

SESSION 38 – THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

³ And [Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. (Matt. 13:1-9; 18-23)

² And [Jesus] was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. (Mark 4:1-9; 13-20)

I. THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A. Matthew 13 and Mark 4 both record the major parables Jesus gave to both His disciples and to the crowds that followed Him. It is the same event from two perspectives or two voices. Each chapter gives insight to the other as both provide stereo sound from both the left and right side. And with that we have Jesus saying, “He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matt. 13:9)

B. What is a *parable*? The Greek used for this word is *parabole* and is an obvious transliteration of a word that means, a relatively short narrative with symbolic meaning—‘parable, figure, allegory, figure of speech.’¹; juxtaposition; comparison; proverb²; a placing beside, juxtaposition; a comparing, comparison.³

Parables are meant to take the *big picture* and apply it to known or familiar things. They are not 1:1 metaphors or symbols of the real; rather they are generalized truths applied using the language of comparison, conveying the picture of *this is like that*. But the key word here is “like.” It’s *not that*, it’s *like that*. It has *some of the same characteristics* of the things being compared, *but it is not completely that thing*. And it is critical to understand the literary purpose of a parable in order to have good exegesis of what Jesus says; not what we either read back into it, or what we necessarily want it to say.

C. Dr. Geroge Eldon Ladd explains the Kingdom parables specifically, The fourth chapter of Mark and the thirteenth chapter of Matthew contain a group of parables which set forth the “mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4: 11). A parable is a story drawn from the everyday experience of the people which is designed to illustrate the central truth of our Lord’s message. This central truth is called “the mystery” of the Kingdom.⁴

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 390.

² The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Septuagint (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

³ G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 338.

⁴ Ladd, George Eldon. Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (Kindle Locations 664-667). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

D. Jesus explains the reason for speaking to them in parables,

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matt. 13:10-16)

The disciples humorously place the crowds in a category different than themselves saying, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Yet after He spoke His Kingdom parables, they came to Him and said,

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” (Matt. 13:36)

Thankfully Jesus knew these men and what was in their heart. They actually were looking for insight into what He was talking about. When they asked Jesus framed what He was talking about as *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven*. But the Greek word here is not *secret*. It is *mysterion* (pronounced moose-stare-ee-on). It is where we derive our English word *mystery*.

Ladd gives insight into the meaning of this mystery:

A mystery in the Biblical sense is not something mysterious, nor deep, dark, profound and difficult. In modern English, the word may bear such connotations, but we cannot interpret the Bible by modern English. In Scripture, “mystery” is often a technical concept whose meaning is set forth in Romans 16: 25-26. Paul writes, “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations.” Here is the Biblical idea of mystery: something which has been kept secret through times eternal but is now disclosed. It is a divine purpose which God has designed from eternity but has kept hidden from men. At last, however, in the course of His redemptive plan, God reveals this purpose, and by the Scriptures of the prophets makes it known to all men. A mystery is a divine purpose, hidden in the counsels of God for long ages but finally disclosed in a new revelation of God’s redemptive work. The parables set forth the mystery of the Kingdom—a new truth about the Kingdom of God which was not revealed in the Old Testament but which is at last disclosed in the earthly ministry of our Lord.⁵

⁵ Ladd, George Eldon. Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (Kindle Locations 667-676). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

Louw-Nida defines this word and provides extra commentary on how it should be used. It's not the full English definition (that came much later).

...the content of that which has not been known before but which has been revealed to an in-group or restricted constituency—'secret, mystery.' ὑμῖν δέδοται γινῶναι τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν 'the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you' Mt 13:11. There is a serious problem involved in translating μυστήριον by a word which is equivalent to the English expression 'mystery,' for this term in English refers to a secret which people have tried to uncover but which they have failed to understand. In many instances μυστήριον is translated by a phrase meaning 'that which was not known before,' with the implication of its being revealed at least to some persons.⁶

It's something that was not known before, but was revealed to a selected group. That is, the *hidden things of God* are to be searched out and found. But they are hidden. And Jesus explained why.

E. Paul uses this word in the following places:

Romans 11:25: the *mystery* of the hardening of the hearts of Jews so Gentiles could be grafted in.

Romans 16:25: the revelation of the *mystery* of the Gospel and preaching of Messiah Yeshua kept secret.

1 Cor. 2:7-8: God's wisdom in a *mystery*, the hidden wisdom...which none of the rulers of this age understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

1 Cor. 15:51: the *mystery* of immortality at the Second Coming

Eph. 5:32: the *mystery* Christ and the Church seen in marriage of husbands and wives

1 Tim. 3:16: the Great Mystery of Godliness! God incarnate.

F. Jesus said there is a *mystery of the Kingdom of God* that only those to whom He reveals it can see it and understand it. He begins with the parable of the sower.⁷ Matthew and Mark both define exactly what the sower is sowing: ***the word of the kingdom***. The mystery of the kingdom then begins with the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. This cannot be overstated. The hidden reality of the Kingdom of God is made known by God through the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. It is by *sowing the word of the kingdom as a seed*. God's word is *eternal, incorruptible seed* and just like natural seed produces the life that is in it.

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 344.

⁷ This is not a statement about giving or *sowing money*. There is nothing in this parable about *sowing a seed* and you'll reap a *return* of 30, 60, or 100%. It has nothing to do with that.

²¹Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and received with meekness the implanted⁸ word, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:21)

²³since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...²⁵but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)

G. There are four types of ground into which the gospel of the kingdom is planted:

- 1) Those who hear and do not understand; the *evil one* (i.e., satan, or other wicked spirits) snatches it away.
- 2) Those who hear and immediately receive it with joy, but have no inward root system; he endures for a *little while* but when trouble comes, he falls away.
- 3) Those hear but the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the seed; it becomes unfruitful
- 4) Those who hear, accept or receive and understand it; he bears fruit of the seed, “each according to its kind (Gen. 1:11)”, so the *word of the kingdom of God* bears fruit of the *kingdom of God*, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

The mystery is this: the kingdom of God appears *as a seed*, small and unnoticed. It is planted as a *spiritual* truth and reality by *preaching the Good News of the Kingdom*. To those who hear, receive, and understand it, it produces the life of the Kingdom that is *in that seed*. What is the life of the Kingdom? It is *eternal life*, or the life of the Age to Come; it is the power of God and the authority to use that power; it is the rule and reign of God from the Messianic Age that has appeared in this present evil age, small and unnoticed, but when received grows and produces fruit.

H. Dr. Ladd lays out his classic already-but-not-yet approach concerning these parables of the mystery of the Kingdom of God

Each of the parables in Matthew 13 illustrates this mystery of the Kingdom, that the Kingdom of God which is yet to come in power and great glory is actually present among men in advance in an unexpected form to bring to men in the present evil Age the blessings of The Age to Come... This is the mystery of the Kingdom [in the parable of the soils]: that the Kingdom of God has come among men and yet men can reject it. The Kingdom will not experience uniform success. Not all will receive it. This was a staggering thing to one who knew only the Old Testament. When God’s Kingdom comes, it will come with power. Who can resist it? Who can withstand God? But precisely this is the mystery of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is here, but it can be rejected. One day God will indeed manifest His mighty power to purge the earth of wickedness, sin and evil; but not now. God’s Kingdom is working among men, but God will not

⁸ W. E. Vine defines this Greek word *emphutos* as, “implanted” or “rooted” or the “rooted word,” i.e., a word whose property it is to root itself like a seed in the heart.” W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White Jr., Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996), 321.

compel them to bow before it. They must receive it; the response must come from a willing heart and a submissive will.⁹

- I. Jesus next spoke another parable of a similar sort comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to *a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away* (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43). The point is this: The Kingdom of God did appear and is present in this present evil age; but the enemy is still here sowing discord and wickedness in the world. The sons of the wicked one can refuse the Kingdom and grow up into fulness to advance the Satanic Agenda in his domain of darkness. The use of the word *enemy* is telling as it is the word used for *the devil*.

The Sower of the Good Seed is the Son of Man. And immediately we should think of Daniel 7, because that is what this parable is about. And we see all of the elements of Daniel 7 here. The good seed is *the sons of the kingdom* and we find them in Daniel's vision of the Ascension of the Son of Man and His sharing of His Kingdom with the holy ones, the saints of the Most High. Reading this parable in light of Daniel provides the insight and clarity Jesus is providing concerning the mystery. There will come a time when

²⁶ *...the court will sit for judgment, and [the Son of the Devil's] dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever.* ²⁷ *Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him. (Dan. 7:26-27; 12:2-3)*

- J. Ladd notes,

What is the point of this parable? In the book of Daniel when God's Kingdom comes, it will destroy sinners and sweep all wickedness and iniquity from the face of the earth. In this parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God has come already and is already at work in the world; but it is not destroying sin, it is not purging the earth of evil. The Kingdom of God is indeed here but in a different way from that which had ever been anticipated. The sons of the Kingdom—those who have received the Gospel of the Kingdom—and the sons of the evil one are to live together in the world until the end of the age. Only then will there occur the final separation. To one who knew only the Old Testament, this was an amazing announcement. When God's Kingdom comes, the wicked will be no more. But Jesus taught, "The Kingdom has come; it is here working among you. Yet wicked men still continue to live in your midst. The Kingdom has come, but the evil Age goes on. The Kingdom has come, but the wicked and the righteous must live together in a mixed society until the coming of the Son of Man."¹⁰

⁹ Ladd, George Eldon. Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (Kindle Locations 721-745). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Ladd, George Eldon. Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (Kindle Locations 758-766). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

- K. The next two parables further drive home the truth of the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus compares it to a grain of mustard seed and leaven in Matthew 13:31-33. Both are tiny and seemingly insignificant. However, it is *how* the power of the age to come penetrated into this present evil age and confounded the powers of darkness and their human subjects. Both the mustard seed and the leaven (yeast) are sowed in the ground and in flour respectively. They are hidden and unnoticed. *But both grow and expand until suddenly...*

³² [The mustard seed] is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” ...³³ [And] “till it was all leavened.” (Matt. 13:32)

The Gospel of the Kingdom and its power in the Person of Jesus made appearance as a *seed and leaven* but when fully realized He and it will be seen by all. Ladd again notes,

The truth [of the leaven] is the same as that of the mustard seed. In its present manifestation, the Kingdom of God is like a handful of leaven in a big bowl of dough. The dough swallows up the leaven so that one is hardly aware of its presence. It is almost unobservable; it can scarcely be seen. Instead of the glory of God shaking the earth, the Kingdom has come in One who is meek and lowly, who is destined to be put to death, who has only a handful of disciples. Little wonder that Roman historians hardly mention the [ministry] of Jesus. From the world’s point of view, His person and mission could be ignored. But one should not be deceived thereby; some day the whole earth will be filled with God’s Kingdom even as the leavened dough fills the entire bowl. The means by which this end is accomplished is no element of the parable.¹¹

- L. The next two parables reflect the value of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus compared the Kingdom to a hidden treasure and to a pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46). Notice, it is the *kingdom* that is the hidden treasure and pearl of great price. Once discovered hidden in the field and consequently its value, “he then goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field!” The point is this: the *Kingdom of Heaven* is a *hidden treasure* that must be discovered. And in this case, it appears by accident. He stumbled upon it. This is in contrast to the merchant who intentionally went looking for the pearl. In either case, *once found* its value becomes obvious. Once the rule of reign of God in His Messiah is discovered, it will produce joy and a desire to do whatever it takes to experience it in fullness. The pearl of great price makes the exact same point.
- M. Jesus next compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a net thrown into the sea that gathered fish of every kind. This is the action of the fishermen. The Kingdom, that is the Gospel of the Kingdom and its present power to set men free is the net. The sea is all of humanity and the fish are humans. The net brings in humans from every nation, tribe, and tongue. The fish are separated and the good ones kept and the bad ones thrown out. Jesus explains this parable as *the end of the age*. The great demonstration of the Kingdom of

¹¹ Ladd, George Eldon. Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (Kindle Locations 806-811). Eerdmans Publishing Co - A. Kindle Edition.

God, in its eschatological fulness is the net and all will be caught up in it. As seen in the parable of the wheat and tares, the divine sons of God (i.e., angels) will come out and separate the evil from the righteous. We see this in Revelation 6-19 where the judgments at the end of the age do exactly what this parable says will happen. It is judgment upon the domain of darkness that is the separation the *evil from the righteous*. Should we think this to be severe, simply notice Satan, the Powers of the Wicked Spirits in the Spirit Realm, Demons, and Wicked Kings have brought persecution upon the Church. And they have spilled the blood of the saints.

⁶*And I saw the [harlot Babylon] drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.* (Rev. 17:6 NASB; et. al.)

Our sympathy level for those who have sought to eliminate all Believers in Jesus will be replaced for glorious affirmation of the Righteous Judgment of God our Father being delivered by our Lord Jesus Christ against His enemies. They have and will have opportunity to repent, but just like Pharoah in the Exodus, they will refuse.

²⁰ *The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk;* ²¹ *and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.* (Rev. 9:20-21 NASB)

The point is this: Jesus will give every opportunity to these humans in the domain of darkness to turn from their evil ways, and *some will*. But not all. This is the impact of the Great Net Kingdom of God. It will be thrown into the sea of all humanity and it will bring all humans under its power at the end of the age.

We have seen this vision before in Daniel 7 concerning the Son of Man. These are the fish that are good:

¹⁴*And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.* (Dan. 7:14)

²¹ *As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them,* ²² *until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom...* ²⁶ *But the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end.* ²⁷ *And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, an all dominions shall serve and obey him.* ²⁸ *Here is the end of the matter...* (Dan. 7:21-28)

This is the meaning of the parable of the Great Net of the Kingdom of Heaven.

- N. The Kingdom Parables are closed up with a question by Jesus to His disciples: *Have you understood all these things?* Naturally, they said, “Yes.” This means the seed of the word of the Kingdom, sowed by the Son of Man, has fallen into the ground of the disciple’s hearts. And the follow-up from Jesus is this:

“Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matt. 13:51)

The question posed by *all these things* takes into account the mystery of the kingdom, its present and future realities, and the great eschatological impact at the end of the age. This is the same question to believers of Jesus today. Do we understand the word of the kingdom and have we received it with understanding concerning the *already-but-not-yet* truths and its great climax at the end of this age? Have we understood its power and its value? The disciples of Jesus obviously were pinned by Jesus and gave Him the right answer. The truth is, Jesus had just sown the kingdom seed in them. And the same effect would take place whether they had grasped everything He had said or not. Later He would call them *dull and without understanding* (Matt. 15:16). So their actual or realized understanding isn’t the point. The point is they received that seed and we know it most certainly grew mighty in them as they began to declare the Gospel of the Kingdom with power and heal the sick, raise the dead, casting out demons, and cleansing the lepers.

- O. Jesus compares them then to *scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven*. Not all *scribes* then are lumped together with unbelieving and hostile Pharisees. The ones here actually are trained for what Jesus has talked about. D.A. Carson observes these as *apocalyptic scribes*:

“apocalyptic” scribes—scribes in the apocalyptic tradition—were devoted to understanding and interpreting hard sayings, dark sayings, apocalyptic sayings. Indeed, parables were part of their focus (cf. Sir 39:1–3). Since Jesus’ disciples have now understood his parables, they can legitimately be called “scribes” themselves, as can all of his disciples with similar understanding.¹²

Concerning the phrase *trained for the kingdom of heaven* not *trained about the kingdom of heaven* he comments:

it is not at all clear that the dative expression means “about the kingdom of heaven”; in the one NT passage with similar construction (27:57), Joseph of Arimathea had become a disciple of Jesus, not about Jesus. By analogy, the scribes in this verse have become disciples of the kingdom of heaven. If the preceding exegetical observations are correct, the points of comparison in the parable are two. The emphasis in the first part of the verse rests, not on the supposition that the scribe has been instructed about the kingdom and therefore understands, but that he has become a disciple of the kingdom and therefore his allegiance

¹² Carson, D. A., et al. Matthew. Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan, 2010.

has been transformed. It is with such a person as with “the owner of a house”—a disciplined scribe brings out of his storeroom new things and old.¹³

- P. What are the new things and old? It is a direct statement of the treasure, that is from the *heart* of these *apocalyptic scribes trained in, about, and for the Kingdom of Heaven*:

The storeroom “regularly stands for a man’s “heart,” its wealth and cherished values...that we must understand the disciplined scribe to be bringing things out of his heart—out of his understanding, personality, and very being.” The things he brings out are new things and old “a subtle touch that reminds the alert reader that in Matthew the gospel of the kingdom, though new, takes precedence over the old revelation and is its fulfillment (cf. 5:17–20). The new is not added to the old; there is but one revelation, and its focus is the “new” that has fulfilled and thereby renewed the old, which has thereby become new (Bonnard). Thus the OT promises of Messiah and kingdom, as well as OT law and piety, have found their fulfillment in Jesus’ person, teaching, and kingdom, and the scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom now brings out of himself deep understanding of these things and their transformed perspective affecting all of life.”¹⁴

- Q. There are other Kingdom Parables to be studied by the Scribes of the Kingdom of God, that is to say, the Students of the Scriptures:

1. The Unforgiving and Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:21-35) “*Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants...*”
2. The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) “*For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*”
3. The Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32) “*What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’...*”
4. The Wedding Feast (Matt. 22:1-14) “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.*”
5. The Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) “*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.*”

The question to ask after studying each of these: “Have you understood?”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.