

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 11 – Story-Teller: The Parables of Jesus

Introduction

Early in His ministry, Jesus taught in clear terms. As His ministry progressed, however, He began to disguise His message in parables (comparisons, or extended riddles). Recall what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces”* (Matthew 7:6). Parables were Jesus’ way of responding to the lack of responsiveness of His audiences. Parables were used to REVEAL truth to the receptive and to CONCEAL truth to the closed. Parables, then, were a form of judgment upon hard-hearted people, while being a great blessing to those who cared to explore the deeper meaning hidden in the parables. Jesus put it this way:

“I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand ... FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES” (Matt. 13:13 and 15).

Jesus spoke more than 30 parables. Matthew 13 is a collection of 7 of these. Here we find 5 core messages presented by Jesus in parables. (There are 2 sets of twins here, thus a total of 5 messages in these 7 parables.)

The Parable of the Sower (13:3-9).

The first parable addresses the issue of receptivity directly.

He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the

thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear” (13:3-9).

Some background: **The hardened soil** was the pathway that the farmer would walk on as he moved through his field. This soil was packed down by the footsteps of the farmer and his animals, and hardened by the heat of the sun. Much of Palestine was **rocky soil**. It looked good on the surface; but underneath the soil was a layer of rock that prevented seeds from taking deep root due to lack of moisture. **The thorn-infested soil** was area that had not been plowed and prepared by the farmer (perhaps left fallow for a season, according to Mosaic law prescribing every 7th year as a “Sabbath year” for a field to rest).

The Meaning (13:18-23):

Jesus did not explain this parable to the multitudes. He left people guessing as to what the parable meant. The disciples asked Jesus to explain it. This is how the explanation made it into Scripture (through the disciples). The four soils represent four kinds of hearts as they were hearing and responding to the teachings of Jesus.

1. The hardened soil pictures the unreceptive heart.

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road” (13:19).

2. The rocky soil pictures the emotion-driven heart.

“The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (13:20,21).

3. The thorny soil pictures the worldly, preoccupied heart.

“And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (13:22).

4. The good soil pictures the hungry, receptive heart.

“And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” (13:23).

This parable invites us to examine our hearts and to ask the question: How receptive and responsive am I to God’s word? Remember the 8 traits of a disciple at OPC? The 2nd one is, a disciple LISTENS to the voice of God. In what ways are you hearing and heeding the words of Jesus as we go through our study of His life and teachings? What difference are Jesus’ words making in your life? If you had to pick one of the 4 soils that best describes your life right now, which one would it be? What steps can you take to improve the condition of the soil in your heart?

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (13:24-30).

Here is another parable based on a farming analogy.

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn”” (13:24-30).

The Meaning (13:36-43):

Again, Jesus did not interpret this parable for the crowds. He only explained it to the disciples, who asked Him for the meaning (which indicated *how receptive they were* to the teachings of Jesus).

- 1. The farmer sowing the good seed** pictured Jesus (and His disciples) sowing the truth of God’s word in the world.
- 2. The growing crop of wheat** pictured the true children of God.

3. The enemy that sowed the tares pictured Satan, who would seek to disrupt the community of God’s children by planting counterfeits among them.

4. The tares picture people who are participating in God’s community, but they are not true believers in Jesus. They act in roles that appear “Christian,” but their heart is not redeemed by the saving work of Jesus.

5. The harvest pictures the final judgment. God alone is able to judge each person accurately according to the condition of their heart (not just outward appearances). He will separate the true believers from the false at the end of the age.

This parable invites the obvious question: Do I really know Jesus as my personal Savior, or, am I just going through the motions of religious activities trying to play the part? How about you? Have you placed your faith (trust) in Jesus to be your personal Savior? Have you truly accepted His death and resurrection as your hope for forgiveness of sins and life-everlasting? Do you remember a time in your life where you turned to Him in faith (trust)? Have you seen evidences of His work in your life since that first day of coming to know His love and grace?

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (13:31-33).

Here is the first set of twin parables that both focus on the surprising growth and influence of the kingdom of heaven.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (13:31,32).

Back then, the mustard seed was proverbial for the smallest seed. When fully grown, a mustard plant could reach up to 15 feet in height so that it towered over all the other garden plants. Jesus said the kingdom of God would start off very small (in His own life and ministry); but would grow into a movement so big that people from all over the world find their refuge and security in it.

He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened” (13:31-33).

In that day, people would always keep a little piece of the previous loaf of bread to preserve the leaven, and that piece would be used as leaven in the new lump of dough. A baker would knead that leaven in and soon that whole new lump of meal would be leavened. Jesus was picturing how the kingdom of heaven (His ministry and message) would eventually spread in its influence until the whole world would be impacted by it.

These twin parables combine to give an important prediction: Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God would *grow* to amazing proportions, and would *influence* the entire world.

Think about it: Do you know of any other kingdom, entity or movement that has grown as big as the movement Jesus started? Has any other movement had such a wide-reaching influence in the lives of people and/or in the life of the world? The life of Jesus has transformed billions of souls over 2,000 years . . . and His influence is felt everywhere. It is our job to continue spreading the message of Jesus in our own spheres of influence. One of OPC's 8 marks of a disciple is GO. "Who's in your top 3?" (Your list of people you are praying for and going to with the message of Jesus?) It is such a privilege to be part of the greatest message and greatest movement that the world will ever see!

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl (13:44-46).

Here's another pair of twins. When interpreting parables, it is important to look for the main big idea; not to look for hidden meaning in the small details. These are parables (comparisons), not allegories (stories where all the details contain hidden meanings). In the case of these twins, the idea is simple to grasp (which is why we are not given an explanation).

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (13:44-46).

In both parables, a man finds something of incredible value (a value that is missed or overlooked by others), and then he finds a way to purchase it for himself (even if he must take extreme measures to make the purchase). Jesus was saying that the kingdom of heaven

(having a share in that kingdom) is the most valuable thing on earth. A person who discovers the value of the kingdom of heaven will consider his/her relationship with Jesus as the most important thing in the world. There is simply nothing that can compare to having a relationship with the King of Heaven!

Consider: Is your relationship with Jesus the single most important thing in your life? Is there anything that you are placing above Jesus? Recall what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things (needs) will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Is Jesus #1 in your life? Is His work in this world of supreme importance to you?

The Parable of the Dragnet (13:47-50).

The final parable in this collection comes complete with the explanation. This is most likely because Jesus explained the meaning to His disciples and Matthew included the explanation right along with the parable itself.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. So, it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:47-50).

This parable is similar to the parable of the sheep and the goats later in Matthew (25:31-46). There is an ingathering first, followed by a separation. At the end of the age, Jesus will bring all of humanity to His throne of judgment, and He will separate those who have believed in Him from those that have not.

Sadly, many people minimize or ignore the very idea of a judgment before God at the end of the age. Yet, Jesus consistently taught about the final judgment. He warned people to live in light of it and to prepare for it. The apostles also repeated the same idea (see 2Corinthians 5 and Revelation 20:11-15). The Bible teaches that this life is a test, a trust, a temporary assignment designed to prepare us for eternity. How about you? Are you living your life in light of eternity? Are you ready to meet the Lord at any moment that He might call you home?

The P.S. Parable – The Head of the House (13:51,52).

There is a short 8th parable that Jesus gave only to His disciples in light of the collection. It focuses on the disciples' responsibility to pass along these teachings to other receptive hearts.

“Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (13:51,52).

Thus, we come full circle in this parable collection. The **first** responsibility of a disciple is to **receive** the teachings of Jesus in an honest and good heart. The **second** responsibility of a disciple is to **pass along** the teachings of Jesus to other people, who also are hungry to learn and apply them (pass along teachings that are old and familiar, along with things that we are just newly learning for ourselves).

Here's another one of OPC's 8 traits of a disciple: MULTIPLY. “Who are you pouring into?” Who is learning about Jesus through your life and your words? Who is being changed in their own walk with Jesus because of your walk with Jesus? It is our responsibility as His disciples to teach new believers the “old” traditions and foundations of the faith, AND to pass along the “new” things that Jesus is teaching us personally, as we daily walk with Him.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of these parables in Matthew 13 spoke most to you? Why?
2. Can you think of a modern-day example where *you* only share something *with people who will appreciate it*, and you do *not share it* with people who have no interest? (Information, an asset, a possession, an interest?)
3. The parables really get at the basic idea of *spiritual receptivity (how hungry we are for the things of God)*. Talk about a time in your life when your spiritual hunger was high. Talk about a time when your hunger for the things of God was lower. What causes you to fluctuate in your receptivity/hunger for the things of God?
4. Do you have a ‘favorite’ parable that is not found in Matthew 13. If so, share which parable it is and why you like it so much.