

Week Forty-one: The Teaching King - Matthew 13:3-23



Overview

Throughout the Old Testament parables are used to transport truth.

Balaam tells Balak a parable about a lion to describe Israel (Num. 23:24).

Jotham uses a parable about a tree to confront Israel for allowing Abimelech to reign over them (Jud. 9:7-15). Samson composes a parable to mystify the Philistines (14:14). Nathan prepares a parable about a lamb to confront King David over the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 12:1-4). Isaiah and Ezekiel, as well as other unnamed prophets, use parables to portray Israel's sin and imminent judgment.

No wonder then that the Prophet Himself used parables to teach kingdom truths: "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples" (Mk. 4:33-34). Parables are powerful

Noted theologian George Eldon Ladd defines a parable as "a story drawn from everyday life to convey a moral or religious truth and is designed to convey essentially a single truth rather than a complex of truths."¹ Another theologian adds that a parable "makes a comparison between a known truth and an unknown truth; it throws them alongside each other."² Others have called parables "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" and "a revelation by illustration." The Gospels contain 35 seemingly simple and easy to remember parables.

Today's lesson will focus on the parable of the soils, perhaps the best known of the parables Jesus taught.

Lesson Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will understand how a simple parable used by Jesus taught spiritual truths to His hearers then and how those truths apply to hearers today.

Key Truths

Parables are powerful delivery systems for truth.

God's Word is instrumental in man's salvation.

God holds man totally responsible for how he responds to the Word.

Not all who respond to the Word are truly converted, and even those who are genuinely converted mature at different speeds.

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology Of The New Testament, Rev. Ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 90.

² John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2004), 49.

Lesson Outline

1. The Purpose of Parables - Matthew 13:10-17

Jesus told parables for a number of reasons:

- Though simple, they contained mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (11)
- Only those who were serious pursued an explanation (12)
- They awakened thirst in those who were truly spiritually thirsty (12)
- They condemned those who did not understand (12b, 13)
- Telling them fulfilled prophecy (14-15)
- They conveyed a blessing on those who understood them (16)
- They explained the parables told by prophets in the past (17)

Jesus' parable-telling separated him from the religious leaders, who were more concerned with appearing scholarly and controlling followers than with communicating God's truth. Even the Pharisees recognized Jesus as one who taught with authority (Matthew 7:29).

2. The Simplicity of the Parable - Matthew 13:3-9

The parable of the soils contains four components:

- A sower
- The seed
- Four conditions of soil:
 - Dirt on the path, packed hard by heavy traffic
 - Stony places with little real soil—a poor environment for growth
 - Soil filled with other plants competing for nutrients
 - Good ground
- Four different results:
 - Seeds falling on top of the hard soil are picked off by birds before they can take root (seed snatched away)
 - Seeds planted in shallow earth with a stony subsoil produce stunted plants (seed scorched)
 - Seeds planted in dirt shared with weeds and thorns wither before they can produce a harvest (seed choked)
 - Good ground always produces a harvest of varying degrees (seed multiplied)

Anyone living in an agrarian environment can certainly relate to this parable, and even those who don't can understand the seeds' reproductive process.

3. The Heavenly Meaning of an Earthly Reality - Matthew 13:18-23

- Jesus sows the Word (13)

- The Word of God sown in human hearts (19)
- Heart conditions vary (19):
 - Hardness of heart (19)
 - A heart unwilling to count the cost (20-21)
 - A divided heart (22)
 - The heart in full surrender (23)
- The proclamation of the gospel has different results in different people:
 - Hardness of heart gives the enemy an opportunity to prevent gospel penetration (19)
 - Shallowness of heart produces an aborted gospel (20)
 - Competing factors in the heart ruin gospel potential (22)
 - A good heart that creates an environment to hear and understand the word of the kingdom always bears fruit, but in varying degrees (23)

Jesus employs simple illustrations to communicate spiritual truth. He uses the parable of the soils to reveal the condition of the heart and force listeners to identify with one of four responses. Every listener can identify with one type of soil.

Application - What does this lesson teach us about God? Man? Sin? Redemption? *People respond differently to the gospel, and God holds every man responsible for how he responds.*

Deterrents exist that prohibit His Word from bearing fruit in the hearts of listeners: Satan's involvement, the cost of following Christ, and worldly distractions all crush the seeds' growth potential.

The proclamation of the Word of God reveals the condition of the human heart.

Summary

God speaks through simple stories to reveal spiritual truths.

God acts by distributing His Word among different people with different heart attitudes.

God reveals that the heart of the problem is always the human heart. He also reveals the transforming power of His Word in the hearts of those who hear and understand.

Discussion Questions

Considering the technological world in which we live in today, what analogy or parable might you use to communicate a spiritual truth?

Why does Jesus say that those who understand this parable will understand all parables (Mk. 4:13)?

How does this parable help Christians to understand those who "fall away" after making "professions of faith"? What warnings does this parable convey?