

Parables of the Kingdom

The parable of the Sower and the Seed was the first illustration that Jesus presented to His listeners about the kingdom of heaven. The parable revealed that people respond to the Word of God in a variety of ways, with most of them eventually rejecting it. Initially, some hear the good news about Jesus Christ with eagerness and joy, but later they decide to have nothing to do with Him. Those who hear, respond, and continue to believe in God are Christians. That is the message of the good soil. Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven were taught after He was rejected by the religious leaders of His day and after His pronouncement of judgment upon them and their generation (Matt. 12:39, 41-42). All of the parables reveal how the kingdom of heaven has functioned and will continue to function. The parables also reveal how the human race is responding and will continue to respond to God and His Word. There are eight more kingdom parables to explore. This study will explore all of them.

Parable of the Wheat and Tares. The parable that Jesus gave after the "Sower and the Seed" was about two plants: wheat and tares.

with it. A tare is an obnoxious weed that is often infected with fungus and sometimes has a poisonous narcotic in its seeds.¹ The tares look like wheat until they are fully grown.

Jesus 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 his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also." Matthew 13:24-26 (NASB)

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!" The slaves said to him, "Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?" But he said, "No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow

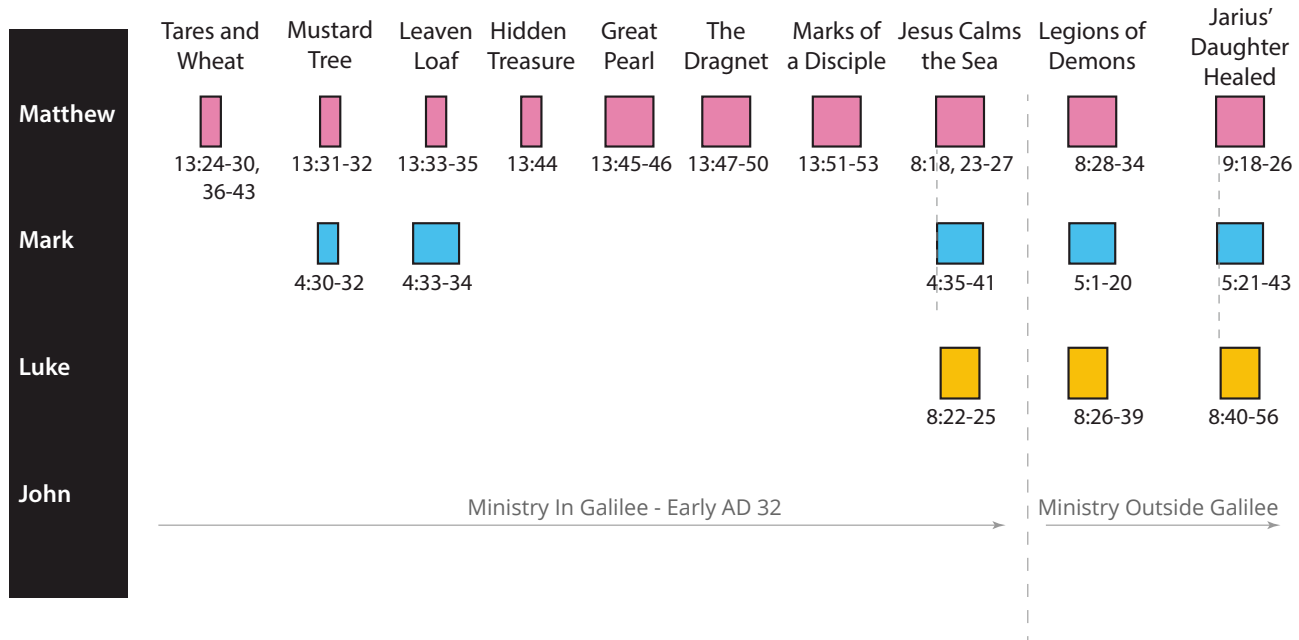


together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the

The parable is about a sower who sows good seed. The good seed starts to grow, but some tares also start growing along

1. Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite.

Life and Heart of Jesus



tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.” Matthew 13:27-30 (NASB)

When the owner of the field heard about the tares, he instructed his servants to wait until both were fully grown. Then he would be able to separate the tares from the wheat.

The message of this parable is that it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to determine the real Christians from the false Christians. There are many non-Christians who are kind, gentle, gracious, and loving. They look like and act like Christians, but they are not. But God knows, and when the end of time comes, God will remove the Christ rejectors and send them into the Lake of Fire for eternity. But Christians will go to His “barn” or heaven.

Parable of the Lamp. The next parable was the mysterious parable about the lamp. It is recorded only in the book of Mark and nowhere else. Here is the parable.

And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to

be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” Mark 4:21-23 (NASB)

The lamp that Jesus referred to was a small bowl containing olive oil. The lamp was usually placed on a shelf or on a table in order to provide light to a room. Clearly, no one lights a lamp, brings it into a room, and then places it under a basket or under a bed unless he or she are searching for something under the bed. (When I taught this passage some months ago, a dear man said, “Yes, you wouldn’t want to put it under a bed because it would burn up the bed.” That was just a humorous comment, and it was not Jesus’ point.)

Jesus’ point is found in the next two verses.

And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever

has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”
Mark 4:24-25 (NASB)

Jesus uses a play-on-words in the statement, “Take care what you listen to.” The Greek word that is translated as “take care” is *Blepo*. It’s basic meaning is “to see.” What Jesus was really saying is, “See what you hear.” He was encouraging them and us to listen to His teachings - the Word of God or the Word of the Kingdom. They were “to listen to the light.”

The lamp was symbolic of Jesus’ teachings or the Word of God. Psalm 119 reveals that the Word is like a lamp. It lights our path.

Your word is
a lamp to my
feet and a
light to my
path. Psalms
119:105
(NASB)

Now we are ready to understand this parable. The first part of the parable tells us that the Word of God cannot be hidden or suppressed. The religious leaders and other opponents of Jesus Christ could attempt to suppress His teachings, the Word of God, but they would eventually fail. There are some today who want to suppress Jesus and His teachings. Increasingly we are hearing voices which claim that Christianity needs to be suppressed. But this parable indicates that they will be unsuccessful.

Those who hear the Word of God need to focus on it. Jesus’ listeners should not have listened to the Pharisees.

They should not have listened to false teachers and neither should we. We are not to listen to messages from the pit of darkness but from the light. Those who are careful about what they hear will gain more spiritual insight, and those who enjoy the message of the darkness will lose what little spiritual insight they do have. The standard that we use is that those who seek spiritual truth will gain more spiritual insight, and those who settle for spiritual darkness will be spiritually dark. We are to listen to the light - the message of the kingdom. That is the meaning of this parable.

Parable of the Seed.

The parable of the seed is not the same as the “Sower and the Seed.” This parable has a different message. Mark 4:26 records the parable.

And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at

night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know.” Mark 4:26-27 (NASB)

The parable reveals that the kingdom of heaven has started growing and will continue to grow by itself.

The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle,



because the harvest has come.” Mark 4:28-29 (NASB)

The end of the kingdom will come when the harvest is complete. The harvest includes seed that started growing beside the road, among the rocks, among the thorns, and on good soil. Unfortunately, only the seed that landed on good soil will grow to maturity and ultimately be harvested. The parable is simple. It tells us that the kingdom will grow by itself and eventually come to harvest. It cannot be stopped. The message of this parable is that the kingdom will grow.

Parable of the Mustard Seed. The parable of the mustard seed is about a very small seed that grows into a very large tree. Here is Jesus’ parable,

And He said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.” Mark 4:30-32 (NASB)

For anyone who objects to the statement that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, the following should help to clarify the situation.

Dr. L. H. Shinnars, director of the herbarium at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and lecturer at the Smithsonian Institution, stated in a conversation that, “the mustard seed would indeed have been the smallest of those to have been noticed by the people at the time of Christ. The principal field crops (barley, wheat, lentils, and beans) have much larger seeds, as do other plants which might have been present as weeds and so forth. There are various weeds and wild flowers belonging to the mustard, amaranth, pigweed, or chickweed families with seeds that are as small as or smaller than mustard; but they would not have been known or noticed by the inhabitants. They are wild and they certainly would not have been planted as a

crop . . . The only modern crop plant in existence with smaller seeds than mustard is tobacco, and this plant of American origin was not grown in the old world until the sixteenth century or later.”²

So Jesus referred to a plant that the audience would have understood starts out very small, almost dust-like, and becomes very large. In Matthew 13:31-32, the same parable is recorded, but there we are told that the mustard seed becomes a tree. Multiple sources indicate that the Palestine mustard plant can grow to twelve or fifteen feet in height. It is tall enough for the birds to nest in and hide under from the sun.

Some believe that the birds of the air are symbolic of demons and demonic activity. They believe the birds are the same as those in the parable of the “Sower and Seed” in Matt. 13:4. There we are told that the birds ate the seed that fell beside the road. Matthew 13:19 indicates that the birds are symbolic of the evil one who comes and takes away the Word of God so that people will not believe. Thus they conclude that all birds represent demonic activity. But the rest of scripture does not always refer to birds in a negative sense. In Matthew 6:26; 8:20; Luke 12:24; and James 3:7, birds are viewed in a positive sense.

Jesus’ parable very closely resembles the illustration given in Ezekiel 17:22-24 where God promised the Jews that He would establish Israel as a kingdom some day. In that passage God used the illustration of a sprig from a cedar tree that He would cultivate and grow into a tree. Eventually, the birds of every kind would nest under it. The birds in the Ezekiel passage represent the different nations of the world. Jesus and the ancient Israelites would have been familiar with the Ezekiel passage. This reveals that the point of Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed is that the kingdom of God will become enormous and spread over all the other kingdoms eventually becoming the greatest kingdom.

Parable of the Leaven. Jesus’ next parable is about a small lump of leaven that is put into some flour and eventually permeates all of the dough. In some ways it is similar to the parable of the mustard seed.

2. MacArthur, John. Matthew. vol. 2, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Press. 1987. p. 369.

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

Some have concluded that the leaven has a negative meaning. It is important to notice that although leaven generally has a negative meaning in scripture, there are times when the meaning is positive. Leviticus 23:17 is a positive example. Notice that the kingdom of God is described as being like leaven. If the leaven has a negative meaning, then the kingdom of God has a negative meaning. Therefore, it is best to understand the leaven as simply an illustration of the fact that the kingdom of God will eventually be everywhere. It will be in every part of the world and in every city. The parable of the mustard seed taught us that the kingdom of God will be the greatest kingdom, and the parable of the leaven reveals that the kingdom will be everywhere at the end of the age.

Holy Spirit’s Side Note. At this point the Holy Spirit reminds us once again that Jesus spoke to the crowd only in parables and in no other way. He spoke in parables because they had rejected Him.

All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This

was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.” Matthew 13:34-35 (NASB)

For a fuller explanation as to why Jesus spoke only in parables, please see the previous study about the “Sower and the Seed.”

Parable of the Hidden Treasure. The parable of the “Hidden Treasure” is very short - one verse.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Matthew 13:44 (NASB)

Jesus does not describe the treasure or the field. That is not important to the parable. In Jesus’ day only wealthy people

had financial banks for their riches. They would construct a building and then hire guards to protect their valuables. But there were no banks for the common person. As a result most people would bury their valuables in the ground inside their homes or out in a field. In this parable someone had hidden his treasure in his field. Unexpectedly, some man accidentally found it, probably while he was digging. Rather than tell the owner of the field, he quickly sold everything that he had and purchased the field from the unsuspecting



Summary of the Kingdom Parables

Parable of the ...

Implications of the Parable

Wheat & Tares	Many only appear to belong to the Kingdom.
Lamp	Listen to the message of the kingdom
Seed	Kingdom will grow
Mustard Seed	Kingdom will become the greatest kingdom
Leaven	Kingdom will be everywhere
Hidden Treasure	Give all that you have to gain the kingdom
Costly Pearl	Sacrifice for the kingdom
Dragnet	The kingdom is only for the righteous

and forgetful owner. Once he had bought the field, the treasure was his.

Parable of the Costly Pearl. The next parable about the costly pearl has the same basic meaning.

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.
Matthew 13:45-46 (NASB)

This time Jesus uses two Greek words to communicate the idea that this individual was very wealthy. The first Greek word is “all,” and the second word is “as many as” or “great.” The second word is not translated in our English Bibles. But both words together indicate that all of his many things were sold. This person was extremely rich, and he sacrificed everything he had in order to purchase the pearl. In the parable of the “Hidden Treasure,” the person sold all that he had. But the wealthy man in this parable buys the pearl after sacrificing his many riches. His sacrifice was very great. Both men sacrificed. The average man and the rich man sacrificed all to obtain the kingdom of God. Jesus used both parables to tell us how valuable the kingdom of heaven truly is.

Both parables teach us that we must be willing to sacrifice

our treasures if we want to belong in the kingdom. What are your treasures? We all have them: entertainment, books, a boat, sex, money, stocks and bonds, status, church, ministry, a leadership position, friends, the kids, or the family. Are you willing to sacrifice them for God? If you are unwilling to sacrifice everything, then you are not like the man in the parable of the “Hidden Treasure” or the “Costly Pearl.” They sold everything. Jesus said this,

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Matthew 10:37 (NASB)

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”
Mark 8:34 (NASB)

This is the message of these parables. Anyone who desires to be in the kingdom of God must be willing to sacrifice everything for Him. Only then can one enter the kingdom of God.

Parable of the Dragnet. The final parable is about a dragnet.

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. Matthew 13:47-48 (NASB)

In ancient times the dragnet, or *sagene* in the Greek, was a very large, weighted net that was dragged along the bottom of a lake and then pulled together in a semicircle. Eventually the net would be pulled together and brought onto the beach. Then the undesirable fish would be removed and the good ones kept. The first part of this parable states the obvious. Then He added this,

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. Matthew 13:49-50 (NASB)

In the same way, just as fishermen remove the bad fish, the angels will remove the wicked souls and keep the righteous ones. The wicked will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous will have eternal life with God. Since Jesus said this place exists, and since He described it the way He did, then it must be real and miserable. Jesus' description of eternal punishment does not sound like a place I want to visit, let alone live in the rest of my life.

Comments to the Disciples. After Jesus was finished with these revealing parables, Jesus wanted to know if the disciples understood them.

“Have you understood all these things?” They *said to Him, “Yes.” Matthew 13:51 (NASB)

They answered, “Yes.” Then Jesus encouraged the disciples to share the new truths that they had discovered.

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.” When Jesus had finished these

parables, He departed from there. Matthew 13:52-53 (NASB)

They had old treasures and now new ones. They were to bring them out for the guests and share them. Then Jesus left the crowds and departed.

Conclusion. The parables of the kingdom paint a great picture. They reveal that the kingdom of God is growing and expanding in the hearts of men and women. Some will listen and respond, willingly sacrificing themselves to gain spiritual life. A man or woman cannot come to God, believe in Jesus Christ, and then continue living as always. One who comes to Jesus will be willing to give up everything that he or she has. This is the test of true faith. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, his or her sins are forgiven; but the sign or the characteristic of true faith is a willingness to sacrifice oneself for God. Does this sound like you? Are you a disciple of the kingdom of God?

The kingdom is moving from nation to nation and around the world. Now it is only a spiritual kingdom. But some day it will exist everywhere when Jesus establishes His earthly kingdom for 1,000 years. Then He will be Lord of lords and King of kings and every person will submit. People will have the opportunity to respond to God and believe in Jesus Christ during that time. At the end of the kingdom, the wicked of all the ages will be sent to the Lake of Fire for eternity. However, the righteous will enter God's eternal heaven and live with Him forever.