

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 2: The Parable of the Sower Part 1

The first set of parables that we will look at come from Matthew 13 and are called “The Parables of the Kingdom”. Jesus’ main message was declaring that the ‘Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’. This message was heralded, not just by Jesus but by John the Baptist as well. The teaching of the Kingdom was central to Jesus’ message and mission.

Context of Matthew 13

In Matthew 13 Jesus presents a series of parables on the same day that he **confronted the Pharisees** (12:22-50). This previous narrative of Matt 11–12, **highlighted the mounting division** between **those who follow** Jesus and **those who do not receive his teaching**—the many who have refused to repent (11:20–24) and the Pharisees who have begun to plot his death (12:14).

This background is crucial for understanding the parables in Matt 13, for they continue this **theme of division**: good soil and bad soil, wheat and weeds, and good fish and bad fish. All these shed light on the positive **and** negative responses to Christ’s ministry.

Some of the parables highlight the **proper response** of the disciples, who have given up everything for the kingdom, like a man selling all he has for a hidden treasure or a pearl of great price. Such radical acceptance stands in sharp contrast to the many who fail to accept Jesus’ call to conversion.

Other parables explain **how the kingdom grows**, which initially consists of only a small group of faithful followers, is like a mustard seed and leaven that will **expand** and have tremendous worldwide influence. Despite some bad soil, seed, and fish, the kingdom will produce abundant results.

In Matthew 13 Jesus was likely at Peter’s house in Capernaum where he took up residence. Here he sits along the Sea of Galilee, assuming the posture of a rabbi about to teach. Since the crowds on the shore were so large, Jesus got into a boat and taught them from offshore. But there is a dramatic shift in Jesus’ teaching method: he spoke to them at length in parables, giving several in rapid-fire succession. This movement from teaching the crowds primarily in a straightforward manner (Matt 5–7) to a new emphasis on parables (Matt 13) surprises Jesus’ own disciples.

The Kingdom of Heaven

The subject of the parables in Matthew 13 are the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’, marked by the often-repeated phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven is like...”. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 13:11 that “*the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you.*” So let’s explore what exactly Jesus means when he says ‘the Kingdom of Heaven.

First of all, the terms ‘Kingdom of **Heaven**’ and ‘Kingdom of **God**’ **mean the same thing**. Matthew almost exclusively uses the term ‘Heaven’, while other Gospels use the term ‘God’. However, these terms are used interchangeably. What Matthew says about the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’, the other Gospels say about ‘the Kingdom of God.’

Secondly, the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ is **not speaking of ‘going to heaven when you die**’. It is not a vision of the afterlife, or about escaping earth and going to heaven. This is illustrated in the Lord’s Prayer when Jesus says, ‘*thy kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH as it is in heaven*’. The Kingdom of Heaven is about **God’s sovereign rule breaking into the world in and through Jesus**.

Thirdly, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is **not a national or political kingdom**. This was the major mistake of first century Israel. They were looking for God to restore the kingdom *to Israel*, as a nationalistic kingdom. They believed a messiah would rise up and lead an insurrection against the Romans and free Israel from Roman oppression. Jesus rejected the attempts of the Jews to make him a political king (John 16:15). Jesus would further emphasize this point when he says, "*My Kingdom is not of this world*" (John 18:36). Here he emphasizes that the Kingdom is not about earthly power or territory but about God's reign in the hearts of His people.

Fourthly, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is **spiritual in nature**. Closely related to a national kingdom that the Jews were expecting, they also were waiting for a physical, earthly kingdom to be set up. However, Jesus described the kingdom in another way: Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "*The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.*" (Luke 17:20-21). This literally speaks of the kingdom with 'within' and 'among' the people in a spiritual manner.

Because the Kingdom is spiritual in nature, it grows and advances through spiritual means. Jesus told his disciples, "*Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'*" (Luke 10:9). He also said in response to the Pharisees accusations, "*But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*" (Matthew 12:28). Paul even has truths to share about the Spiritual nature of the Kingdom, "*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" (Romans 14:17), and "*For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.*" (Col 1:13)

Lastly, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is presented as a **present reality** that Jesus fully established, and which would **continue to grow**. The parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13 present the kingdom as **already present** in the ministry of Jesus, but it is **not yet fully realized**. It grows gradually, like a seed, until it reaches its full culmination when it fills the whole earth (as pictured in Daniel 2:35, 44 and Habakkuk 2:14.).

So let's keep all of these points in mind as we make our way through the parables and learn what Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of Heaven to his disciples.

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9 *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear."*

The Parable of the Sower is the first of the Kingdom Parables that we will explore. This parable is found in three places:

- Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23
- Mark 4:3-9, 13-20
- Luke 8:5-8, 11-15

Mark adds an interesting question from Jesus to his disciples in Mark 4:13, he says, “*Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?*”. This statement would indicate that the Parable of the Sower is **foundational** to understanding the rest of Jesus’ parables. Thus, the reason why Jesus himself takes the time to explain the meaning of this parable to his disciples.

The picture of a sower going forth to sow draws on images that for some ancient Jews would have been quite familiar. First it would resonate from the agricultural world in which first-century Jews lived because agriculture was a central aspect of their daily life and economy. Many first-century Jews were farmers, laborers, or lived in agrarian communities. They understood firsthand the challenges of sowing seeds, preparing soil, dealing with weeds, and waiting for a harvest. They depended on the success of their crops for survival, so the imagery of soil types, crop yields, and the effects of external forces (e.g., birds, rocks, thorns) would be immediately relatable.

Also, this parable would be familiar to the Jews from their own Scriptures. In the Old Testament God was depicted as a sower (Isa 55:10–11; Jer 31:27–28; Hosea 2:25) and seed represented his word that would accomplish his purpose, producing an abundant crop (Isa 55:10–13).

Let’s look at the different parts of this parable:

- ³*A farmer went out to sow his seed.*
- ⁴*As he was scattering the seed,*
- *Some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.*
- ⁵*Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.*
- ⁷*Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.*
- ⁸*Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*
- ⁹*Whoever has ears, let them hear.”*

Of course, many people could relate to this imagery, but what was the meaning? For those expecting the Kingdom of God to be nationalistic Jewish kingdom, this imagery might confuse them. The story he told wasn’t exactly what they were expecting.

It wasn’t a story about God sowing Israel in its own land at last, restoring its fortunes to the sort of greatness they had always dreamed of. It was a story of both failure and success, and some might have wondered, “what sort of a farmer wastes two-thirds of the seed like that?” However, the key to parables is summed up in the last statement Jesus makes in v. 9 “⁹*Whoever has ears, let them hear.*”

Jesus wants them to discern the spiritual meaning of this parable through spiritual ears.