

# Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part III, Ch. 13)

### Jesus Teaches Using Parables

We know that Jesus sometimes used a boat as His “pulpit”. This unusual setting for preaching and teaching provided Him space from the pressing crowds, good acoustics, and an efficient way to address a large number of followers at one time.

As far as we know, for the Jews of the day, this was a new method of delivery of religious instruction. Some might have seen this sort of “innovation” as potentially dangerous, because it removed the instruction from the normal, controlled environment. Traditionalists might've preferred that teaching of the scriptures be carried out in the synagogue under rabbinical oversight, or a some other, more “appropriate”, place.

Commentator Charles Spurgeon makes an amusing observation about this:

*“The teacher sat, and the people stood: we should have less sleeping in congregations if this arrangement still prevailed.”*

The Greek word **παραβολή** (“para-bo-IAY”) is a bit more expansive than our usual definition “parable”. In the Septuagint, a.k.a. “LXX”, which is the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, it is used to translate the Hebrew **משל** (“mash-ALL”), which includes proverbs, riddles, and wisdom verses as well as our usual idea of “Earthly stories conveying heavenly truths”. Typically these sayings would be short, and teach a single truth, which is not to say it teaches an easy truth.

Commentator William Barclay notes:

*“A parable is not an allegory; an allegory is a story in which every possible detail has an inner meaning; but an allegory has to be read and studied; a parable is heard. We must be very careful not to make allegories of the parables.”*

### **13:3-23, The Parable of the Soils (*not* the Sower!)**

A sower went out to sow: The agricultural practices and customs of Jesus' day make for an easy connection to the parable. But the subject of this first sentence is not the focus of the teaching.

The focus is on Jesus' audience and others who would hear the Gospel. He is talking to them about them, teaching them about them and others among them. He is teaching his apostles about all those that they would be carrying the Gospel to:

- On the path (wayside): the path where people walked, and seed couldn't grow because the ground was packed too hard.
- On rocky ground: where the soil is thin, lying atop a plethora of rocks. Seed could spring up quickly because of the warmth of the soil, but the seed is unable to take root because of the rocky foundation underneath.
- Among the thorns: the soil is fertile, but maybe too fertile, because thorns grow there as well as good grain, and the bad crowds out or starves the good.
- Good ground: soil that is both fertile *and* free of destructive weeds.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear: Jesus did not invent this phrase; the Hebrew variation of having "ears to hear" harkens back to Moses in Deuteronomy 28:4. So it is not merely a call for all to listen. Rather, it is a call for those who are spiritually sensitive to take special note that something very important has just been said.

Why do You speak to them in parables? It's not the use of parables per se that the disciples were asking about, but rather the way Jesus used them. Jesus' use of parables wasn't as easy as simple illustrations of spiritual truth.

Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given: This is a hard sentence for us to read! Jesus used parables so that the hearts of those who were rejecting Him would not be hardened further, which would be the case if He spoke plainly. The same Gospel message that humbles an honest heart and leads to faith and repentance, can also harden the heart of a dishonest or self-deceiving listener. So this parable conceals truth from those who are too

blinded by prejudice (or too lazy in thought!) to perceive it. Jesus speaks in parables because He loves all of those listening.

Jesus' parables present God's message in a way that the "spiritually sensitive", i.e., those blessed with faith, could understand, while those not (yet) in the faith, and those with hardened hearts, would hear a story without incurring additional condemnation for rejecting God's Word.

Remember, these parables were given in the context of the Jewish leaders' building rejection of Jesus and His work. In this sense they were examples of mercy given to the undeserving. They are an example of God's mercy towards the hardened.

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: By speaking in parables Jesus also fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, speaking in a way that the hardened would hear but not hear and see but not see.

For this people's heart has grown dull: "Fat" is probably a better translation than "dull" (**παχύνω**, "*pach-OO-noh*"). We get "pachyderm" from this root. A "fat" heart is one that has no room for additional nourishment, one that is content with its current state.

But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear: Genuinely blessed are those whose hearts are not "fat" or "dull", and still have room for the Gospel. They exhibit responsiveness to the Holy Spirit.

This is he who received seed sown along the path: Those who reject the message outright; they never really hear the word with understanding. One of Satan's diabolical tricks is to tempt men to feel they are "enlightened" in what is in fact their darkness regarding the Gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

On rocky ground: Those who receive the word enthusiastically, but their life in the faith is short-lived, because of whatever "rocks" undermine that faith and lead to rejecting it. The problem is not their sudden growth, but rather their lack of depth, whether due to tribulation, or persecution (or... or... or....)

"Falls away" (**σκανδαλίζω**, "*skan-da-li-zoh*") is the verb form of the word we get "scandal" from, and is literally "tripped up". This is not a gradual loss of interest, but an utter collapse under pressure.

Among the thorns: This soil represents a heart that is fertile ground for the Word; but also allows all sorts of other things to grow, that ultimately choke out the Gospel. Those weeds are things like the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of Earthly riches.

Good ground: This soil represents those who receive the word, and it bears fruit in their soil (heart!). The amount of fruit growth is in differing proportions (some hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty), but each has a generous harvest that endures.

We benefit from seeing bits of ourselves in all four soils:

- Like seed on the path, sometimes we allow little or no room for God's Word in our lives.
- Like seed in the rocky places, we sometimes have flashes of enthusiasm for the work of the Kingdom that quickly burns out.
- Like the soil among thorns, the distractions and cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of and ambition for material riches constantly threaten to "choke out" God's Word -- and our fruitfulness.
- Like the good ground, the Word bears fruit in our lives.

Even though it might seem that few respond to the Gospel, God is in control, and the harvest will come. This was and is especially meaningful in light of the rising opposition to Jesus in His day, as well as in our own. Not everyone is good soil, but God assures us that those who are will bear ALL the fruit He has planned out for us (Ephesians 2:10).

### **13:24-30, The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares**

His enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat: This parable describes the work of an enemy who tried to destroy the work of the man who sowed good seed in his field. The enemy's purpose in sowing tares among the wheat was to destroy the farmer by destroying his wheat. But the wise farmer would not allow the enemy to succeed. Instead, the farmer decided to sort it out at harvest time.

This parable describes corruption in God's church. Just like the soil in the previous parable, the wheat here represents us, the people of God. Some corrupting influence is introduced, and may look right and genuine, just as tares can resemble good wheat, especially at first. First-century hearers may

have thought of darnel, a poisonous ryegrass plant that is related to wheat, and virtually indistinguishable from wheat until it matures.

Lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them: In the interest of preserving and protecting the wheat, the wise farmer does not separate the tares from the wheat until the time of harvest. He allows them to live and grow together in the field, because that is ultimately what is best for the wheat.

It makes sense that Jesus offered this parable right after explaining the parable of the soils, as it expands on the reality of our lives being so much like “the seed that grew up among the thorns”.

### **13:31-33, The Parable(s) of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven**

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed: Some, especially premillennial dispensationalists, consider this as a description of the growth and eventual dominance of the church, the kingdom community during the millennium. (Lutherans do not adhere to these ideas or teachings, which emerged in the 1800’s, and are not supported in scripture. For more on the major “millennialism” schools of thought, see this lesson from our “What Lutherans Believe” series: [https://backtothebiblecatechism.com/wlb/WLB\\_08\\_End\\_Times.pdf](https://backtothebiblecatechism.com/wlb/WLB_08_End_Times.pdf).)

Considering the parable itself and the context of the parables both before (and after) it, this parable should be regarded instead as another description of corruption in the kingdom community, just as was the previous parable (the wheat and the tares).

Both of these parables are *prophetic*, teaching us how, from very small beginnings, the Gospel of Jesus Christ would extend to all the nations of the world, and ultimately bring to them God’s righteousness and holiness in the Person and work of His Son.

When it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree:

Interestingly, this mustard seed plant grows unnaturally large, and it harbors *birds*, which, in the previous parables were emissaries of Satan! D. A. Carson notes in the New Bible Commentary:

*Close study of birds as symbols in the Old Testament and especially in the literature of later Judaism shows that birds regularly symbolize evil and even demons or Satan (cf. b. Sanhedrin, 107a; cf. Revelation 18:2).*

The mustard plant ordinarily does not grow beyond the size of a bush, and at that size would be a rather unlikely place for bird to nest. The tree-like growth from this mustard seed describes something unnatural, or perhaps supernatural. In the Old Testament, the image of a tree was used to represent a great empire (e.g., Daniel 4, Ezekiel 17 and 31).

This parable accurately describes what God's church on Earth *actually became* in the decades and centuries after Jesus' ascension. In those centuries the church grew inexplicably large in influence, especially given the opposition to it. But with the Christianization of the Roman Empire, it was also a rather large nesting place for terrible corruption. We've had many birds lodging in the branches of this tree, for many, many centuries.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven: Jesus used a surprising word picture here. Many regard this as a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God working its way through the whole world. But leaven is consistently used as a picture of sin and corruption, especially in the Passover narrative of Exodus 12:8 and 12:15-20. So once again, the content and the context point towards this being a description of corruption in God's church on Earth.

...A woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened: How much flour (meal) are we talking about? A *lot*. This lady was a *serious* baker! A "measure" was just over 60 gallons<sup>1</sup>. So three measures was a huge amount of flour, much more than one would normally prepare, and again suggests the idea of unnaturally large size.

The idea of *hiding* leaven in three measures of meal would have offended an observant Jew. Jesus is again preparing his apostles and disciples for the coming threats of corruption and impurity.

### **13:34-35, Jesus' Teaching in Parables is a Fulfillment of Prophecy**

Without a parable He did not speak to them: This does not mean that Jesus never, in His entire teaching and preaching ministry, spoke in anything other than a parable. But it describes this particular phase or season of His ministry and how He reached listeners with His message of the Kingdom, especially in this time of increasing opposition from Jewish leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/WeightsAndMeasures.xhtml>

I will open My mouth in parables: Another reason Jesus taught about the kingdom community in parables is because *the church itself* was one of the things which have been kept secret, and would not be fully revealed until later. Speaking of which...

Kept secret from the foundation of the world: Paul expresses this same idea about the church in Ephesians 3:4-11.

### **13:36-43, Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds**

In His explanation, Jesus made it clear what the different figures in the parable represent:

- The field represents the world
- The good seeds represent God's faithful people, the sons and daughters of the kingdom
- The weeds/tares represent false prophets and false believers in the world, sons and daughters of Satan, who, just like tares among wheat, may appear at first to be God's people

In the parable of the soils, the seed represented the Word of God; here it represents true believers. Why? Because the point of the parables is completely different. The parable of the soils shows how people receive and respond to the Word of God. The parable of the tares of the field shows how God will divide His true people from false "believers" at the end of this age.

The field is the world: This parable points out that false believers among true believers happens everywhere, in the "invisible" church as well as the visible, local one. While these parables are warnings of inevitable truths, and we should always be on the lookout for false teaching and false prophets, ultimately it is not our job to "weed out" those who appear to be Christians but actually are not; God Himself will do that at the judgement.

There is additional significance in Jesus saying, "The field is the world" instead of "The field is Israel." This brief statement presages the mission to spread the Gospel beyond Israel to all ethnicities (nations).

The enemy who sowed them is the devil: The enemy plants "counterfeit" believers in the world and in the church, and this is why merely being a "member" of the church saves no one; only Jesus saves us.

The reapers are angels... The Son of Man will send out His angels: It's easy to forget that God's angels have a special role at the judgment. Indeed they do, and while we may not know or understand the details, should see them as God's soldiers in battle against Satan and his "soldiers". This wording reserves a special level scorn to be heaped upon Satan, the "great" evil angel. He sows the tares and tries to destroy God's harvest.

The "wheat" comes into God's barn from all over the world, from all ranks of society, from all ages of God's church. The one thing they have in common is that they were sown *by the Lord*, from the good seed of His Word.

### **13:44, The Parable of the Hidden Treasure**

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field: The field is the world, but the man does not represent the believer, because we have nothing to buy this treasure with. Instead, *Jesus* is the man who gave all that He had to buy the field. D. A. Carson explains further:

*"Under rabbinic law if a workman came on a treasure in a field and lifted it out, it would belong to his master, the field's owner; but here the man is careful not to lift the treasure out till he has bought the field."*

This parable and the one following it differ in character from the previous three. The previous three each spoke of corruption in the God's kingdom on Earth. These two, however, speak of how highly the King values the people that populate His kingdom.

And for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field: The treasure that is so wonderful that Jesus would give all to purchase it, *is the individual believer*. This illustrates how Jesus would give everything to redeem the whole world to preserve a treasure in it, and that treasure is His people.

### **13:45-46, The Parable of the Costly Pearl**

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls: Again, Jesus is the buyer, and the individual believer is the pearl that He sees as so valuable that He would happily give all He had to possess it.

One pearl of great value: It seems crazy for a merchant to sell all that he had for one pearl, but for this merchant it was well worth it. That shows how much he valued this pearl of great value, and how much Jesus values His people.

### **13:47-50, The Parable of the Net**

The kingdom of heaven is like a net (dragnet): Jesus shows that the world will remain divided right up until the end, and that *the Church will not reform the world*, ushering in the kingdom. Some today teach contrary to this notion, that a reign of Christ on Earth lasting one millennium will be ushered in because of the “completeness” or “holiness” of His people. Instead, Jesus tells us...

So it will be at the end of the age: There will be both the wicked and the just until the end of this world (which was also illustrated in the parable of the wheat and the tares). At that time the angels will come forth and assist the King in the work of judgment, sending some into the furnace of fire for final judgment. Again, this is contrary to the teaching of the premillennialist school of thought.

### **13:51-52, The Disciples Claim to Understand Jesus’ Parables**

They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.”: It’s always tempting to wonder if the disciples really did understand Jesus, including here. Note, however, Jesus did not deny or correct their claim to understand!

Every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom: Jesus said that everyone who really knows God’s Word will both know the old and learn the new about the kingdom. Jesus uses the term “scribe” here simply to describe a teacher. The main idea is that the disciples – who had just claimed to understand what Jesus taught – are now responsible to bring forth their understanding to others, to distribute from the storehouse of their understanding to others. That storehouse contains things old (the scriptures) and new (the teachings of Jesus concerning Himself and the Kingdom of God).

This is why most churches, including the Lutheran church, require that Pastors, teachers, or any ministers of the Gospel, not be novices in the faith (1 Timothy 3:6). Instead, they should be well acquainted with and trained

regarding both the Old and New Testaments, and possess a deep faith in the One who inspired their writing!

### **13:53-58, Jesus is Rejected at Nazareth**

Is this not the carpenter's son?: Because these villagers were familiar with Jesus as a boy and accustomed to observing rather normal, unspectacular things from Him, we can infer that Jesus had a rather normal boyhood.

There are extra-biblical sources, e.g. "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas", a.k.a. "The Infancy of Jesus", that claim otherwise, but those are not accepted by the church as credible.

His brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas: Jesus had many brothers and sisters. The word used here as the plural of "brother" (ἀδελφός, "*a-del-phOS*"), can indicate more than simple biological fraternity, but there's no reason in scripture to translate it other than in simple terms. The Roman Catholic idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary is not supported by the Bible.

Where then did this Man get all these things: Jesus was not received in a welcoming or friendly way. They speak skeptically and will refer to Him as "this Man", a rather cold and impersonal way to refer to a son of their own town.

So they were offended at Him: When we consider how strongly Jesus is identified with Nazareth (e.g. Matthew 2:23), it is a bit surprising that the people of Nazareth did not appreciate it. The success and glory of Jesus seemed only to make them more resentful towards Him.

A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and in his own house: We sometimes, perhaps inadvertently, promote a wrong-headed idea about what it means to be "spiritual". It's easy to suppose that "spiritual" or "devoted" people will be somehow "more" than normal. In fact, those closest to truly spiritual people see just how normal they are, and may even think that they aren't spiritual because they are so... normal!

He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief: It is remarkable and sad that Jesus was, so affected by their unbelief. It's not that He was *incapable* of performing mighty works, but rather that he was encountering 2 or 3 bad kinds of "soil" and would not speak or act in a way

that was detrimental to them. This is a good reminder that God chooses to work in concert with human agency, not the other way around. He develops our ability to partner with Him. If we are trapped in unbelief, He will work on what's best or most important first, which may look to use like He is being hindered, but is, in fact, a manifestation of His love for us.