

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part VI

by Thomas Ice

And He answered and said to them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." —Matthew 13:11

Jesus revealed to His disciples the mysteries about the kingdom of God in Matthew 13 (Mark 4:1–34; Luke 8:4–18). The parables of Matthew 13 are not identical with the yet to be revealed church age, even though there is some major overlap. Matthew 13 surveys this present age in its relation to the kingdom since the parables cover the period of time between Christ's two advents—His first and second comings. This includes the present church age, the rapture, the tribulation, the second coming, and the sheep/goats judgment. While the church age is not specifically revealed in Matthew 13, this passage does note that there will be a great ingathering of Believers during this current inter-advent age. God would later reveal in the epistles the specific purpose that His Eternal Plan had for Believers of this age. What do the parables in Matthew 13 teach?

An important emphasis Jesus focuses on in Matthew 13 deals with "understanding" (Matt. 13:11, 13, 19, 23, 36, 51) the lessons of the parables. This emphasis should be kept in mind when reading the narrative of the passage since it is a key to the proper interpretation of the passage. This is what Jesus emphasizes in the text itself. Why is this Jesus' focus? It is Jesus' focus because most of the nation has rejected Him and therefore not understood. Since His disciples have not rejected Him, then they are made capable of understanding His parabolic descriptions. I might add that Believers today are capable of understanding these passages as well. Mark Bailey notes concerning these parables: "They are enigmatic to those who fail to understand the message because of a rejecting heart, but they are understandable by those privileged by God to know and receive more (vv. 10–11). These mysteries of the kingdom both reveal and conceal truths of the kingdom of heaven, so that it is appropriate that these parables followed immediately after the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus."¹

PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The first parable provides a model for interpreting the rest of His parables. Notice, Jesus speaks the parables in public and then explains them in private as He had forecast (Matt. 13:11–17). The parable is an agricultural illustration that all would be familiar with in Jesus' day. This one features a sower, while a later parable will feature a reaper (Matt. 13:36:43). The sower scatters seed in his field. When broadcast, there are four kinds of soils upon which the seed falls. The four soils represent different responses to the seed, which represents different responses to the message of Jesus.

The first response describes that which "was sown *beside the road*" (verse 19). This is one who hears the gospel and does not understand it. The reason given is because the evil one snatches away what has been sown (verse 19). Second is the seed which "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" (verses 20–21). Third is "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 riches choke the word,

and it becomes unfruitful" (verse 22). Fourth is "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" (verse 23).

I recall when on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ in the mid-70s where we were taught the parable of the sower at a retreat in preparation for the coming year's campus ministry. The instructor taught all but the first soil referred to converts to Christ, but the second and third soil needed to go on to discipleship in order to overcome their obstructions. The teacher's emphasis was to get us to see the need for an aggressive approach to discipleship for those who made professions of faith in Christ. Such a lesson is indeed important, however, I do not think this passage supports the view that soils two and three reference Believers.

Christ's parable of the soils in its original context relates directly to the response of Israel to His kingdom message. If it is to be applied to gospel response, I believe the passage supports the notion that soils two and three are false professors who have not truly come to faith in Christ. Thus, the first three soils would depict the responses of some who may be interested to some degree in the claims of Christ, but in the end do not really *understand* and believe.

As I mentioned earlier, the key to understanding these parables is the word "understand." Only in the fourth soil does our Lord say, "the good soil, this is the man who hears and understands it" (verse 23). Only in the fourth soil does one find fruit: "who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (verse 23). It is only the fourth soil that represents a true response to Christ's message of the kingdom and therefore would represent a true believer in Christ. Stan Toussaint provides four reasons for this interpretation:

This interpretation fits the context of the parabolic instruction. The word of the kingdom had been proclaimed to Israel by John, by Jesus, and by the disciples. This parable notes the blindness and dullness of Israel's response to this proclamation. However, some did understand and were growing in understanding (Matthew 11:25).

Second, this view of the fruit fits the Lord's explanation as to why He spoke in parables (Matthew 13:10-17). From those who failed to lay hold of the word of the kingdom or who abused it the word was taken away (Matthew 13:12-15). On the other hand, it was given to the disciples to know because their hearts were conditioned to receive the word of the kingdom (Matthew 13:11-12). . . .

In addition, this interpretation of the fruit fits the explanation of the parable which the King gives to His disciples (Matthew 13:18-23). The introduction to the interpretation of the parable emphasizes understanding. The eyes and ears of the disciples were called blessed because they were seeing and hearing that which the prophets and holy men of old desired to see and hear. . . .

Finally, this interpretation is very logical. Seed produces more seed. The word of the kingdom received into the heart would yield more revelation and understanding of it. This new revelation is that which the King is about to give in the remainder of Matthew 13.²

Arno Gaebelein applies the first three soils to gospel responses corresponding to the world, the flesh, and the Devil. "The Devil snatches up and devours, the Flesh attempts

and fails, the World surrounds and chokes.”³ John MacArthur says, “The point of the parable has to do with the soil. . . . the parable highlights four different kinds of hearts in varying degrees of receptivity.”⁴ He also see only the fourth soil representing a true believer. “The final soil is well cultivated and produces the desired crop. . . . Jesus says the good soil pictures a person “who hears the word and understands it.”⁵

LESSONS TAUGHT

The study of the mysteries concerning the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus’ first parable in Matthew 13 should be seen as an introductory parable that includes an interpretation to demonstrate how to interpret the other parables. I also believe every parable taught by Jesus is for the specific purpose of teaching something about Israel’s rejection of their Messiah and how it will impact the nation. This is the point of Christ’s explanation in Matthew 13:11–17 when ask by His disciples, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (verse 10). Bailey concludes: “One of the mysteries of the kingdom is that in the preaching of ‘the word of the kingdom’ God is inviting people to become related to Him by salvation through His Son. This message to which the Jews failed to respond was nonetheless the very vehicle by which God is raising up a people for Himself. Within Israel there were differing responses to Jesus’ message. His message was like seed being sown in people who for various reasons were not as responsive as the disciples might have hoped.”⁶

Toussaint notes that the main point of the parable of the sower is the “reception of the word of the kingdom in one’s heart produces more understanding and revelation of the kingdom. In this way the parable acts as an introduction to the remainder of the parables.”⁷ Thus, a summary of the lessons mean the inter-advent age will be characterized by the sowing of the Word of God (the gospel). The inter-advent age, (the period between the two comings of Christ) will be marked by the seed falling on different preparations of the soil (hearts). During the sowing of the seed, there will be differing oppositions from the world, the flesh, and the Devil. The inter-advent age will be marked by four different responses to the seed that is sown: 1) the wayside response form of unbelief; 2) the rocky ground form of unbelief; 3) the thorny ground form of unbelief; 4) the good ground response of belief, rooted in the Word of God that conquers spiritual warfare and reproduces, some a hundred fold, some sixty, and some thirty.

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Sower and the Soils” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 155, April-June 1998, p. 175.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 179.

³ Arno C. Gaebelain, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 273.

⁴ John MacArthur, *Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), p. 27.

⁵ MacArthur, *Parables*, p. 35.

⁶ Bailey, “The Parable of the Sower and the Soils,” p. 187.

⁷ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 179.