



Matthew 13—Commentary Notes*

A. Introduction

In the last two lessons, we have studied the four types of responses people had towards the Lord and His message (Matt 11–12). Beginning in Matthew 13, we see that Jesus changed His style of teaching, as Jewish opposition reached its peak when the religious leaders denied Jesus’s power and claimed that it came from Satan (Matt 9:34; 12:22-37). Before the people determined to reject Him (Matt 12:24), Jesus never spoke on the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, nor was it ever revealed in the Old Testament. Now, as Jesus began to speak on this subject, a new era is revealed. It covers the period between Israel’s rejection of the Messiah to the time when she will finally believe in Him.¹ In other words, it is the time between Jesus’s ascension and His return. Prior to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus, the church on earth becomes a partial manifestation of the heavenly kingdom.² When the religious leaders at that time strongly opposed Jesus, and the people were nonresponsive and indifferent to His messages, Jesus began to teach in parables. He hid the mystery of the kingdom of heaven from the religious leaders and nonbelieving crowds but made it plain to His disciples. The Lord Jesus not only changed His message and style of teaching, He also changed where He taught. He moved away from the synagogues to the lakeside, the wilderness, into people’s homes, and even taught while traveling on the road.

B. Outline

- I. 13:1-52 Jesus told eight parables but only explained their mysteries concerning the kingdom of heaven to His disciples.
- II. 13:53-58 Jesus was rejected by the people of His hometown.

C. Content

- I. **13:1-52 Jesus told eight parables but only explained their mysteries concerning the kingdom of heaven to His disciples.**

In this passage, Jesus spoke about the mystery of the kingdom of heaven in eight parables. He used common and visible things of everyday life rather than philosophical and unusual terms. Furthermore, He only explained the meanings of two of the eight parables, the parables of the sower and the weeds. Concerning the rest for which Jesus did not give explanations, Bible scholars have held varying views. Therefore, we will explain these parables based upon interpretations that have been more widely and generally accepted throughout the ages.

- 1. The Parable of the Sower (13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15).

13:1-9 – This is the first time that the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus’s teaching in parables. The word, *parable*, is derived from two Greek words, which together means “alongside” or “side by side.” A parable is like an illustration that compares the known and the unknown alongside each other. It expresses hidden truths with something that is familiar to the audience. It is different from a fable in

* Translator Note: These Commentary Notes were originally compiled in Chinese and translated into English for use by Chinese Christian Fellowship International’s (CCF International’s) English classes. All sources listed in the table (only listed in English when applicable) at the end of these notes were used and consulted in the original Chinese compilation. Please refer to the table for the references of each numbered annotation. For more information on the sources consulted, please contact CCF International. All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

which has a meaning for every object. A parable only focuses on the central theme. Unless the person telling the parable provides an explanation, its meaning is hidden and cannot be understood from the surface. Therefore, a parable must be interpreted from its theme, and not by forcing an explanation by focusing on the details.³ Before we begin to study the parable of the sower, let us first discuss the reason why Jesus taught in parables.

When Jesus taught the people using parables, the disciples were surprised at such a change in His style of teaching. They asked Jesus why He taught in parables (13:10), and the Lord gave them two reasons:

- 1) The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is only given to the disciples, and not to the crowd (13:11-13). Jesus taught in parables so that the humble seeker may seek and know their meanings. Therefore, to those (the disciples) who were receptive to the truth, they were able to understand. However, to the apathetic (the crowd) or those who refused the truth (the religious leaders), it would be difficult for them to comprehend. Thus, the parables became a blessing of grace to some, but a judgment to others. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus still gave people a chance. Since the meaning of a parable is hidden, it will stir up willing hearts to seek its true meaning. To anyone who sincerely seeks God, God's truth will shine in their hearts and bring them to understanding. On the contrary, to those who neglect or oppose the truth of the gospel, God's truth will remain hidden to them. Therefore, no one can blame God if they perish, but each bears his own responsibility for rejecting or neglecting God's truth.
- 2) It was to fulfill the Word of Isaiah 6:9-10 (13:14-17). God, through the Prophet Isaiah, had foretold that His people would not understand His message. The prophecy was then fulfilled in the time of Christ. Even though many had seen Jesus's miracles, they did not understand. Even though many had heard the Word of God, they did not comprehend. In contrast, the disciples were blessed that the Lord granted them the special privilege to see, hear, and understand their meanings and the mysteries that people in the Old Testament longed to know (1 Pet 1:10-11). The disciples and the religious leaders all heard the same message, but their responses drastically differed. The disciples heard and believed, while the religious leaders heard but rejected. Therefore, when a man chooses to leave the true light that God gives, only darkness is reserved for him.⁴

The parable of the sower is also called "the parable of the soil." The different soils—along the path, the rocky places, among thorns, and the good soil (with three variances in itself)—yielded four different results. Some were eaten by birds, some withered, some were choked, and still others brought forth a crop that was a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

13:18-23 – The Parable Explained. This parable is recorded in all of the Synoptic Gospels, and it comes with a detailed explanation as well. This reveals its importance in Scripture.⁵ The following is its interpretation:

- 1) The Sower (13:37)
The sower at that time was Jesus, but after His resurrection and ascension, it expands to include every preacher, Bible teacher, and Christian. To teach the Bible or to witness for the Lord is equivalent to doing the work of "sowing."
- 2) The Seed (13:19; Luke 8:11)
This seed is mainly the message of salvation. Whether we help others in love or care for unbelievers, let us never forget to also sow the "seed" of the message of salvation even if the results are out of our control.
- 3) Four Types of Soil (13:19-23)

The soil speaks of the condition of a man's heart in response to God's Word. It is very unfortunate that even after hearing Jesus's message in person, most remained fruitless (unbelieving). Nonetheless, like soil, the heart of a man can be "reconditioned" to receive God's Word and bring forth fruit.

- (1) Along the Path (13:19). Within the wheat fields in Israel at the time were many small paths (Matt 12:1). After being treaded upon by people for a long time, its soil packed down hard and no seed is ever able to germinate and grow in it. Such ground is much like a heart that is tightly shut. The person hears the Word of God, but does not understand. He hardens his heart and chooses not to listen or to understand God's Word. Most who heard Jesus's preaching at that time were such people (soil). No message from God could enter their hearts. A hardened heart can be the result of pride. Such a person is complacent and does not feel that he needs to change. Therefore, he rejects God's message. Perhaps he has sinned morally and refuses to leave his current lifestyle. Such hearts easily allow Satan (the birds) to work (13:4,19) in their hearts and minds through thoughts of unbelief or rejection. They are then effortlessly snatched away even the words that they already heard. The person thus loses the opportunity to be saved and to inherit eternal life.
- (2) The Rocky Places (13:20-21). The hearers of the Word represented by this type of soil are an improvement from the first. God's message left a good impression on them. They welcomed and received it, but their zeal lasted only a short while. They were pleased to hear a good sermon, but refused to be changed by it. They are unwilling to be transformed by God or to obey His Word. The message did not take "root" in their hearts because they never decided to truly believe in the Lord. Their reception of the Word was only superficial. These people seem to be soft (like ground covered by only an inch or two of soil), but their hearts are actually as hard as stone. Since they did not allow God's Word to take root, when hardship and persecution come like the scorching sun, they quickly turn away from the way of truth.⁶ At the end, they are not able to receive eternal life. For this reason, we need to carefully follow-up with those who seem to have received God's salvation "with joy" and to pray that the seed will take root and grow in their hearts.
- (3) Among Thorns (13:22). This group received the seed, but their minds are crowded with many burdens. Their lives are preoccupied with pleasures and worries. Their schedules are packed, and they are anxious about worldly matters everyday and are concerned for fame, fortune, and future. Such persons might sit and worship in church, but their minds are focused elsewhere. They are not in the habit of reading the Scriptures or praying, nor do they invest time, energy, or thoughts on matters concerning Jesus Christ or eternity. Hearts like this are the most misleading. They think that they are regular participants in the church. They even serve, but little do they know that the thorns of the pleasures and worries of life have prevented the seed of truth from growing and bearing fruit. We can only imagine how empty such a life will be without eternal life!
- (4) The Good Soil (13:22; Luke 8:15). This group consists of people who have genuinely received the seed of God's Word. They understand what they have heard and retain it in "a noble and good heart." Not only does the seed take root and grow, it bears much fruit. Such a person possesses a vibrant and ever-maturing spiritual life. Christians who are able to produce a crop that is "a hundred times" what is sown have these unique characteristics. First, they are honest before God. They sincerely seek after God's Word as their spiritual food. Their spiritual life matures because of their willingness to completely obey God's leading. Second, they are kind to others and are always mindful of God's glory while being salt and light of the world. Third, they hold fast to the truth. They keep God's Word in their hearts and are continually purified by the Word of the Lord, filled by the Holy Spirit (Ps 119:11), and victorious in battles (Eph 6:17).⁷ A life

such as this is kept under the Holy Spirit's rule, and it will naturally yield a crop that is a hundredfold or even more.

Jesus used the yielding of thirty-, sixty-, and hundredfold not to compare or rebuke, but to show that the seed of truth is alive and can grow at varying degrees in a heart of a good soil. A life that is deeply rooted in the truth, that commits to God in all facets of life, and that is sensitive to sin will naturally bear fruit that glorifies God and blesses others.

Therefore, the reason why there are different results lies not in the seed, but in the soil that receives the seed. When the gospel of the kingdom of heaven is proclaimed, people differ in their responses to the good news. With this parable, Jesus points out that the Pharisees and the religious leaders rejected His message because they were not of a soil that was "prepared to receive." He further emphasized that the majority of the people will also not respond positively to the gospel.⁸

This parable serves as a great encouragement to spiritual "farmers"—preachers, teachers, and evangelists. When a farmer sows his seed, not all the seeds will germinate and grow, nor will they all produce the same yield. Believers only need to faithfully preach the gospel and to teach the truth, and not to lose heart even when our efforts often do not bring forth fruit.

Strictly speaking, the first three types of soil represent those who are unsaved. However, the focus of this parable is not salvation, but whether a seed, once sown, will produce fruit. The application for the disciples of Jesus then and for us now is not to judge others, but to examine ourselves to see which soil we are. As for others who might belong to the first three types of soil, it is possible for them to become the fourth type over time as they turn to repentance. Therefore, we must continue to share the gospel with them and treat them with love and gentleness.

2. The Parable of the Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43).

From the parable of the sower, we see that only a few among the those who hear the Word of God will eventually receive it. Such a phenomenon reveals a greater force at work other than the hardened hearts of man—a force that is against the work of Christ and His Word. The parable of the weeds reveals such works of the enemy.

The kingdom of heaven mentioned in this parable is not the kingdom that is to be fully realized at the end of time, for at that time, the work of the enemy will cease. Instead, it refers to the condition of the church today, which is the "kingdom of heaven" before the Lord's return, as well as possible crises during its development.⁹ We are to guard ourselves against the deceptive spirit within the religions of the world today, and we must guard from becoming discouraged when we witness such falsehood within the church.

13:24-30 – After the owner sows his seed in the wheat field, the enemy of the sower comes in the night when everyone is sleeping (note that this does not mean that the sower was negligent), and intentionally sows the seed of weeds (injurious tares) in the field. These two plants resemble each other when they are young, but become distinguishable when they are older. However, after a period of growth, the roots of the weeds and the wheat become entangled. Therefore, in order not to harm the grain, the weeds are left alone for the time being. This is why the owner instructed his servants to wait for the separation of the weeds at the time of the harvest. The tares are poisonous and will make people nauseous and sick. Therefore, they must be separated out before the wheat is gathered and grounded. Jesus used this parable because the audience knew the agricultural references very well.

13:36-43 – The Parable Explained. After Jesus left the crowd and entered into the house, He explained this parable and its central meaning to the disciples.

- 1) The Sower (13:37). This sower is different from the sower of the first parable. In the first parable, the sowers included preachers other than the Lord Jesus. In this parable, two sowers are enemies of each other. The first who sows the good seed (wheat) is the Son of Man, who is Jesus Himself. The second who sows the bad seeds (weeds) is the devil who always delights in sowing weeds in the wheat field in order to oppose the Son of Man.
- 2) The field is the world (13:38), which is also the gospel's field of harvest.
- 3) The Good Seed (Wheat). This seed represents the "people of the kingdom of heaven" or the children of God. In other words, they are genuine Christians who have received the message of the kingdom. The Lord Jesus sowed them in this world for them to grow and mature to bear crops (Jas 1:18; John 15:16).
- 4) The Bad Seed (Weeds). They are the "people of the evil one"—hypocrites who belong to the devil. Satan and his work are very deceitful. He works when "everyone is sleeping" (that is, in the dark and unbeknownst to people) so that there is no one to keep watch. He sows weeds that resemble the wheat in early germination, but when they "sprout and form heads," the counterfeit is revealed. Nevertheless, even when some (weeds) are visible, they are still difficult to distinguish and hard to separate from the wheat. The most horrific thing in the meantime is that these injurious tares are already harming the grain in the field. Today we see all kinds of religions appear to be similar to Christianity. They promote "doing good" and "being a good person." It is difficult for one to discern the origin of such instruction. The same threat is also found within the church, which have always had false pastors and false believers within throughout the ages. How did they enter the church, and when did they sneak in? No one knows.

What is Satan's purpose to degrade the world with the "people of the evil one"? It is to "cause sin...and evil" (13:41). Through these false believers, the devil aims to corrupt the faith of the church, to destroy her, to create confusion, to stir up hostility among nonbelievers towards Christianity, and to even cause nonbelievers to stumble.

Perhaps we might ask, "Does the church not belong to the Lord? Why does God not intervene? Why does He allow these people to remain in the church for such a long time, some even growing in zeal and gaining a reputation for it? Why do we not see the efficacy of God's Word in their lives?" Through this parable, Jesus reveals a mystery to us. This is the work of the devil, and it is the reality the church must come to recognize! Not only must we oppose false religions in the world, we must also combat the pretense of the so-called "spiritual people" within the church and their superficial godliness. On the other hand, we should not be surprised by this phenomenon because even one of Jesus's twelve disciples, Judas, belonged to the devil.¹⁰ These weeds (false Christians) are not mutated seeds. They are seeds sown by Satan. They appear to be "Christians," but they are not seeds from God. Jesus clearly warns us that the evil one not only sows false Christians in the church, he also instills false beliefs. Yet God allows these counterfeit seeds to grow alongside the authentic ones until the time of harvest (judgment) comes.

- 5) The Harvest (13:39). This is Jesus's strongest and most severe warning for the final end (judgment) of the weeds. Jesus says that at the end of the world, the weeds that cause people to stumble and do evil will be separated from among the world and within the church by harvesters who are angels (13:39). Do not be surprised that Jesus Christ does not immediately do away with the weeds now. God has saved them for the end, that is, when the fruit (wheat) has matured and can be harvested (Rev 14:18-19). When the time of harvest comes, the weeds will be easily distinguished by the different fruit they bear (injurious tares), and their end is the judgment of the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:42). This is the mysterious plan of God, and it is not easy for us to comprehend.

The church today has many who are enthusiastic in getting rid of the tares. They cannot tolerate dishonest people within the church or believers who are neither hot nor cold. They are anxious and saddened by those who despise the church and are, therefore, zealous in clearing the church of them through criticism and judgment. They have thus taken over the task that belongs to the angels (who do the work of separation of the wheat and the weeds), and the end result brings harm to genuine believers and creates even more chaos. Let us, therefore, allow the wheat and weeds to “grow together until the harvest.” The Lord Jesus Himself will judge when that time comes (1 Cor 4:5).¹¹

Our responsibility today is not to “judge” or “punish” the weeds in the church. Instead, God wants us to further our learning of the truth so that we will not be misguided by heresy. He wants us to be alert and pray for the church, to be “wheat” rather than a harvester.

The Lord Jesus explained the meaning of the first and second parables and leaves the remaining six unexplained. His purpose was for man to humbly seek the truth of the kingdom of heaven. As a result, today’s Bible scholars have different interpretations and perceptions of these parables. Still, we only need to remember that whatever the interpretation for the remaining parables, they must follow the explanations for the first two, and they must also agree with the general teachings and principles laid out in the Scriptures. Within these guidelines, we will explain the remaining parables based upon interpretations widely accepted by Bible scholars.¹²

3-4. The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast (13:33-35; Luke 13:20-21). These two parables share the same fundamental truth. Therefore, they are discussed together.

13:31-33 – “He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.’”

The mustard seed was well-known at that time to be the smallest seed in vegetable gardens. “As small as a mustard seed” was also a common saying then to describe things of a small scale, such as in Matthew 17:20, where faith is described as a “mustard seed.” Even though it is very tiny, when it flourishes, it can grow to be like a tree with a height reaching twelve to fifteen feet. Birds of the sky come and perch in its branches and build nests!¹³ Likewise, yeast in a small amount can cause sixty pounds of dough to rise. These two parables share the following two interpretations:

- 1) Positive Interpretation: The beginning of the gospel message seemed small and weak (starting from the Apostles), but the seed of God’s good news is powerful. It grew to be strong and noticeably large and has since been spreading to all corners of the world. In the parable of the yeast, the dough is the world, and the rising power of the yeast is the gospel, which is impacting the whole world. This interpretation is in line with the historical expansion of Christianity and the development of its faith.
- 2) Negative Interpretation: This second explanation closely resembles the teaching of the weeds. It warns us that within the rapid development of the church, the powerful influence of evil also grew. The normal growth of the church should be like a “tree”: slow but sure, continuous and persistent, and steadfast. In the parable of the sower, the Lord pointed out that the “bird” is the “devil.” Therefore, the parable of the mustard seed, which grows to be a tree on whose branches the “birds of the sky” come to perch shows us that when the church develops rapidly as a physical organization, the power of the devil will seize this opportunity to infiltrate and spread all sorts of worldly views and political influences in the church under the disguise of “religion.” As a result, the church simply becomes a worldly social club filled with all kinds of sin and evil.¹⁴

As for the yeast, it likewise warns us that in the development of the church, there is the hidden danger of false teaching that permeates like leaven and deteriorates the whole (Acts 20:29-30). Leaven (or yeast) is often used in the Scriptures to symbolize evil (Lev 2:1; Matt 16:6-12; 1 Cor 5:6-7; Gal 5:9).

Jesus concluded this section with the exhortation: “whoever has ears, let them hear” (13:43).

5-6. The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Precious Pearl (13:44-46).

After speaking the first four parables to the crowd, Jesus spoke the next four only to the disciples. The next two also have two varying interpretations.

- 1) The hidden treasure and the precious pearl symbolize the kingdom of heaven. If one is to inherit the kingdom, he will need to give his all in exchange for it (because of its worth). “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Matt 16:25-26; Luke 14:33). We have witnessed the realization of these parables in the life of Paul, who regarded all things as garbage (loss) that he might gain Christ (Phil 3:8). The kingdom of heaven is prepared for those who “recognize its value,” and only such people will obtain this treasure. Have you attained it? Do you treasure it?
- 2) The hidden treasure may also symbolize the nation of Israel, who is God’s “treasured possession” (Exod 19:5; Ps 135:4) and the man is Christ. One of the reasons Jesus came into the world was to deliver Israel and to obtain this treasure hidden underground. He “sold” His all (i.e., leaving His glory in heaven – John 17:5; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:5-8). The precious pearl represents the church, who is the bride of Jesus Christ. The Lord utilizes the value of a pearl treasured by the Gentiles to describe His relationship with the church. This is the uniqueness of this parable. The Lord Jesus loves His church and redeemed her with the great price of His own life (1 Cor 6:20). Like the man who was willing to sell his all, Jesus Christ also gave His life as a ransom, so that all who are willing to believe in Him shall be saved.¹⁵

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

- 1) The Net (13:47): This is not a small fishing net but a large dragnet that can gather “all kinds of fish.” The net is the kingdom of heaven.
- 2) The Lake (13:47): This refers to the world (Isa 57:20–21).
- 3) Letting Down the Net into the Lake (13:47-48): This refers to proclaiming the gospel to all peoples of the world. The Lord had left His disciples in the world so that they may let down the net and catch fish as fishers of men who “fish for people” (Matt 4:19). When the gospel is preached in the whole world, and the number of the saved is fulfilled, it will be time to “pull the net up on the shore” (Matt 24:14), and the end—the judgment of Christ—will come (Matt 25:31-46). It will be the time of eternal separation between true and false believers and believers and nonbelievers.¹⁶
- 4) All Kinds of Fish (13:47): They symbolize true Christians (the good fish) from every nation, language, and tribe of the world, and those who profess to be Christians only in name (the bad fish).

The parable of the net speaks of the judgment at the end of the world. If we have genuinely put our trust in Jesus Christ, we do not need to fear for the certainty of our salvation because the Holy Spirit is the seal of our salvation (Eph 1:13), and no one can snatch us from the hand of our God, the Father (John 10:28).

13:50 – Matthew often uses the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” to describe the grief and regret that people will experience concerning the punishment and judgment they could have avoided. For those who say that they are not afraid of what happens after death, they most likely do not know of the dreadful judgment that awaits them!¹⁷

13:51 – The disciples said that they understood all that Jesus said, but in reality, they did not fully comprehend the meaning of these parables. We know this from their latter questions and actions.

8. The Parable of the Owner of a House Who Brings Out Treasures from His Storeroom (13:52). Jesus wanted His disciples to be like a teacher of the law taught by Him and like an owner of a house, who takes out old and new treasures from his storeroom. These new and old treasures might be the Old and New Testaments, respectively. They could also be one’s past and present spiritual experiences in application. For the disciples, it means that they can intertwine their Old Testament knowledge with the truths that the Lord taught them. Jesus taught the disciples not only for their own spiritual benefit, but also that they may teach others, like an owner of a household who distributes food to members of the household of God at the proper time (Matt 24:45).

II. 13:53-58 Jesus was rejected by the people of His hometown.

After speaking to His disciples, Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth (Matt 2:23; 21:11; Luke 1:26-27; John 1:45) and began to teach in the synagogue. In His previous visit, the people rejected His teaching and attempted to push Him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-29). This time, even though the townsfolk were impressed by His signs and teaching, they still rejected Him. They thought of Him as but the son of a carpenter whom they knew, and whose brothers they knew as well. (Three of Jesus’s brothers, whom Mary and Joseph bore after Him, were James, Simon, and Judas. They share the same names as Jesus’s disciples, but they are not the same people.) Therefore, at that time, not only did the teachers of the law, the Pharisees, and the religious leaders despise Jesus, the Nazarenes also refused to believe him because they could not perceive that the Lord Jesus was indeed the Son of God. In their eyes, He was simply an “ordinary man” among them. He could not possibly be the promised Messiah. Therefore, they ended up rejecting the Messiah, and even hated and despised Him. It is not surprising that Jesus responded with a well-known proverb of that time: “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.”¹⁸ Due to their unbelief, Jesus did not perform any more miracles in Nazareth. The gospel is the power of God, and only those who “believe” can receive it.

D. Conclusion

Beginning in Matthew 13, Jesus turned His primary focus to teaching His disciples. In this chapter, Jesus used eight prophetic parables to help the disciples to understand the situations they might encounter as they build up the kingdom of heaven (i.e., the church, the body of Christ). When they go out to sow the seed of the truth of the gospel, they can expect most people to reject them.¹⁹ Satan will try to destroy their work and infiltrate false Christians and heretical teachings in their ministries. However, they are not to lose heart because the Lord Jesus will protect His chosen people, Israel, and His church. He will separate the good from the evil and the wicked from the righteous. A day of judgment will come. What great hope and comfort such truth brings to Christians today, who live during the prophesied period of Jesus’s parables!

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