

## **Dr. David Turner, Matthew**

### **Lecture 6A – Matthew 13:1-23: The Parables of the Kingdom I**

Greetings again, this is David Turner, and this is Lecture 6A, our first lecture on the parables of the kingdom, where we introduce the parabolic discourse in Matthew 13, and discuss the passage up through verse 23. We got a little rushed in the last tape and ran a little long at the end. You may have lost about half a sentence there at the end, but simply what I was saying is that one can understand how the parables of chapter 13 were fitting because of the background that you get in 11 and 12.

As opposition to Jesus is sadly increasing and getting more intense, and he is being accused of collaboration with the devil and slanderous charges like that, one can see how he would begin to use the parables as means to communicate the truth to his disciples who have the opportunity to get everything explained to them, and to basically shut the door to those who were only taking what he was teaching, to use it against them, and to come up with additional slanders. So that's where I was going there at the end when things were cut off. You didn't miss anything that was all that decisive, so there's no worries about that.

In this lecture, we don't have quite the volume of material to deal with, so we can take things a little more casually, and I don't have to talk as fast, and you don't have to listen as fast, hopefully. We come to one of the most distinctive passages in the gospel of Matthew, and perhaps in the whole New Testament, the parabolic discourse of Jesus, the very familiar parable of the sower. So, first, as we look at the matters here, we'll attempt to introduce the discourse as a whole, as far as its structure and interpretation, parables in general, and then Matthew 13 in particular, and then we'll move on and discuss roughly the first parable and a couple questions that arose in Jesus' interpretation of it.

Our first task then is to understand the structure of this discourse, and I invite you not only to be looking at page 26 of your supplemental materials, which gives the lecture outline, but also the material I've supplied for you on pages 27 and 28, where we have a couple of the different approaches to the structure of the discourse laid out there so that you can see how they work. After briefly mentioning the setting of the discourse, Matthew narrates Jesus' third major discourse in 13:3 to 52. Remember now, the first discourse of Jesus is the Sermon on the Mount in 5 through 7, and the second is the commission of the disciples for mission to the nation of Israel in Matthew 10, and both of those discourses end with the distinctive comment, when Jesus had finished these words, as does this discourse in Matthew 13 and verse 53.

This discourse can be seen as having two sections of four parables each if 13:51 and 52 is correctly interpreted as a parable. You may not notice that 13:51 and 52 is a parable, but if you look at it, you will notice that in 13:52, Jesus uses the introductory formula for a parable, every scribe who has become a household of the kingdom of heaven, every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household, and if you just look up the page in your Bible to verse 47, where Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet, 45, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, 44, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure. You catch that introductory kingdom of heaven is like motif, it is clear that 52 is another one of the very brief parables or statements, which basically compare something to something else.

So 13:51 and 52 should be viewed as a parable, and if that is the case, there are two sections of four parables each in the gospel of Matthew. In both of these sections, Jesus answers a question from the disciples about parables, 13:10-17 in the first half, and 13:36-43 in the second half. Between the two sections is Matthew's editorial comment, which explains how the parables are a fulfillment of prophecy in 13:34-35, that refers to Psalm 78.

It's also interesting to note that a pair of short parables which are quite similar concludes the first section, and the same type of pair of two short similar parables introduces the second section, compare 13:31-33 and 13:44-46. Although there are some people like Hagner who doubt that there is any symmetrical structure in the discourse at all, there are at least two proposals that have some merit. Notice on page 27 in the middle, the approach of Davies and Allison. They suggest a three-part structure with each part of the discourse beginning with a parable, continuing with both an introduction, excuse me, an interpretation of the parable, and then a further discussion of parables.

So, they see the first section in 13:1-9, having the parable proper, followed by a discussion with the scriptural citation in 10-17, and Jesus' interpretation in 18:23. A second series of parables is stated, discussed, and interpreted in 13:24 down through 13:43. A third cycle is somewhat different, however, 13:44-48, where you have the parable of the treasure, the pearl, and the net. They are interpreted in 49 and 50, at least the net is, and then the discussion of parables, excuse me, in general in 13:51 and 52.

This approach is sort of tantalizing. It has some strength, but it tends to break down in section 3, where the order of the discussion and interpretation is reversed; if you notice that in the third part, that doesn't work as well. It also doesn't deal as nicely with the situation where you have the first half of the parables being addressed to the larger group of disciples outside the multitude, 13:2, and the second group of parables, 13:36 and following, addressed to the disciples in a house after Jesus has left the multitude, notice 13:36, which makes that clear.

An approach to the structure that does a little better job of dealing with that aspect is found in a journal article written by Wenham in 1979. I believe you'll find Bromberg giving you the specific information on that article. Wenham presents a structure involving chiasmus, or introverted parallelism, in which the focus of the structure is on the middle.

So, if you're looking at your notes to page 28, you see right in the middle of the page the letter E, which puts Jesus' explanation of why he used parables, citing Psalm 78, and the interpretation of the parable of the tares at the heart of this discourse. On either side, then, of that heart, you have the two pairs of short parables, the mustard seed in 11:4, and 46. On either side of those, you have the sort of as pairs, the parable of the tares in 24 to 30, contrasting good and evil, and the parable of the net in 47 to 50, which likewise contrasts good and evil.

On either side, then, working further out, we have at the beginning, toward the beginning of the discourse, in 10 through 23, the disciples' question and Jesus' answer about how the sower should be interpreted, and answering to that in the second half, Jesus' question and the disciples' answer, notice how that switches from their question and his answer to his question and their answer, about understanding parables in 51, and of course the discourse begins with the parable of the sower in 1 through 9, and ends with the parable of the homeowner, the one trained for the kingdom, as opposed to the sower, which is about hearing the word of the kingdom. Now, to my mind, this is a rather helpful approach to the structure of this discourse. Jesus, I don't think, spoke in a random way, and certainly Matthew as an editor didn't just dump these parables in here as we might make up a grocery list at random and just sort of arbitrary writing things down.

There is order, and there is symmetry, and there is beauty and literary aesthetic wonder as we notice the way this passage works. Onam's analysis notes the two halves of the discourse quite well. It is also correct in seeing the symmetry of the two short paired parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, and the treasure and the pearl, but it's not as convincing in the way that it places non-symmetrically Jesus' two interpretations of the parables, 13:10 through 17, the interpretation of the sower, does not end up in parallel with 13:34 to 43, the explanation of the parable of the weeds in the wheat.

That could be something of a problem, I suppose. Now we move on from the matter of how Matthew 13 is structured to a brief comment or two on the interpretation of parables in general. Davies and Allison's commentary presents a brief, very helpful excursus on the interpretation of parables, and you can find them in several books on the parables.

I would, I guess, recommend strongly the book by Kissinger, which gives quite a bibliography on parables as well as some history of interpretation, as well as Blomberg's book on the parables. That's another fine text on them. The history of the church and the experience of many Christians both testify to the prevalence of imaginative interpretations of Jesus' parables.

You may have heard some pretty, shall we say, wild sermons on this. I won't ask you to confess if you've preached them. The Sunday school definition of the parable is, fortunately, in this case, a good one.

A parable is indeed an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Multitudes of such heavenly meanings have been superimposed upon the parables. The early church fathers, we call them the patristic folk, the patristic authors tend to transform, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, as you recall, in the Gospel of Luke, transformed that into the story of Adam and Eve and their fall.

They went down, in a sense. And if you've ever looked into that, you can find it in many of the books on the parables. It's quite imaginative, as the person going down to Jericho happens to be Adam.

Jericho becomes a city which signifies mortality, supposedly because of the etymology of the word Jericho, which means the moon, and the moon waxes and wanes. Therefore, it symbolizes mortality. The thieves who attack Adam are, of course, the devil and his angels. The Good Samaritan who comes to pick up the man who was robbed and beaten is none other than the Apostle Paul.

The two individuals who will not help him, the Levite and the other individual, are symbols supposedly of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets. It goes on and on. When the Good Samaritan takes the man to the inn, it becomes a picture of Paul putting the person into the church.

There's nothing ultimately heretical about the interpretation, but it has very little to do with the historical or literary context of that story in the Gospel of Luke, and it tends to obscure the true interpretation of it. This allegorizing approach, then, tends to atomize the parables. It just takes them apart piece by piece and doesn't pay any attention to the structure that the pieces are in from the author of the Gospels.

In recent years, a very different approach has sort of come to the forefront called reader response criticism. Reader response criticism stresses the modern reader's sort of knee-jerk response to the parable, again, rather than the historic or literary context in which it was originally spoken. Therefore, this can be a big problem.

Reader response criticism yields results which frequently have only a tangential relationship to the history and literary context of the parable. Over a hundred years ago, in reaction to the excesses of allegorizers, a German scholar named Adolf Jülicher wrote a book entitled *Die Gleichnis lehren Jesu* in 1899. That simply means *The Parabolic Teaching of Jesus*, and many others since him have argued that Jesus' parables, unlike allegories, have only one main point.

But this narrow approach seems contrary to Jesus' own interpretation of his parables, as we'll see later, let alone the polyvalence or flexibility of meaning inherent in the use of stories by skilled speakers and authors. Therefore, it seems best to look at each parable in its own context in order to determine the degree to which its earthly details convey a heavenly meaning. Look at Blomberg and Reichenberger on the parables, and I think those two books, and you'll get some good material on that.

Parables are indeed allegories, but it's not up to us to allegorize them. The allegorical aspect is a matter which is done by the author, not by us as the reader. Their imagery must be understood in terms of their own ancient historical and literary convention, not in terms of extraneous categories superimposed upon them by other readers.

The imagery of Jesus' parables is drawn from 1st century Palestine, so understanding the historical context is crucial. It's also important to note the literary context, since at times the preceding context provides the key, since the parabolic imagery answers to and matches up with the key characters and issues in the narrative. Also at times there is a concluding general comment which applies the parabolic imagery to a contextual matter.

Now the interpretation of Matthew 13. Reading Matthew 13 in its context seems to indicate that Jesus intended his parables to reveal truths of the kingdom to his disciples, and to conceal those truths from the enemies of the kingdom, 13:10-16. The primary focus of the parables is reflection upon the varied responses to the kingdom message, 13:19. Thus, the primary background for the parables of Matthew 13 is the increasing opposition to Jesus and his message, which has been narrated in Matthew 11 and 12. The parables help the disciples understand this opposition.

Classical dispensationalism is mistaken in its attempt to understand the parables as primarily referring to the future millennium or as teaching the mystery of the rejected, the offered, rejected, and postponed kingdom. Toussaint and Walvoord's commentaries on Matthew take that view, which I do not hold. The kingdom is already inaugurated in Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7, and especially 12:28. The parables are about its present progress in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, as well as its future glories.

Of course, we can always draw application from this historical context to modern contexts where the message of the kingdom is still being proclaimed. Ultimately, the disciples continue the mission of Jesus, according to 24:14 and 28:19. But we need to pay attention to the fact that 13:19 tells us that the parables are about the hearing of the word of the kingdom, the kingdom message. And of course, the ministry of the disciples, thinking of them as the church at large, continues until the end of the age, according to 13:39 and 43.

As well as 24:14 and 28:18 through 20. Now we move on to Jesus' telling of the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-9. Since the context of the second discourse, excuse me, since the conclusion of the second discourse in 11:1, Matthew has stressed the repeated rejection and opposition which Jesus has been experiencing. Evidently, the disciples have been experiencing the same trials on their own mission trip, 10:18 and 24:25. Evidently, John, whose doubts began this section of the narrative, and Jesus' own family, who occupy a position outside of that of Jesus' disciples as the narrative closes, 13:46-50, are not fully in step with the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom.

The Pharisees' murder plot in 12:14 indicates the implacable opposition of the religious leaders to Jesus' ministry. Thus, the third discourse heavily stresses the mixed response to the kingdom message and indicates that this will continue into the end of the age, 13:23, 13:30, 13:40-43, and 13:49-50. At the end of the age, God will punish those who reject the kingdom and he will reward those who receive it. Now we move on to 13:10-17, the disciples asking Jesus a question.

The parables of the kingdom in Matthew's narrative. The fact that the disciples ask Jesus why he is speaking to them in parables implies that this is something new, something of a departure in his ministry. Yet some take this too far, holding that the Jews had decisively rejected the offer of the kingdom and that in response, Jesus will now speak of the postponed kingdom exclusively in mysterious language, which is the interpretation of dispensationalists such as Toussaint and Walvoord.

Jesus has previously used parabolic imagery before Matthew 13:7, 24-27, 9:15-17, 11:16-19, 12:29-33, 43-45. Jesus will also continue to speak plainly without parables to unbelievers in certain parts of the narrative to come. For example, 15:3-7, 16:2-4, 19:4-9, and 19:17-22, most of all Matthew 21:23.

Therefore, there is no bifurcation between non-parable before 13 and all parables after 13 that dispensationalism has sometimes argued for here. But there is a real sense in which Matthew 13 does mark a transition in Jesus' ministry. Opposition has indeed come to a head in Matthew 12.

But the parabolic discourse of Matthew 13 is neither a novel method of teaching, since Jesus used parables previously, nor is it a new teaching about a postponed

kingdom. Jesus' parables describe the present response of Israel to his kingdom message. When his disciples take up that message after Jesus' death and resurrection, the parables will just as accurately describe the response of the nations to their preaching, all the way to the end of the age.

Our disagreement here with dispensationalists like Toussaint and Walvoord is not so much over the decisive nature of Matthew 13 as it is over the issue of the nature of the kingdom and its presence, mainly the presence of the kingdom. Now, the relationship of the parables to the sovereignty of God. Finite creatures will never, even after their glorification, fully understand the interplay of God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Matthew 13, verses 11 through 15, with its citation of Isaiah 6, 9, and 10, is one of the most abrupt affirmations in the Bible of God's prerogative to reveal himself to whomever he wishes. Yet this statement is not as striking as the previous one in 11:25-27, which speaks even more bluntly of God hiding the kingdom message from those who in feigned autonomy, reject it. Matthew 11:27 also goes further than 13:11-15 in affirming that Jesus shares the divine prerogative of revealing the Father to whomever he wills.

Be that as it may, one can only respond to these affirmations of divine sovereignty in a spirit of awe and worship. And one must remember that in the Bible, if not in every Christian theology, the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of God's creatures go hand in hand. This is clear when Matthew 11:25-27 is compared with 11:28-30, where the sovereignty of God in Jesus' prayer is directly followed by his appeal for people to come to him in the exhortation of 11:28-30. Also in 16:15-17, where Peter willingly makes a confession of Jesus, but Jesus tells him that God has revealed this truth to him and it's not his own initiative.

It's also clear that those whom God sovereignly rejects are those who willfully reject God. God does not cast his pearls before swine, 7.6. The doctrine of God's sovereign election, as the saying goes, comforts those afflicted by sin and afflicts those who are comfortable with sin. It also provides assurance that the preaching of the kingdom message will be attended with God's blessing in bringing people to faith.

God will bring his people to himself. Yes, if it's just now dawning on you, I admit I am a Calvinist. As the saying goes, sue me.

Now let's move on to Jesus' explanation of the parables of the sower in 13:18-23. As noted above in the introduction to Matthew 13, Jesus' detailed interpretation of the parable of the sower invalidates a popular idea that a parable has only a single point of reference to reality. The Eulicher view, one that has been given great attention in evangelical circles, many hermeneutics books will tell you that there's only

permissible to find one real point in a parable. A shame Jesus had not read those books.

Although the central point of a parable is clearly the reception of the kingdom message, several signifying details add depth and detail to this central point. Evidently, Jesus himself is the sower, but the parable has immediate application to the disciples' ministry as they sow the seed, as they go out and preach the kingdom message. And it has ultimate application to the later church's proclamation of the gospel of Christ after the cross.

The first three types of soil, to get now to Jesus' interpretation of the parable, successively lay out three factors which hinder the reception of the kingdom message, Satan, persecution, and greed. Satanic opposition is pictured as effective when the seed falls on hard ground beside the path, which probably represents hearts hardened by both human sin and divine abandonment. Look at 13:15 and compare with that 9:4, 12:34, 15:8, 18:19, and 24:48. Persecution is effective when there is an immediate joyful reception of the message, evidently a solely emotional response lacking the root of intellectual understanding, 13:21. Greed and secular concerns are also effective in thwarting the reception of the kingdom message, evidently when the demands of discipleship confront a materialistic lifestyle, 13:22. Compare 6:19-34, 16:24-26, and 19:23. In light of this, preachers of the gospel will do well to warn their listeners of the eternal danger of having a heart hardened to God but pliable to Satan. Similarly, a heart open to shallow emotional influences but closed to a deep understanding of the kingdom easily turns from God when troubles arise.

Finally, a heart which is easily attracted to worldly concerns and wealth is a heart which is soon distracted from the message of the kingdom. These solemn matters are all too seldom heard from all too many pulpits. Another crucial question here is whether only the good ground mentioned in 13:23 represents a genuine disciple of the kingdom or whether others who bear no fruit should be viewed as genuine though unproductive disciples.

This is the so-called lordship salvation controversy. There are those who call themselves Calvinists who have a belief in something called eternal security, sometimes parodied as once saved, always saved. This leads them to conclude that any reception of the gospel, even when it is thwarted by Satan, persecution, or worldliness, amounts to a genuine reception which infallibly leads to eternity with God.

Those types of interpreters would read all the different types of soil in Matthew 13, perhaps with the exception of the first one, as indicating genuine conversion. But in my opinion, this will not do in Matthew, who teaches us consistently that fruit is a



test of genuine discipleship. Notice in Matthew 3, 8-10 the words of John the Baptist to that effect, confronting the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Note also 7:16-20, the way you tell the difference between a true and a false prophet. Notice 12:33, where there was no fruit amongst Jesus' contemporaries. 21:19, in the parable of the wicked tenant farmers.

Also in that same parable, 21, 34, 41, and 43. So, fruit is necessary for someone to be viewed as a genuine disciple in Matthew. On the other hand, it's also important to note that there are degrees in fruit bearing, according to 13:23. Some 30, some 60, some 100.

This is a factor that should lead those who stress discipleship, like I would, to avoid legalism and perfectionism. We can't set up human standards for discipleship and authoritatively condemn would-be disciples as unbelievers. Neither can we expect mature discipleship overnight, as it were, since godliness, like fruit bearing, involves a growing season before there can be a harvest.

Therefore, while it would be my conclusion that only the good soil which receives the seed and bears fruit is a picture of true conversion, I would be very careful in heavily-handedly applying that and setting up our own human legalistic standards to describe whether someone is truly a disciple or not. We need to go easy on that. So we need to balance the idea that salvation is by God's grace with the idea that those who believe in God will take Jesus as Lord and begin a process of following in His footsteps.

To conclude the lecture on Matthew 13 up through verse 23, we note that it provides an explanation for the rejection experienced by Jesus in Matthew 11 and 12. The message has come to many, but relatively few have received it and borne fruit. The very next parable in its interpretation, the parable of the weeds and the wheat, will make it clear that this mixed response to the kingdom will continue to the end of the age.

This explanation is found most obviously in the wickedness and unbelief of humans and in the schemes of Satan, but ultimately it will be explained in God's mysterious sovereign purpose.