requires remaining attached to the Vine, Jesus Christ. Christians are merely conduits for the fruit, but they must remain faithfully and loyally committed to the relationship to ensure the fruit’s production.

If a believer’s spiritual growth is insufficient or he or she becomes spiritually diseased (without seeking God’s healing), he or she will be cast into the fire at the end of the age. The “wailing and gnashing of teeth” will come not only

from those who have maintained an anti-God stance. It will also be the response of those who were cleansed by Christ's sacrifice but who "neglect so great salvation" (Hebrews 2:3) and fail to abide in Him (see also Hebrews 6:4-8; John 3:15-18; I Corinthians 9:27).

## **The Role of Scribe**

The eighth and final parable in Matthew 13 is the Parable of the Householder:

Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."  
(Matthew 13:51-52)

The first parable concerns the response of people hearing the Word of the Kingdom. Only those who hear and *understand* it respond in a positive and sustained manner (Matthew 13:23). This understanding is not dependent on mental acuity, for undoubtedly, some very astute people gathered to hear Him. Instead, Jesus explains that the peoples' incomprehension is because "the hearts of this people have grown dull" (Matthew 13:15). It requires spiritual healing for anyone to understand the Word of the Kingdom. It requires a divine gift for a person to know the Kingdom's mysteries (verse 11; see also Matthew 11:25-30).

The eighth parable also hinges on understanding. Jesus prefaces it with the question, "Have you *understood* all these things?" After the disciples respond that they have, He proceeds with the final teaching of the occasion, the responsibility of "every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven."

In general, the scribes of Jesus' day were negative figures, despite the office itself being an honorable one. The term "scribe" (or "secretary") could refer to any official writer. The first usage dates to the administration of King David (II Samuel 8:17). The role of scribe began with those skilled in writing—and more importantly, recording accurately—but it took on additional significance under Ezra, "a skilled scribe *in the Law of Moses*, which the LORD God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6). Because the scribes were

responsible for accurately copying the Scriptures, they knew well what the Scriptures said. They thus became teachers of the law. Unlike the priesthood, restricted to the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron, anybody could become a scribe with the proper instruction and study.

The gospel writers frequently group the scribes with the Pharisees and priests because they had become part of the apostate religious leadership of Christ's day. They also frequently opposed Jesus and His teaching, as human traditions had infused their learning and methods of interpretation. Those who should have known the Scriptures best—and recognized the Scriptures' Author and Object—were as unseeing as the other religious leaders. Their leavened learning had corrupted their understanding.

Jesus does not apply the eighth parable to all scribes but specifically to those instructed in things related to the Kingdom. This instruction is not like that offered to a disinterested pupil but what a teacher would give to a disciple—someone wholly dedicated to the course of instruction. This level of devotion is in view when Jesus commissions the disciples after His resurrection: “Go therefore and *make disciples* of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

### **A Teacher's Treasury**

To paraphrase this parable, every teacher of God's instructions who is a disciple of the Kingdom is like the head of a family—the master of a house—who “brings forth” out of his “treasure”—or more properly, out of his “treasury” or storeroom. What is this treasury? Recall that this parable builds on the previous chapter, where Jesus castigates the Pharisees for their blasphemous words in attributing His power to Satan. Jesus responds, “A good man out of the *good treasure of his heart brings forth good things*, and an evil man out of the *evil treasure brings forth evil things*” (Matthew 12:35).

The Pharisees had generated evil things—blasphemy—from their treasuries, their hearts. In contrast, a scribe who is a true disciple of the Kingdom will deliver good things out of his heart. These things will be “new and old.” What is in view are new things in terms of character or quality (*kainos*). For instance, the New Covenant is not new simply in terms of time (*neos*) but is

of a completely different—higher—quality than the preceding covenant with Israel (Hebrews 8:6-7).

Therefore, the disciple-scribe will bring forth from his heart—from his God-given *understanding*—both what has come before and what is new in clarity and righteous application. This reinforces Jesus' earlier declaration that He had not come to destroy or abolish the law but to fulfill it by demonstrating its intent in His life (Matthew 5:17-19). After His resurrection, He “opened [the disciples'] *understanding*, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45; see also verse 27). With inspired understanding, the disciple-scribe will maintain the instruction given in the “Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44), but he will also distill its intent.

In the broad sweep, Christ's ministry involved speaking to multitudes and even whole cities early on, but as His ministry progressed, He focused more on His disciples than the general population. As we say today, opportunity knocks and then moves on. Jesus said what He had to say but did not belabor it; He did not continually sow seed in an unfruitful area. In response to the satanic opposition to Him in Matthew 12, He spoke parables to the multitudes, giving testimony against the physical kingdom. From the beginning of His ministry, He worked on instructing a spiritual remnant, yet He was still faithful to give a last warning to His physical nation, if for no other reason than to answer the objection up front that He had not given them a chance. He spoke the truth and then “committed them all to disobedience” so He could have mercy on them in the resurrection (Romans 11:32).

### **The Power of God to Salvation**

To summarize the eight parables, the physical nation descended from Abraham could not receive the truth of God's dominion. Its leaders were of the Devil, and only those chosen by God could receive the Word of the Kingdom with understanding. The nation's connection with God through Abraham had become corrupted by its beliefs and practices, and demons roamed freely within it.

Yet God intervened and hid the treasure of faith in a few—faith so valuable that Christ willingly paid an incomprehensible price to purchase the whole

world for the sake of the spiritual nation that had the faith of Abraham. God will account that nation's citizens worthy at the end of the age if they continue to live by faith, and in the process, they will use their God-given understanding to teach others.

So, with the apostle Paul, we see that the gospel of the Kingdom "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17).