

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 6B – Matthew 13:24-52: The Parables of the Kingdom II

Greetings, this is David Turner, and this is Lecture 6b in our Matthew course. In this lecture, we're going to do our second in the series of two on the parabolic sermon, the parables of the kingdom, in Matthew chapter 13. We're picking it up with Matthew 13, verse 24, where Jesus tells three more parables.

First, the parable of the wheat and the weeds, or the weeds and the wheat, or the tares, or whatever you want to call it. The parable of the weeds in 13:24-30 will be interpreted later in 13:36 and following, but an attentive reader is already drawing tentative conclusions about it due to its similarities to the parable of the sower, which Jesus has already interpreted. The similar motifs in both parables include sowing, seed, and mixed results.

As 13:36 and following will show, one would be mistaken to identify the significances of the respective sowers and seeds in the two parables. And there are new elements, such as the enemy, the weeds, the landowner, the slaves, the harvest, the harvesters, the fire, and the barn, which occur in this parable, although we do have mention of thorns in the parable of the sower. The details of this imagery, particularly this new imagery that we find in this parable, will be interpreted by Jesus in 13:36 and following, but the developing dualism between the landowner and his enemy, the good seed, that is the wheat, versus the weeds, the barn, and the fire, can already be seen as portraying an ominous battle between the cosmic forces of good and evil.

Now, the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. There is much debate over the meaning of these two short parables. Most of the dispensationalist school, at least the old-line ones, believe that the imagery of the parables is meant to portray the presence of evil within professing Christendom.

This is due primarily to an understanding of the kingdom of heaven as a mystery encompassing Christendom, which is understood as organized or nominal Christianity. Christendom as a whole contains evil elements mixed with the good, so both parables are usually viewed as picturing that evil. Walvoord even interprets the birds nesting in the tree as unbelievers, but the dispensationalist too, disagrees, since he takes the mustard tree as portraying the kingdom positively.

It's pointed out by such interpreters that leaven is sometimes in the Bible a symbol of evil, and you can get your concordance and find these verses for yourself, but they cite such verses as Exodus 12, verse 15 and 19, Matthew 16:6, and 11 and 12:1

Corinthians 5:6 to 8, Galatians 5:9, but if you compare Leviticus 7:13 and 14, and Leviticus 23:17, you can find places where leaven is portrayed a little more positively as part of the sacrificial system. Since they think that leaven is invariably evil in its portrayal in the Bible, such scholars conclude that this parable of the leaven portrays the growth of evil within Christianity. This view of the parables is often held in conscious opposition to postmillennialism, which takes the images of the growth of the kingdom in the two parables as indicating the ultimate conversion of the world to Christianity before Christ returns.

So, this is sort of the opposite, a very pessimistic view of organized Christianity by dispensationalists compared to a more positive view of the ultimate victory of Christianity before Christ comes back held by postmillennialism. There is good reason to disagree with the classic dispensational position. First, their understanding of the kingdom of heaven as the mystery of evil within Christendom between the two advents of Jesus is doubtful.

Rather, the kingdom in Matthew is the rule of God inaugurated through the words and works of Jesus and consummated at His return. Second, it's very doubtful that straightforward statements which compare the kingdom of God to leaven or to mustard seed should be understood as a portrayal of evil. After all, it is the growth of God's rule, not Satan's, that's being portrayed.

One need not assume that birds or yeast must always be viewed as evil any more than other biblical symbols, such as that of a lion portraying Satan in one context and Jesus in another. Compare the lion as Satan in 1 Peter 5:8 and the lion as Jesus in Revelation 5:5. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast speak of the deceptively subtle yet dramatically significant growth of God's kingdom. Despite frequent fruitless responses to the kingdom message, it does bear much fruit in many cases, 13:23. Even John the Baptist may doubt its advance, but it is advancing just the same, 11:1-6. The strong man is indeed being bound and his goods are being plundered, 12:29. While postmillennialists may view the advance of the kingdom over-optimistically, classic dispensationalists view the present age too pessimistically because they do not acknowledge that the kingdom has already been inaugurated and has begun to advance during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

It may presently seem as insignificant as a mustard seed, but it will eventually be the largest tree in the garden. Its growth may be as imperceptible as the influence of yeast in a loaf of bread, but in the end, it will be pervasive throughout the earth. The use of humble symbols like mustard seed and leaven is appropriate for God's humble servant who does not cry out in the streets, 12:19, and who rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a war horse, 21:1 following.

Davies and Allison, in their commentary, are correct that these parables portray a contrast between the present reality and the ultimate destiny of the kingdom. That

which is now humble will then be glorious. The realization that God is already at work and that there is a unity of the ultimate with the present will give the disciples hope.

Now we move on to the citation of Psalm 78 in the explanation of the parables that Jesus gives in Matthew 13 verses 34 and 35. These verses contain the second fulfillment citation of the Old Testament in the discourse, the previous one being where our Lord cited Isaiah chapter 6 verse 9 in 13:14, and 15. The pattern of unbelief due to hard hearts, which occurred in the days of Isaiah, was recurring in the days of Jesus.

Israel as a whole did not believe Isaiah's warnings of impending invasion and neither do Jesus' contemporaries believe his kingdom message. Compare 13 verses 14 and 15 with Isaiah 6, 9, and 10. Now Matthew inserts his own commentary on the discourse he is narrating, citing Psalm 78:2 as the pattern being fulfilled by Jesus.

In Psalm 78, Asaph speaks of God's past faithfulness to Israel despite her sin and judgment. To coming generations, notice Psalm 78, 4, this recounting of God's mighty acts might seem like hidden secrets long ago hidden from ancient times, 78, 2, but in reality these are matters known by Asaph's generation because they were told to them by their ancestors. Asaph, in turn, passes on these ancient secrets to the next generation.

But as the psalm unfolds, one reads a narrative of God's faithfulness to a rebellious and disciplined people, not a mysterious discourse full of enigmatic sayings. So, it's somewhat interesting and difficult to understand exactly why Asaph speaks of God's historical care for Israel as secrets hidden since ancient times, evidently because the new generation does not understand these things and it's up to those who have experienced them and who have heard about them to keep the truth alive and to pass on the tradition. Two key questions need to be answered here in relation to Psalm 78.

The first concerns why Asaph styled his historical narrative as parabolic and enigmatic in 78:2. He did this first because matters well known to his own generation were as yet ancient secrets to the coming generation. Evidently, there is a bit of poetic hyperbole here, but the point is clear. Asaph's psalm is also parabolic in the sense that his recounting of the past reveals the profound pattern that may be discerned from the bare historical events.

Asaph does not merely recount, but he also interprets Israel's story as the story of God's faithfulness to his people in spite of their sin and deserved punishment. This faithfulness is manifested in his mighty acts of redemption. Look at Psalm 78, verses 4, 7, 11, and 12, 32, 42, and 43.

By his interpretation of Israel's history in this matter, which stresses God's mighty acts of redemption and his faithfulness, Asaph has revealed to a new generation the profound truth of God's redeeming grace. The second question concerns why Matthew cited Asaph's words in Psalm 78. On the surface, despite the obvious connection of the keyword parable, Matthew appears to be taking the psalm out of context.

Though while it may be granted that the psalm is not a prediction of Jesus, Matthew's penchant for typology, his finding of patterns in Old Testament history which are filled with ultimate significance by Jesus, is well known. That Matthew's view of the Old Testament is frequently typological is seen early on in the infancy narrative in Matthew 1 and 2. So Matthew finds in Asaph's words a precedent which provides a pattern that Jesus fulfills as Asaph utters profundities for a new generation, so Jesus reveals the ultimate secrets of the kingdom of heaven to his own generation.

Look at 13:11 and compare 12:39 and 41:42. As Asaph discerns the pattern of God's faithfulness to his people, which overrides their disobedience and his discipline, so Jesus' parables lay out for his disciples the pattern of the reception and rejection of the growing kingdom until the ultimate judgment and reward. Notice 13:19 and 39 through 43.

As Asaph's reflection on the old days brought out truth for a new generation, so Jesus' parables equip his disciples to bring out of their treasure things new and old in their teaching, 13:51 and 52. What was new in Asaph's day is now part of what is old in the disciples' treasure. But what they've learned from Jesus will remain new when they teach all nations as he is with them until the end of the age, 28:19, and 20.

Carson's commentary is good on this particular point if you want to look at some further discussion. Now we go on to verses 36 through 43 where Jesus explains the parable of the weeds and the wheat. Jesus' interpretation of his second parable has a more dualistic and eschatological tone than the first one.

Instead of speaking in general terms about people under the guise of soils who bear fruit and those who do not, as in the former parable of the sower, the second parable stresses in vivid terms the destinies of the two groups. The contrasting ethical qualities, literally lawlessness versus righteousness, which lead to these two opposite destinies, are also brought out in verses 41 to 43. There's also a clear contrast of the respective roles of Jesus in verse 37 and the devil in verses 38 and 39.

The ultimate figures behind the cosmic struggle, behind the contrasting people, ethics, and destinies found in the parable are Jesus and Satan. The imagery of Jesus as the sower of the good seed, the people of the kingdom, is especially noteworthy

since it is a picturesque way of putting what Jesus has stated previously. He is the sole revealer of the Father, 11:27.

But the enemy, Satan, like wolves who wear sheep's clothing, 7:15, also sows seed, and the resulting weeds are difficult to distinguish from the wheat. Therefore, as many have said, Satan is the great imitator. Matthew's narrative frequently stresses the end of the age and the judgment to Kovalo.

John the Baptist speaks of this in vivid language, which anticipates Jesus' words in this passage. Matthew speaks of himself as the eschatological judge in the Sermon on the Mount, 7:22 and 7:23. And there he stresses the bliss of the future kingdom on earth as the reward for faithful discipleship.

Notice chapter 5, verse 3, 5, 10, and chapter 6, verse 10, and chapter 7, verse 21. Unexpectedly, many Gentiles will share in the eschatological banquet with the patriarchs, 8, 11, and 12. Confessing Jesus and aiding his messengers will result in reward, chapter 10, verses 32 and 33, as well as verses 41 and 42.

The peril of the towns that did not believe in Jesus will be worse than the notorious towns of the Old Testament when the judgment comes, chapter 11, verses 22 and 24, and chapter 12, verse 41. Those who slander the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, even in the world to come, 12:32. With all of these judgment passages in the background, the reader of Matthew should not be surprised at this vivid portrayal of the end of the age in the parable of the weeds and the wheat.

Of course, there's a lot of additional teaching on this matter in the rest of the Gospel of Matthew. So, if you'd like to look at some passages on judgment, you might consider 13:49, 16:27, 17:11, 18:8, and 9:19, 27 to 30, 22:1 to 13, and 30 to 32, Matthew 24 and 25, 26:29, 26:64, and finally 28:20 implies that there will be a judgment at the end of the age. So, the stress here in chapter 13 on judgment brings to a head some implications that have already been given and leads to further teaching about the future judgment in the rest of this gospel.

It's also worth mentioning here that this parable should not be cited as supporting a casual attitude on the part of Christians toward the matter of church discipline. No doubt, there are false disciples in the church, and it's somewhat convenient to view them as the weeds and the wheat. But notice that Jesus says in verse 38 that the field is the world, not the church.

So, for us to take the field as the church with good and bad in it is a mistake, because if anything, the picture is the picture of the church as the good seed in the world, which is the bad seed, according to 13:38. This underlines the eventual global ministry of the church in 24:14 and 28:19. Other texts in Matthew make it clear that God does not take the sin of professing Christians lightly.

Such passages as 7:21-23 and 18:15-17, 18:21 following the parable there, and 22:11-14. So, it's important that in Matthew, Christians are godly, growing, righteous people. Not perfect, but growing.

And for us to look at this text in 13:38, excuse me, look at the parable as if it's teaching that it's inevitable that we'll have a lot of evil in the church is a mistake. It's not easy to maintain a pure church, but it is mandatory for those who take Jesus' call to discipleship seriously. And now the three more parables that Jesus tells after this explanation of the parable of the tares.

We now look at 13:44-50, the parable of the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the fishing net. This pair of similar parables, the hidden treasure and the pearl, describes the sacrificial pursuit of a singular goal, whether the hidden treasure or the pearl. Notice how similar these two parables are to the parable of the mustard seed and the leaven at the end of the first half of the discourse.

Although some interpret both of these parables as pictures of the redemption of the church by God through Jesus, viewing Jesus as the one who buys the field containing the hidden treasure and as the one who buys the pearl, this tends to neglect the context and to read Pauline theology into Matthew. Although Matthew does speak of Jesus as a ransom for many in 20:28 and also notice 26:28, there is another approach which better fits the context. Throughout Matthew 13, Jesus has been speaking parabolically of the mixed response to his kingdom words and deeds.

One may trace positive responses to the kingdom as well as negative responses. As to positive responses in the parable of the sower, there was the good soil which produced fruit, 13:8 and 23. The secrets of the kingdom are revealed to the disciples, 13:11.

The parable of the wheat and weed speaks of the glorious future of the righteous as good seed gathered into a barn, 13:43, and this is reinforced by the parable of the fishing net, 13:48. The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast speak of the almost imperceptible growth of the kingdom from insignificance to greatness. In light of all this, it seems likely that the parables here fit this same pattern of positive response to the kingdom.

The kingdom is portrayed then as a hidden treasure and as a valuable pearl, and it's pursued by men who sell all they have in order to gain it. Surely this fits the picture of discipleship one finds throughout Matthew. Jesus' first disciples leave their families and their fishing gear, interestingly, to follow Jesus in Matthew 4, verses 20 and 22, as compared 9:9. Following Jesus entails the sacrifice of losing one's life for Jesus, and thereby finding it, paradoxically, 16:25, and 26.

The rich young ruler refuses to sell all he has to follow Jesus, 19:21, and 22, but all who do make such a sacrifice will be richly rewarded, 19:27, to 29. Thus, these parables present both the sacrifice required in following Jesus and the disciples' joy when they do follow him, 13:44, compared to 10, and 28:8, and for a temporary joyous look at 13:20. The joy is in the present possession of the kingdom as well as its future rewards.

Despite the lure of wealth in the present, 13:22, and the many distractions of life in this world, millions continue to sacrificially follow Jesus at great cost in this present life, but with greater prospects for the future. Jesus himself said it in Matthew 5, verse 3, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now the parable of the fishing net.

The message of the parable of the fishing net is obviously similar to that of the parable of the weeds, but among the differences between the two is the presence of fish of every kind in this parable, as opposed to only two kinds of plants, wheat and seeds, in the preceding one. Perhaps this is a subtle reminder of the universality of the kingdom mission, which is mandated to all the nations in 28:20. The net does not discriminate as it gathers the fish, and neither should disciples of the kingdom as they fish for people, 4:19, 22:9, and 10.

This is the type of thing where we ought to reconsider the philosophy of church growth that sometimes tries to target demographic groups and to make them be the sole indicator of one's goal in mission, in a way that tends to, you know, always move the churches out to suburbia rather than staying in town or in the inner city administering to people where they are. Certainly, as we look around the world, there are weeds and there is wheat. There are ultimately two kinds of folks: those who, by God's grace, believe in Jesus and those who continue in their sin.

But from the standpoint of the parable of the fishing net, there's all kinds of fish out there, and we need to be gathering, we need to be sowing, and we need to be preaching the gospel to all the nations and leave it in God's hands as to who will ultimately turn and believe in Jesus. Now, finally, the last parable in this gospel, a passage which some do not even necessarily see as a parable, 13:51 and 52, the parable of the homeowner. You'll remember, hopefully, from a previous lecture that we noted the parabolic introductory formula in 13:52.

Therefore, every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household. And that statement that the scribe who has become a disciple is like the householder is the classic parabolic introduction that we've seen several times already in this gospel. So, it is correct to view the parable of the homeowner in verses 51 and 52 as a parable because it has that same formula.

The fact that it's short shouldn't bother us because we've already seen at least four short parables in two pairs. The parable of the leaven and the mustard seed in the first half of the discourse, and the parable of the hidden treasure in the pearl in the second half. So, this would seem to me to indicate that any analysis of Matthew 13, which doesn't notice eight parables coming in two sets of four, four to the crowds in the first half of the chapter, four to the disciples in the second half of the chapter, needs to rethink things.

So, it is clear from Matthew chapters 11 through 13 that many of Jesus' hearers in the crowds do not understand the kingdom message. The animosity of the Jewish religious leaders toward Jesus and his message is becoming potentially lethal. Even Jesus' disciples are slow to grasp what all this means, 13:10 and 13:36.

Jesus has been teaching through his parables that the kingdom will have a mixed reception all the way to the end of the age. The kingdom's growth will be real, though imperceptible, and its humble beginnings will eventually lead to a substantial entity. The sacrifice required to enter it is great, but those who abandon everything else to follow Jesus will be greatly rewarded.

But all this has been stated parabolically and therefore mysteriously, even enigmatically. And even though three of the parables have been interpreted, it's not certain that the disciples have understood. So, Jesus puts that question to them, and they answer it in the affirmative.

The parables have evidently been an effective means of communication to those to whom it has been given to understand the secrets of the kingdom, 13:11. Since they affirm that they understand his parabolic teaching, he concludes the third discourse with yet another parable. As an aside here, we need to compare their claim to understanding with something which happens a bit later in 15:15, where it is quite clear that they do not understand.

And as we follow this section of Matthew's narrative, we will find repeatedly Jesus ministering to the disciples and trying to help them understand. So when they say here that they understand, Jesus, I'm sure, is taking that with the proverbial grain of salt. So Jesus concludes the third discourse with yet another parable.

This time it's a short one. It's more of a simile, really, than a story. And like the two previous pairs of short parables, it is not interpreted.

Look at 13:31 to 33 and 13:44 to 46. It's a bit surprising that Jesus speaks of his disciples as scribes or teachers of religious law, as the New Living Translation does it, since the scribes are consistently among Jesus' enemies in Matthew. But in their teaching capacity, they will function in Matthew's Christian Jewish community just like the scribes functioned in the larger Jewish community.

Look at chapter 23, verse 34 for another reference to Christian scribes. The disciples' role here is compared to that of a homeowner who utilizes both new and old treasures in managing his household. It would seem that the reference to new and old things should be understood in the light of Jesus' teaching that he has come not to cancel but to fulfill the law and the prophets, that basic teaching going back in 5:17.

Thus, Israel's pre-Christian scriptures are not old in the sense of being decrepit, outdated, antique, or obsolete, since they are still part of the kingdom's scribe's resources. But the new things, the ultimately definitive teachings of Jesus about the kingdom, are to be used first as the scribes' primary resources. Matthew makes much of the teachings of Jesus, featuring them in his five major discourses, 5 through 7, the Sermon on the Mount, 10, the Sermon on Mission, 13, the Parables of the Kingdom, 18, the Spiritual Values of the Kingdom, and 24, 25, the Eschatological Discourse.

So, Matthew is stressing the teaching of Jesus in a way here which underlines what he is saying in Matthew 13:52, that the scribe of the kingdom will bring forth of his treasure things new and old. Certainly, the new things are ultimately wrapped around, if you will, the teaching of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus' mandate that all nations be discipled and that disciples be taught all that Jesus has commanded.

Kingdom scribes must now manage God's household with the resources Jesus provides, his new definitive teachings about the eschatological inauguration of God's reign, which fulfill the old scriptures of Israel. Hagner puts it very well in his commentary when he says, Christians must represent a Christianity which encompasses both Testaments. Of course, we need to remember when we look at our Bibles that many times we have spent so much time in the New Testament that pages there are worn out and falling out, but if we go back in the Old Testament all too often we find the pages crisp and brand new and probably never even been read before.

This is sad, and this is something we need to correct and take Jesus' words here as indicating that if we don't understand the old revelation well, it will be very difficult for us to understand the new revelation, which fulfills it. We must understand that the superstructure of the New Testament is laid upon the foundation of the Old.