**The Parables about the Kingdom of God**

Today we continue our theme of the Kingdom of God. We have in last two weeks asked what it is and what Jesus had to say about it. Today we look at an overview of the parables Jesus told in relation to it.

Next week we are looking at whether it has already arrived or yet to come and in the final week, we will examine what it means for us here in the 21st Century.

So, to the parables.

Parables are a way to transmit moral, transcendent principles in a story that people can understand and relate to. They are a teaching method using the familiar to illustrate the unfamiliar concepts.

It is a story or saying that demonstrates a truth using comparison, hyperbole, or a simile.

So, in his parables Jesus compares some readily observable natural or human phenomenon to the Kingdom of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Parables operate at 4 levels.

1. A marvellous story that captures the imagination of the hearer
2. A story that teaches moral behaviour
3. A story that reveals something about the Kingdom of God
4. A story that reveals something about Jesus himself[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is on that third reason that we are focusing today.

Jesus intended his followers to understand and apply his parables. To insiders the parables are a guide; to outsiders the parables are a mystery, albeit an intriguing one.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Mark 4:34 it is written “*He did not say anything to [the crowd] without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.”*

He was facing violent opposition and threat of death for his open preaching, so he used veiled speech, i.e. parables,[[4]](#footnote-4) understandable by his followers but not so for those who did not believe.

Luke 8:*10 He said [to his disciples], “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’* He was quoting from the prophet Isaiah.

In fact, approximately one third of all Jesus’ teaching are in parables.[[5]](#footnote-5)

He used parables in all sorts of teaching situations. Matthew gathered a lot of them together in his Gospel in chapter 13, but they are recorded also in the other Gospels as well.

There are no parables in the New Testament outside of the Gospels, and only seldom were they used in the Old Testament.

In his parables, Jesus made statements concerning the nature, the reception, and the results of the proclamation of the Kingdom by the King and his followers.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There are twelve parables about the kingdom of God that Jesus tells in the Bible, but time allows us only to look in depth at six of them.

The Parable of the Sower.

Matthew 13:3-8 *“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*

He used a parable to show people’s response to the message of the kingdom of God. A few verses later Jesus explicitly explained its meaning to his disciples.

*18-23 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*

He identifies the soil as being the state of our hearts, and that the effect of the word [seed] is dependent on the state our heart.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The parable of the sown seed

Mark 4:26-29 He also said, “*This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”*

He used a parable to show the discreet character of the kingdom of God as contrasted with the apocalyptic expectation of upheaval - the seed grows quietly. Under the very noses of those in power, the kingdom grows, from the small beginnings of a band of twelve to the 2.6 billion today.

From this parable, we learn that God will cause the growth. We need to show up, show the love of God to the world, and leave the results to God.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast

*Matthew 13:31-32 “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”*

*33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”*

He used these two parables to show the immense growth of the kingdom from an insignificant beginning.

The modern hearer of these parables immediately thinks of organic growth, but the idea of natural development was alien to people of the ancient world. Between seed and fruit, they saw, not continuous development, but contrast, and recognised a divine miracle.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

If there is a difference between the two parables, it may be that the mustard seed indicates extensive growth, and the yeast indicates inward transformation[[9]](#footnote-9) which happens without human endeavour or struggle.

From the parable of the mustard seed, we learn that the kingdom of God starts small, but it grows into the largest of garden plants. It is a place where we are welcomed in and a place we can call home; and that great things can come from small beginnings.

From the parable of the yeast, we learn that God’s kingdom changes us and changes the world around us.

The parable of the weeds

*Matthew 13:24-30 “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’*

The illustration worked particularly well for the people of that time. The tares (the weeds) he refers to are bearded darnel, a species of ryegrass, the seeds of which are a strong drug like sleeping effect. The plant bears a close resemblance to wheat as it grows until the ear appears, and only then the difference is discovered.

Nowadays, good and evil, virtue and vice, sin and holiness continue together in spite of their contrast and it is only at the end of the world when the harvest takes place, that the Lord of the harvest will command the reapers to gather the weeds to be burned and the wheat to the barns.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The author Michael Green writes that “though now scarcely indistinguishable from everyone else, one day, at the final judgement, the sons and daughters of the Kingdom will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The parable of the good fish and bad fish

*Matthew 13:47-50 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So, it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

He used these two parables (the weeds one and this one about fish) to show the mixed nature of the world - those involved in the kingdom of God who will be separated out at the end and those who are not in the kingdom who have another fate.

It also reminds us of the fact that God will do the separation in his own time, and we should not pre-empt that. It speaks of God’s role in judgement and not ours.

The parables of the treasure and the pearl

He used these two parables to show the inestimable value of the kingdom of God for which people must be prepared to give up everything.[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Matthew 13:44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

It is like a man going across a field who stubs his toe on what turned out to be a hidden treasure, sells all and buys that field. This is the sudden, decisive type of discovery – in one divine moment he sees, decides, and commits himself for life.

*Mt 13:45-46 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

This is like a merchant seeking good pearls, who finds one of such beauty and perfection that he sells everything else, and buys that one pearl. This is the careful, weigher of values type of person; he finds one of the greatest value and sells all to buy it.

The first is the emotional type, the second is the hard-headed, business-like, “show me your value” type. Jesus welcomed both types and both approaches.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In these two short parables, Jesus essentially asks, “What is your value system? How important to you is your soul? What would you trade for your salvation?”

These two parables are concerned with the idea of value.[[14]](#footnote-14)

From the parables of the hidden treasure, we learn that the kingdom of God is much more valuable than anything that we own here on earth.

And it also alludes to the fact that God gave up everything that he had in order to rescue and redeem us, to bring us into his kingdom. We are his pearl.

Time prohibits me from covering the other parables about the kingdom but take a note and look them up for yourself. They are:

Parable of the Householder in Matthew 13:52 which teaches us that the elements of God’s kingdom are both new and old and that God wants us to try new things. He is not throwing out the old but incorporating it into a new thing. Think of Jesus saying “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17–18).*

The parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24 and again in Matthew 22:1-14 teaches us that the kingdom of God is like a party; that it stretches us, and compels us to love even those who we are not naturally inclined to love; and importantly, when we place other things above God, even things that seem good, we lose out on the kingdom.

Remember the excuses the invited guests gave: *‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’… ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’… ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’*

*And the master’s reply: ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’… Not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”*

The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, teaches us that we can be left out of the kingdom because we were not ready and prepared.

*The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ 13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 tells us that God entrusts his wealth to us; he wants us to invest in his kingdom, and he wants us to take risks.

*For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.* *And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35 tells us that God has forgiven all of our debts and wrongdoing and that we can only inherit the kingdom of God if we similarly forgive others.

*‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

And lastly, the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16 which tells us that all are welcome in the kingdom of God, and all receive the same reward, regardless of when we “join” and that God is generous, and that we do not earn the kingdom of heaven; it is a free gift given to us.

*I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’*

So, taken together, what do all these parables mean?

Some of the passages we have looked at speak of the coming of the kingdom by gradualism – person to person, region to region, nation to nation, under the covers, out of sight of the rulers.

On the other hand, there are passages that refer to the apocalyptic or sudden coming of the kingdom, when Jesus returns to set it up.

Stanley Jones comments that “the gradualistic concept gives my task. I can be the agent of the coming of that kingdom now. The apocalyptic concept give me my hope – my hope that the last word will be spoken by God and that last word will be victory but this interpretation of the kingdom as only being in the future, when Christ returns, makes the Kingdom innocuous now. [[15]](#footnote-15) We will look on these concepts and issues next week.

Some of the parables tell us of our attitude toward the Kingdom. What do we value? Just how important to us is the kingdom of God? How do we demonstrate that?

The kingdom of God is a hard thing to understand but when put in terms of the parable stories, we get a glimpse into what it is.

The stories are not definitive, they are similes, not metaphors – “the kingdom of God is like…” not “the Kingdom of God is…” but they help understand the concepts.

So, to sum up the key characteristics of the Kingdom of Heaven from the parables we have looked at:

* It is open to everyone, and we should invite everyone. We invite; God does the calling.
* We are not the ones who will sort out believers from non-believer. Let God be the judge.
* The kingdom is huge but always starts with one person.
* One person who believes impacts everything around them with the Kingdom of God.
* The kingdom is immensely valuable for us, and we should strive to go wholeheartedly for it.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson *The Writings of the NT* 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jerram Barrs *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.peterdehaan.com/christianity/parables-of-jesus/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson 172 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IVP 823 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Charles R Erdman *The Gospel of Matthew* 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Erdman 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Walter Kasper *Jesus the Christ* 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Francis Foulkes *A Guide to St Matthew’s Gospel* 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Erdman 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Michael Green *The Message of Matthew* 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. IVP 649 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. E Stanley Jones *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person* 297 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sproul, R. C. *What Do Jesus’ Parables Mean? (First edition, Vol. 28, p. 28* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jones 73-74 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)