

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### MATTHEW 13

THE thirteenth chapter of Matthew is necessarily full of interest to all students of the teaching of Jesus. In it we have a setting forth of truth concerning the progress of the Kingdom of heaven in this age. Any study of it, therefore, which is to be of real value, necessitates a careful consideration of its scope and method.

The chapter is a set discourse of Jesus, and not a collection of truths taken from the Saviour's teaching at different times, and set forth by Matthew as a consecutive discourse.

Dean Alford's words on the subject may be quoted as giving one simple and yet sufficient reason for holding this view.

"The seven parables related in this chapter cannot be regarded as a collection made by the evangelist, as related to one subject, the Kingdom of Heaven and its development; they are clearly indicated by verse 53 to have been all spoken *on one and the same occasion*, \* and form indeed a complete and glorious whole in their inner and deeper sense."

**\*The italics are Dean Alford's.**

The King was approaching the great crisis in His propaganda, when it would be necessary for Him to challenge His disciples as to the result of His mission, and their opinion concerning Him. In view of this, and in all probability in preparation for it, He uttered this parabolic discourse, which is in large measure illuminated by the experiences of His ministry, and which illuminated the future for them in the matter of their ministry.

Let us first briefly examine a group of Scriptures which forms the foundation of our present study.

Verses 1-3. We first see the King as He emerges from the house in which He had been holding communion with His disciples, and taking the seat of a teacher by the sea. Multitudes gathered about Him, and "**He spake many things to them in parables.**"

Verses 10-16. In the midst of this discourse, indeed, after the first of the parables, His disciples approached Him and asked, "**Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?**"

Then follows the answer which He gave to them, and which contains for us His own explanation of His method.

Verses 34, 35. At the close of the account of the parables addressed to the multitudes, Matthew carefully declares the fact that here He adopted the method of parable, and announces His reason for doing so.

Verse 53. This last verse read in connection with the first three, reveals the boundaries of the discourse.

The question of the disciples, “**Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?**” is our question as we commence our study of this discourse. Perhaps we shall best be able to understand the answer as we look at the question in its context of time and circumstance.

It is evident that at this point in His ministry Jesus commenced practically a new method. He had already made use in His teaching of the parable-method, but from now He employed it supremely. The disciples noticed the change, and therefore asked Him the question.

Perhaps the force of their question is to be discovered by placing the emphasis upon the words “*unto them*,” for in answer, Jesus immediately said, “**It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.**”

If this contrast between the multitudes and themselves were in their mind, and if it were a real one as the reply of Jesus made clear, it must still be remembered that before the discourse was finished, He addressed Himself to them also in parables. I draw attention to this, in order that we may at once understand that whatever was the reason of His adopting the parabolic method with the multitudes, it obtained also in some degree at that time in the case of His own disciples.

We are not left to any speculation as to the meaning of the method. The King answered their question, and His explanation of His own method must be accepted. It is, however, of such a nature as to demand a very careful consideration, or it may be entirely misinterpreted.

I utter this word of warning because I am convinced that it often is sadly misinterpreted, and much of its most tender purpose lost thereby.

Let us first inquire into the meaning of the word “*parable*.”

Literally, it is a throwing or placing of things side by side, with the suggestion of comparison. Something is placed by the side of something else, with the intention of explaining the one by the other. Such a method is that of the parable.

The old and simple definition comes back to us “*A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning;*” that is to say, some familiar thing of earth is placed alongside of some mysterious thing of heaven, that our understanding of the one may help us to an understanding of the other. The method is that of taking some one set of facts, familiar and material, and making them explanatory of others, strange and spiritual.

Invariably in the teaching of Jesus a parable was a picture of things seen, intended to reveal and explain things unseen, and a rapid glance over this chapter will show how the King made use of the things that were most common in the experience of those amongst whom He was teaching for this purpose.

I do not suppose that if Jesus were teaching in our cities to-day He would use any of the comparisons He used then; He would rather draw attention to the commonest sights of the city life, and use them as illustrations. All the parables of this chapter were facts under the actual observation, or within the immediate experience of the men He was teaching. Perhaps even then in the distance a sower may have been seen scattering his seed. The field sown with wheat and intermixed with darnel was one of the most familiar things to them from boyhood. The mustard tree, about which we know so little, they knew full well. The woman hiding the leaven in the meal was an everyday home picture. Treasure found in the field was not so common, but still not unknown; and so with the merchant seeking pearls. The fisherman with his net, and the householder of the final parable were perhaps the most familiar of all.

In the use of the parable it is always necessary to emphasize the teaching of similarity and disparity. The similarity of principle is emphasized by the recognition of disparity. To forget the teaching of disparity is to fall into the blunder of fanciful interpretation.

The question naturally arises as to why Jesus adopted this parabolic method of teaching. What was His intention?

Let me answer first by a simple statement based upon what we have already seen. The purpose of the parable is that of revelation by illustration, and the method is always intended to aid, and never to hinder understanding.

I know of nothing more curious, and at the same time more pernicious, than a certain interpretation of the motive which the King had in His use of parables, and I feel that it is of the greatest importance that we should avoid it. I refer to the view that our Lord adopted the parabolic method with His hearers because He had abandoned them in anger, and that His purpose was to hide His truth so that they should not see it. This I most strenuously deny. Christ never adopted any method characterized by such subtlety and cruelty. He never professed to be teaching men while at the same time He was resolutely attempting to hide truth from them. To charge Him with doing so would be to charge Him with dishonesty.

The parable is an aid, not a hindrance. It veils truth, not that men may not grasp it, but that it shall not escape them. There is a sense in which the sun is hidden by the piece of smoked glass which the boy holds before his eyes, and yet without such an instrument he could not look upon the sun at all. Essential light unveiled, blinds. Its veiling is the opportunity of vision. It is not, however, for us to speculate, but to hear what the King Himself said in answer to the disciples' inquiry.

Let us, however, hear all He says, not contenting ourselves with His first sentence, but giving attention to His whole explanation. In answer to the inquiry:

**“Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.”**

If Jesus had said no more than this, I should have made the deduction which I maintain has often been falsely made. I should have understood Him to mean that He was compelled to use the method of the parable in speaking to these people because it was intended that they should not know the truths concealed. Having made such a deduction, I should have been sorely perplexed. The whole meaning of His mission was that of giving men to know the truth; why, then, should He use a method ordinarily employed for illumination, in order to obviate His first intention of revelation, and produce exactly opposite effects in His hearers? But let us follow Him further, and the meaning of the first statement becomes apparent.

**“For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.”**

Note most carefully the contrast of which this is an explanation. **“It is given unto you to know . . . to them it is not given.”**

Now the explanation.

**“Whosoever hath, to him shall be given.”**

He declared that it was given to His disciples to know the mysteries. Why was this knowledge given to them? According to the Teacher’s explanation it was because of something they already possessed. Bearing that in mind, turn to the contrasted position. **“But whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.”**

He declared it was not given to these men to know the mysteries. Why was that knowledge denied? According to His own explanation it was because of something they lacked. These men lacked that which the disciples possessed, the possession of which created in them a capacity for receiving the mysteries of the Kingdom. It was not therefore possible for them to grasp these mysteries, and even what understanding they did possess, they were in danger of losing.

What, then, did the disciples of Jesus possess which these men lacked?

In order to answer that question let us take it in another form. What was the essential difference between the disciples and the rulers and multitudes standing around? Did it not lie here, *that the disciples had received Jesus as King, and by reason of that action and their attitude towards Him had become able to receive the mysteries of His Kingdom?*

The people, notwithstanding His ministry, had rejected Him up to this time, and therefore He could not give to them, nor could they have received, the mysteries of the Kingdom. To the men who had crowned Him, He belonged; and all the principles and privileges of the Kingdom they were able to appreciate and possess. The others had so far refused their allegiance and were therefore unable to see, or enter into, the Kingdom.

If we go further back for a moment, we may state the case thus.

All these men among whom the ministry of Jesus had been exercised had preliminary knowledge of the ways of God as a result of the religion in which they had been born and trained. In fulfillment of the messages of their own Scriptures He had come. Certain of them had received Him, others of them had rejected Him. To those receiving Him were given the mysteries of the Kingdom. To those rejecting Him these messages could not be given, and they were in danger of losing the real value of all that they had gained through their early religious training. Now with these men to whom are denied the secrets of the Kingdom, because of their disloyalty to the King, Jesus adopts a new method. He will give them pictures to lure them toward the truth.

Follow Him still further, **“Therefore speak I to them in parables; because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith,**

**‘By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;  
And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive.’ “**

That prophecy of Isaiah Christ declared to be fulfilled in the case of the people to whom the mysteries of the Kingdom were **“not given.”** They were the people that hearing, did not understand; seeing, could not see, nor perceive. Upon whom was the blame of their blindness and deafness to be laid?

In answer to this inquiry, let us continue the quotation as Christ continued it.

**“For this people’s heart is waxed gross,  
And their ears are dull of hearing,  
And their eyes they have closed;  
Lest at any time they should see with their eyes,  
And hear with their ears,  
And understand with their heart,  
And should be converted (turn again),  
And I should heal them.”**

Now in this passage the heart of the whole subject is laid bare.

Christ declared in effect that these people did not see the things that His disciples saw. They saw without seeing, they heard without hearing. And why? They had shut their eyes lest they should see, and they had stopped their ears lest they should hear.

They had rejected the King, and without the King they had no key to the mysteries of the Kingdom. Because of this dullness consequent upon disobedience, He now proceeded to address them in parables. Nowhere is the infinite pity of the heart of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, more beautifully seen than in the method.

We have all seen a skillful teacher arrest a class with a story.

Here, then, is the great Teacher, talking in parables, not in order that these men might not see, nor hear, nor feel, but in order to constrain them to a willingness to see and hear and feel. Presently we shall see that Jesus had to use the same method with His disciples, and for the self-same reason. Their vision was not yet perfectly clear, for they had not yet absolutely surrendered everything to His Kingship. There were things, therefore, which He could only interpret to them in this way.

The parable is always the method of Infinite Love. It is the method adopted in grace to meet the need of near-sightedness. All that it suggests to us is ultimately interpreted and enlarged by more direct teaching.

Let us first examine the scheme of the discourse. In it we have the King's own view of His Kingdom, as to its history in the age which He initiated.

The Kingdom of God in its fundamental ideal and ultimate realization is infinitely greater than any condition revealed in the process of these parables. In human history there had been already different phases of manifestation, and various degrees of realization of that Kingdom amongst men. Beyond the particular age in which we live, there will be, according to the teaching of Scripture, manifestations more perfect and far more glorious than anything our eyes have yet seen. In these parables the King deals only with the manifestation and method of progress in this age of God's Kingdom.

The first parable is not introduced by any direct reference to the Kingdom. It is simply the story of the initial work of sowing. Then immediately Jesus proceeded in a series of other parables to refer to the issues of that work throughout the age. That the application of these parables is limited to the age He initiated is clearly manifest in the phrases with which the King introduces each parable, excepting the first and last. The second parable, that of the two sowings, is introduced by the words, "**The Kingdom of heaven is likened unto,**" and the remaining ones by the words, "**The Kingdom of heaven is like unto.**"

The first phrase means "The Kingdom of heaven has become like unto," the expression suggesting the changing manifestations of the Kingdom in succeeding generations. The second phrase implies simply the manifestation of the Kingdom in the generation then present.

What this limit of application is, is made perfectly clear as the discourse proceeds. Twice does Jesus refer to the "**end of the world**" (vers. 39 and 49). In each case, our commentators tell us that this is in reference to "*the consummation of the age.*"

Thus the pictures of the Kingdom are pictures of conditions obtaining between the moment in which Jesus spoke and the consummation of the age meaning not the end of the world, in the sense of the dissolution of the material universe, but the completion of the period which began with His first advent, and which will be closed by His second.

A general survey of the discourse reveals three principal divisions.

- First (vers. 1-35), “**Jesus went out of the house**” and uttered four parables in the hearing of the multitudes.
- Second (vers. 36-50), Jesus “**sent the multitude away, and went into the house,**” and spoke to His disciples parables which were of a different nature from those already spoken to the crowd.
- Third (vers. 51-53), Jesus addressed Himself to His disciples concerning their responsibility during the age.

Of these parables the King Himself gave the explanation of two. In each case the explanation was to His own disciples. The first explanation, that of the parable of the sower, was possibly given in the hearing of the multitude. The second explanation, that of the two sowings, was given to the disciples privately.

In preparation for a more detailed study of these parables, it is of great importance to state certain necessary canons of interpretation. Let me first name these, and then consider them a little more particularly.

I. *Simplicity of interpretation*, for remembering the intention of the parable, the simplest interpretation is the most likely to be the true one.

II. *Restriction in application* of the pictures to the limits clearly marked by the King.

III. *A consistent use of the figurative terms* employed, both within the system and with the general use of Scripture, except where specifically otherwise stated.

With regard to the first canon, it is quite possible to examine these parables of Jesus, as it is possible to examine His miracles, with a desire to find hidden depths and hidden meanings. That there are such in all of them, I do not deny, for the simplest thing Jesus said was in itself of the essence of eternal truth, and may have a thousand applications. I hold, however, that in our study it is better to interpret them in the light of the multitudes to whom they were addressed. Seeing that He spoke, not to hide spiritual truth, but to reveal it, we may take it for granted that the sublimest meaning is also the simplest.

As regards the second, it must be remembered that we shall utterly miss the real value of this discourse if we attempt to make any of the parables include the whole fact of the establishment and administration of God’s Kingdom. We must recognize from the beginning that they are pictures of one age, and remember that that age is not final.

Upon the third canon I desire to lay special emphasis. The figurative terms of these parables are used consistently within the system. That is to say that Jesus was true to His own figures, and used them in one sense only. Personally I believe that to be a principle, not merely in the teaching of Jesus, but throughout the whole of Scripture.

So important do I hold this to be that I desire at once to gather out from the parables some of the figures which Jesus used, and which at first sight may appear to have different significations, but which, as a matter of fact, have always the same value and intention.

We read of

- The sower,
- The seed,
- The birds,
- The soil,
- The sun,
- The thorns,
- The fruit,
- An enemy,
- Reapers or servants,
- The harvest,
- A tree,
- Leaven,
- Meal,
- A woman,
- Treasure,
- A man,
- A merchant,
- A pearl,
- A net,
- The seashore,
- Fish.

And although some of these illustrations are repeated in different parables, it will be seen, as we continue our study of them, that their significance never changes. The figure always stands for the same truth, in whatever parable it is found.

The sower is found in three parables, in the first, in that of the darnel, and in that of the mustard seed, and when we come to their particular interpretation we shall find that the sower in each represents the same Person, the Son of Man. Again in the same connection, we find the figure of seed sown, and with the exception of the bad seed, which is distinctly so called and thus differentiated from the other, it has a uniform significance in all connections.

The figure of birds is used in the parable of the sower, and in that of the mustard seed. It is a mistake to interpret it as symbolic of evil in the first, and of good in the second. In both parables, birds are symbols of evil.

Again the soil appears in the parable of the sower, in that of the darnel, in that of the mustard seed, and in that of the treasure. life has always the same meaning, and this meaning is once given, "**the field is the world.**"

Fruit is found in the parables of the sower and the darnel, and in each case must be interpreted according to the seed.

Reapers or servants are found in the parables of the darnel and the net, and in each case represent angels at the end of the age, acting with the King Himself.

The harvest is referred to in the parables of the darnel and of the net, and in both cases refers to the end of the age.

Then lastly we have illustrations which do not repeat in the discourse, but which are used in other parts of the Bible. Thorns are here, as everywhere, symbols of evil. A tree is here, as always, a symbol of great and widespread worldly power. As in every other case in Scripture, so here, leaven must be the type of evil. The meal here must be considered as the three measures, and thus its identification with the meal offering of the ancient economy is seen. Treasure is found in one parable, and it can only be explained in conjunction with the parable of the pearl. Thus I maintain that in order to an understanding of these matchless parables of Jesus, we must recognize the perfect consistency of Jesus in His use of figures.

*Let us now turn to a general survey of the main divisions and particular parables, and the teachings contained in each.*

The first four parables (one, and three) were spoken wholly to the crowds, and reveal the Kingdom from the human standpoint. The second four parables (three, and one) were spoken exclusively to the disciples, and represent the Kingdom from the Divine standpoint.

- First, the external fact of the Kingdom in the four parables for the crowd.
- Secondly, the internal secret of the Kingdom in four parables for the disciples.

Taking the first four we find running through them the same elements. In each one the Lord reveals the fact of antagonistic forces with continued conflict, and an issue in which failure apparently predominates, rather than success.

- In the first parable there is hindrance in the soil.
- In the second, there is opposition on the part of an enemy who by night sows counterfeit seed in the field.
- In the third, there is seen the counter-development of a worldly power affording shelter and protection to evil.
- In the last of the four there is revealed an alien principle which makes for disintegration and destruction.

Thus it is evident that these four parables do not give us the picture of an age in which there is to be a greater increase of goodness until final perfection is attained; but rather one characterized by conflict, and one in which it appears as though evil triumphed rather than good.

In the parable of the sower the work of the King is revealed, that namely, of scattering seed to produce Kingdom results. The work of the enemy is manifested in his attempt to prevent Kingdom results by the injury of the seed through the soil on which it falls. In the parable of the two sowings the work of the King is manifest, and also the spoiling work of the enemy who sows the same field with darnel.

In the parable of the mustard seed which, contrary to all law, produces a great tree, we have a revelation of an unnatural growth, an abortion, something never intended, and therefore lacking the true elements of strength. In the heaven, as we have seen, we have the simplest symbol of corruption.

It is most important to remember that these parables give us pictures of the Kingdom as realized in the world, showing how far that realization is attained in the present age. The subject of the Church is involved as the means to an end and as the measure of the realization of the Kingdom. Our Lord was not for the moment dealing with its ultimate destination and calling in the ages to come.

Leaving the multitudes by the sea, the King gathered His disciples about Him in the house, and proceeded to utter to them parables which were not for the crowd. In them He revealed one activity, that of the King Himself. Here a great and glorious success is achieved in each case, and yet there is discrimination.

There is first the finding of treasure in a field, and the purchase of the field to possess it. By no stretch of imagination can that purchase be made the picture of what any human being can ever do. He Who purchased the field of the world is not a rebellious subject, but the King Himself; and the treasure hidden is that latent possibility for the development of which the whole field must be purchased.

So also in the next parable, notwithstanding all our exposition, and singing,

“I’ve found the pearl of greatest price!  
My heart doth sing for joy;  
And sing I must, for Christ is mine!  
Christ shall my song employ.”

The pearl is not intended to represent Christ. It is perfectly true that to find Him is to find the chief treasure here, but that is not the teaching of this particular parable. When we find Him, He is God’s free gift to us, but this merchant purchased the pearl, selling all that he had to do it.

Finally, in the parable of the net no workers are recognized in the casting of the net into the sea. It is the act of God Himself. At the end of the age, when it is gathered in, there will be discrimination, and the measure of success is clearly shown.

We have, then, simply and rapidly in this study, looked merely at the broad outlines of teaching. The chief interest at this moment is the contrast between the parables spoken to the multitudes and those to the disciples. To the crowds He declared the facts concerning the Kingdom in this age, which would eventually become patent to outward observation. When He gathered His disciples about Him alone, He showed them the inside truth. While there may appear to be in the passing centuries failure, shortcoming, the leavening of everything that should be pure, yet through all such failure God is Himself gathering out His treasure and finding His pearl.

Finally we come to the last parable.

It is interesting to remember that almost invariably we speak of the seven parables of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. As a matter of fact there are eight. Seven of them reveal truth concerning the Kingdom. The eighth, which is as full of beauty and of importance as any, deals with the responsibility of those who know the truth.

Having uttered the seven parables, He asked His disciples, “**Have ye understood all these things?**”

One is almost surprised to read their answer. “**They say unto Him, Yea, Lord.**”

I do not suppose for a moment that they did understand all, but they saw some little way, had some gleam of light, had in all probability caught the general teaching of the discourse in both its private and more public aspects. The King knew that presently they would understand, that with the coming of the Spirit there would come perfect illumination; and with infinite patience He accepted their confession, and proceeded to lay upon them a charge of responsibility.

This general survey of the scheme of the King’s teaching makes evident certain matters of present and pressing importance. We must have the Master’s conception of our age if we are to do the best work in it for His glory. If our eyes are set upon some consummation which He did not expect, then what can we expect other than that we shall be heart-sick ere long? If, on the other hand, we accept His view and consecrate ourselves to its realization, then we shall be able to bear “**the burden and heat of the day,**” and do the work He has appointed.

~ end of chapter 32 ~

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