

THE 
KINGDOM
PARABLES

MIKE MAZZALONGO

bibleTalk^{TV}

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14998 E. Reno

Choctaw, Oklahoma 73020

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1. INTRODUCTION

If you were to take all of Jesus' sermons and teachings together and study them for a particular style or theme you would learn that the central theme in His preaching, especially as recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, was the idea of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Jesus spent much of His time talking about the coming, the preparation for, the nature of and the make up of the kingdom.

It seems Matthew used the term kingdom of heaven because Jews had been trained to think in terms of heaven as a spiritual dimension. Mark uses the term kingdom of God because his Gentile readers could more easily identify with this idea since they had no concept of heaven.

Jesus used the word kingdom throughout His ministry and 13 of His 43 parables begin with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Obviously if Jesus gave so much importance to the subject of the kingdom and our involvement in it, we should be familiar with His teachings on it.

This is the basic reason for this book - to become more familiar with the kingdom by understanding some of Jesus' major teachings on the subject. Before we begin, however, let us take a look at some "Kingdom" history and background in order to put these teachings into context.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE KING AND KINGDOM IDEAS FOUND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Theocratic Rule

The book of Genesis tells us that society was originally designed to co-exist in peace with extended families sharing the limitless resources of a perfectly balanced creation, all under the loving care and presence of God. There were no human rulers of any kind. The only present authority was God and His word.

With the advent of sin, a new level of authority was instituted within the family structure: the husband was to have authority over his wife. However, no authority for society in general was yet established. After the flood (Genesis 9) God gave to society the authority to police itself and execute justice for crimes (life for a life, Genesis 9:6) in order to provide order in a new and sinful world. The first human ruler who appeared at this point in time was self-appointed.

In Genesis 10:10 we read that Nimrod formed and reigned over his own kingdom and was probably the instigator in building the Tower of Babel. This is the first instance in the Bible of a human king and kingdom.

The word "king" is translated from a root word in the Greek which means ruler, and the word kingdom comes from a variation of that word which refers to the geographical area over which that ruler rules. The sinful world, after the flood, had gotten to the point that it rejected God's rule and began to appoint themselves as rulers and kings.

After the great flood during Noah's time and with the selection of Abraham to begin forming a new people who belonged to God, there was a return to family rule with God as guide and protector. As the nation of Israel formed the 12 tribes descended from Jacob we see that, contrary to pagan nations, the Jews still maintained the tribal leaders as the highest form of authority under the direction of God's influence and presence in their lives. Although they came into contact with pagan kings, the Jews remained without a king for over two centuries after they entered the Promise Land. Up until this time they lived under

theocratic rule (God ruled them directly through the prophets, judges and the Law of Moses).

Human Kings

Once settled in the promised land and while still carrying on military campaigns against border enemies, a movement began to have a man serve as king over the people of Israel. This was against God's will but He nevertheless permitted the people a change in system and warned them that they would regret it. The Bible records the sad experience that the Jews had with earthly kings:

- Saul went mad and died in disgrace.
- David was a great king but disobeyed God with terrible sins and consequences.
- Solomon built the temple but became unfaithful and led the nation into idolatry.
- The kingdom was divided after Solomon's death.
- The Northern Kingdom was totally destroyed because of its idolatry (approx. 700BC).
- The Southern Kingdom was also destroyed and carried off into exile for the same reason but was allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild after 70 years of exile (approx. 600BC).
- Only a small portion of the Southern Kingdom remained under the rule of the Roman Empire when Jesus was born to Mary.

God's Relationship with the Kings

The idea that God is a king or has a kingdom is not apparent in the early portions of the Bible. The image of God's relationship and position with earthly kings and His own stature as king, as well as the entire idea of a spiritual kingdom is developed very slowly by the different writers of

the Old Testament. This is because God does not reveal a concept that people have no way of relating to or understanding. This gradual development of knowledge is called progressive revelation. Progressive revelation takes place when God slowly reveals a concept, one piece at a time, over many years, through different writers. The kingdom of God was such an idea that was revealed slowly to mankind through progressive revelation.

We know that human kings were subject to God and feared Him (Genesis 20:1-7). For example, Abimelech, king of Shur, feared God's wrath when he unknowingly took Abraham's wife into his harem. We also see the Pharaoh resist God's judgement and finally give in when God destroys the first born in Egypt prior to the Jews being released from captivity.

However, the direct relationship between God and a king begins with Saul, the first king of Israel. We see that God chooses and establishes kings. I Samuel 8:5-7 says that although God permitted it, He recognized that the people had chosen a human king instead of remaining with Him as their king. This is the first reference to God as a king, and later on there will be a mention that He has a kingdom as well. It took a long time before the idea that God as king with a kingdom was introduced into the Jewish mindset.

MAN AS DIVINE KING

At that time there also existed the idea that a human could be a divine ruler of sorts. The Egyptians may have been the first to combine the idea that the king was a descendant or product of the gods and therefore divine (Sun Kings). This may have been why Pharaoh resisted Moses seeing him as an equal descendant of the gods and simply a rival to be defeated.

The Greeks revived this idea for Western civilization with Alexander the Great, and from there this concept was borrowed by the Romans. Augustus Caesar (63BC-14AD) saw his role and person as an incarnation of the gods and thus began emperor worship throughout the empire.

When Christians confessed Jesus as Lord (Divine King) this was seen as defiance and eventually brought about the persecution of the church.

The idea of the divine human king did not survive in the West after Rome fell but continued in the East (Shinto-Japan). In the Jewish world we see the idea of God ruling as a divine king in heavenly places. David describes God in this role in Psalm 47:2-3; 101:1.

The earliest direct reference in Judaism to the title king being used for God is in the 8th century by Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 6:5). By this time, in the Jewish mind, the idea that God was the king who ruled over all kings was firmly fixed (1,200 years from Abraham to Isaiah).

From this point the ideas of the divine king taking on a human form and dwelling among men, inviting them into His divine kingdom will be processed by several other prophets over another eight centuries.

THE KING AND THE KINGDOM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

After Isaiah, the prophets Zechariah and Obadiah began to describe the Messiah as a charismatic ruler (king) who would appear and renew the golden period of Jewish history (Solomon's reign). This leader would rule from Jerusalem. He would purify the nation, save it from its enemies and have sovereignty over all the nations.

It was this kind of prophesy (a Redeemer and Savior to come in the future) that stirred the hopes of the nation.

These prophets filled out the description of the "one to come" spoken of before but not well pictured. Daniel picked up and developed this image further in Daniel 7 by giving an exact historical time when this person would come. In Daniel 7 he describes the rise and fall of four world kingdoms and then the establishment of a fifth kingdom (spiritual in nature and greater than the previous four). Daniel, however, adds two important ideas to the ones already mentioned:

1. The Messiah would be a divine king, not just a human ruler.

2. He would rule not only by Himself but with his people. These people would constitute a divine kingdom.

The concept of the Messiah as divine king ushering in a special kingdom to rule over all other kingdoms was finally expressed in its fullness by Daniel. This set the stage for the last two prophets to speak about the kingdom of God:

1. John the Baptist

When John comes along the people are anticipating a king who will purify, save and exalt the Jewish nation over its enemies. John's initial preaching falls in line with their expectations. Repent and be baptized to purify yourselves and be ready, for the kingdom is coming. The people responded to him and this recognizable message.

John also announced the divine aspect of the kingdom by speaking of the Holy Spirit and how the One to come would baptize the people with Him. One idea that had not yet been developed, and caused some confusion for John and the people concerning the kingdom, was that the king and kingdom were two different things. They also believed that there would be great political change when He came.

2. Jesus the Messiah

When Jesus finally arrives, He follows John's preaching about the kingdom but He tells them that the kingdom has arrived. The deduction is that if the kingdom has arrived then the king (Messiah) is here too.

At first, with His miracles and teachings, the people want to see Him as the king to come, but when the political changes don't happen they reject Him and are confused. Jesus is the one who develops fully the concept of the kingdom only partially described throughout history by the different prophets:

- He explains that the kingdom is not earthly but spiritual in nature.

- He explains that the divine king is at the center of the kingdom, not above the kingdom like human kings.
- He tells them that the kingdom is made up of the king and those who are united to Him by faith, not culture.
- He explains that the kingdom has a:
 - Past - prophesied and hoped for.
 - Present - Jesus manifests its king and provides an earthly dimension for it - the Church.
 - Future - At the end of the world all aspects of the kingdom (earthly/heavenly) will merge into one.

His parables on the kingdom, which we will study, describe the nature and tension between the present condition of the kingdom and its future consummation when He returns.

KINGDOM THEOLOGY IN POST NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

A lot of what we think about the kingdom of God today is based on various theological ideas that were developed after the New Testament was written.

Catholic thought formed by Augustine (4th century) was that the kingdom and the church were exactly the same thing. They saw the kingdom as a spiritual monarchy where the Pope was ordained as head of the church, and the church ruling different parts of this Kingdom. This is why Popes and Cardinals dress like kings or royalty. For Roman Catholics, the hierarchy of the kingdom was stressed.

Protestants – Reformers. The Reformation leaders emphasized the spiritual aspects of the kingdom (Luke 17:20, "Kingdom is coming with signs not to be observed"). The kingdom was not manifested in strict hierarchy as Catholics saw it, but in the work of the Holy Spirit among the believers. The transformation of lives is the sign for believers.

Charismatics carry this idea to extreme; tongues and miracles become the sign for a true believer.

MODERN THEOLOGY

Those who espouse what has been called the "Social Gospel" see the kingdom displayed as the presence of God making the world a better place to live.

My task in this book will be to examine the parables of Jesus about the kingdom and try to see it as He explained it. We begin with Jesus at the center; add the church in His image; complete the picture with the end of the world where the kingdom (only described in parables) will manifest itself in complete fullness. Complete fullness will be God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, angels and the spiritual world completely integrated forever.

Hopefully, our study of the Kingdom parables will help us understand the difference between where we are now (the present state of the kingdom) and where we will be in the future (the final consummated state of the kingdom).

2. Types of Parables on the Kingdom

Before going on to study the Kingdom parables I think it would be helpful to explain what a parable actually is. A parable is a story-telling or teaching device. The word parable comes from a Greek word that means to lay beside or to place alongside. The point is that in a parable you place a story or an idea (which is simple to understand) alongside a story or an idea that is complex or hidden. The simple story mirrors the complex one in order to make it understandable.

In Jesus' case He would lay everyday stories that were easily visualized by the people He was teaching, alongside principles and concepts in the spiritual world, which could not be seen. His parables, using earthly objects and human situations, mirrored spiritual realities in the heavenly dimension.

In the New Testament Jesus spoke 43 parables. Of these, 13 were about the kingdom of heaven and were divided in the following way:

- 5 agricultural examples
- 4 examples concerning money
- 2 situations involving feasts
- 1 fishing story
- 1 example using cooking as its basis

These examples for parables were not only easy for the people of that time to understand, they were also adaptable to every culture and age. Every disciple, regardless of time or place, can relate to and learn from Jesus' parables about the kingdom. Let us begin, then, with two parables that use different images to make fundamental points about the kingdom.

THE KINGDOM IS LIKE... LEAVEN

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

And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."

- Luke 13:20-21

HISTORY OF LEAVEN

Leaven was an important idea in Jewish life because bread was a main food item and leaven, aside from its use in making bread, was also used as a religious symbol. At that time, leaven was produced by mixing various plants or kernels of grain together and allowing them to ferment. In bread-making, leaven was usually a piece of dough left over from a previous batch of bread and left to ferment before adding flour.

The expression "hidden in the flour" means to add flour.

Three "pecks" of meal was about a bushel (56 lb), which was a normal batch of bread and baked products.

In the Old Testament, leaven was prohibited during the feast of the Passover (Exodus 23:18; 34:25).

Symbolically, leaven represented decay and impurity, and so an effort was made to avoid it during special feasts and offerings. In the New Testament Jesus used leaven as a symbol of corrupting influence as seen in the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders.

And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

- Matthew 16:6

The New Testament writers also used leaven as a symbol for corruption and evil influence (I Corinthians 5:6). When Jesus gives this parable, however, He does not use leaven as a symbol for corruption as had been done in the past. He compares the kingdom to the simple and common task of making bread. The leaven in the flour mixed together makes it rise, influences its growth, causes it to change its look and taste, and eventually prepares it for its final purpose: to be eaten, to provide life.

This simple and recognizable image is placed alongside the kingdom, and the reader is left to conclude that the kingdom is like leaven. The kingdom in the world is like leaven in the bread. It begins as something that is sour and dead (the cross of Christ; the humble death in baptism of every believer). When added to the world it influences its direction and growth, causes it change its look and taste and prepares it for its final purpose: the coming of the Son of God to judge the world.

No one parable teaches us everything about the kingdom; each one gives us one or two pieces of the puzzle. For example, the parable of the leaven gives us specific information about the kingdom:

1. The Kingdom is something that changes and evolves.

We dwell in a kingdom that is in the process of change, so we must be prepared to change and grow as well.

2. The Kingdom affects everything else.

The kingdom is not isolated; it is not a monastery or a bubble in which we live excluding everyone who is not within.

The kingdom affects everything around it, everything that

comes into contact with it changes for the good (conversion) or for the bad (rejection of Christ).

3. **There will be an end.**

Just as the bread reaches its final stage and purpose, so does the kingdom. Other parables are left to give information about what that end will be; this one only states that there will be an end.

The Kingdom is Like... A Dragnet

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰ and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- Matthew 13:47-50

Fishing was a main occupation of these times and commercial fishermen would use large nets to harvest fish for selling at the market. The dragnet was the largest of nets weighted below and with corks on top. It covered about half a mile of water and picked up everything in its path.

In the parable the net is full and taken to shore where the fishermen would begin separating the edible, saleable fish from the worthless fish. The edible would be placed in containers to keep fresh in order to transport. The inedible were simply thrown away. The people of Jesus' day, especially around Galilee, had seen this happen all of their lives.

In this parable Jesus goes ahead and actually takes the comparison one step further in order to reveal the similarities that exist in the spiritual realm. He explains that this parable points to the end of the world and a time of judgement. Since He said that the kingdom is like a net thrown out to catch fish, the judgement here refers to the people, who are in the kingdom, the ones who have been taken in the net.

We know that the "net" is the gospel, which is cast out into the world bringing in all kinds of fish (people) into the kingdom. Jesus says that at the end of the world the angels will separate the true disciples (good fish) from the false disciples (bad fish). Angels do this – Matthew 25:32. The good go into the containers (the many rooms of the Father's house), the bad will be thrown away (into the darkness with bitter weeping). This parable about the kingdom teaches some very different lessons than the one regarding leaven. They do not contradict each other; they complement each other by adding more detail.

From the dragnet parable we learn:

1. All kinds of people are brought into the kingdom. We know now that the gospel is the means to draw all people into God's kingdom.

2. There is good and bad in the kingdom. People say, "I'm not going to that church because there are hypocrites there." They think that the true church is the perfect church. Jesus teaches that all kinds of people find their way into the kingdom - for a while.

The net brings all in. The requirements to be a member of the church allow for even insincere or evil people to be included if they want to. We ought not to be surprised or discouraged when we see someone naming the name of Christ but not acting like a Christian - Jesus said this would be normal.

3. The kingdom will be purified. When Jesus returns, not only sinners and disbelievers will be judged. God, through His angels, will remove all those from the church who don't belong there. We can fool society, we can fool the brethren, we can even fool ourselves - but we cannot fool God. God knows who are the true disciples and He will keep only these in the end. Of course, this is a warning to everyone at various levels:

A. For those who are not in the kingdom. Jesus spoke this parable, not to disciples, but to the crowds who came to hear Him speak. He made it clear to all that there was to be a dividing line between those who were in and those who were out (not all the fish in the sea were in the net).

Christianity is both inclusive and tolerant. Anyone can become a Christian and all Christians are to be patient and loving even in the face of another's weakness. But Christianity has boundaries set by God (the One who is allowed to do so and whose boundaries are always right and just). For example, God is the one who set the boundaries for marriage (Genesis 2:24) and no human court (e.g. U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on same-sex marriage) can overturn His decision. Christians simply reflect what those boundaries are, they don't invent them!

Another set of boundaries set by God can be seen in the gospel message itself:

- If you believe and respond to it in faith - you're in the kingdom.
- If you disbelieve or refuse to respond - you're out of the kingdom.

He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.
- Mark 16:16

This is not intolerance or bigotry, it is God's boundary and those who follow Him also hold to the boundary He has established. Jesus demonstrates the idea of boundary in this parable; some are in the net, others are not. It is possible therefore to be left out if we so choose. Another warning:

B. Those in the kingdom. To those in the kingdom, but there in name only not in the Spirit (i.e. I'm a Christian but bear no fruit). Jesus warns these that they will not escape judgement. Some people think they can hide in the church. They believe that they can have just enough religion to keep them saved while still enjoying the world. This parable warns that there will be a sorting out within the kingdom in order to clean out the hypocrites and the dead wood. Jesus wants to offer God a "living" church, a kingdom alive in Christ when He comes. For this reason, those who are really of this world and insincere in their Christianity will be removed.

Finally, a word of encouragement:

C. To the true citizens of the kingdom. For those who know Christ; obey Christ; trust completely in Him; are faithful to the kingdom; growing in the kingdom - there is the promise of a better place. They will be kept for rooms in the mansion of the Father. Each of us has to determine where we are and where we need to be - this is the invitation or message of this parable.

- For some it may be the initial step of repentance and baptism to enter into the kingdom.
- For others it may be a recommitment and renewal to a deeper and more faithful discipleship with God to remain in the Kingdom.
- For most, this parable should be an encouragement to continue following the Lord as they have been; knowing that the reward is sure because the Lord who promises it is faithful to the citizens of the kingdom.

3.

Parable of the Wedding Feast

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, "Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast." But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.

"But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without

wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

- Matthew 22:2-14

In this parable there is the story itself and then the true meaning of the story as it relates to the "kingdom."

THE STORY

That a king would invite guests to a wedding feast for his son and that the invited guests would refuse to come for such poor excuses is almost unbelievable. For example, imagine refusing an invitation to the White House for dinner because you need to have the oil in your car changed.

That the guests would actually mistreat and kill the king's messengers is beyond belief. This would say that:

- They did not respect the king.
- They were not afraid of him or even loved him.
- They were very foolish.

That the king would send his army to destroy these people is justified under the circumstances, no one would argue with this. The story becomes a little strange when the king invites the common people to fill the place of the invited guests. For those listening to this parable in the first century it would seem very strange for anyone to treat the king in the way the people did in this story. It would seem even stranger for a king to then invite common people to his table. Kings did not do this in those times. On the contrary, they stayed away from common people and slaves as much as possible. The story even has a surprise ending as the king ejects one of the guests from the feast because of improper attire.

The wedding garment (wedding clothes) was a set of clothing provided by the host to his special guests in order to spare them the expense of purchasing a new set of clothing for the occasion. At that time good clothing was expensive and hard to come by, especially for common people. Royal weddings were often made more opulent and grand when the king himself provided not only food and drink for the occasion but also a new set of clothing for each of his guests.

In the parable the common people were invited, therefore it was natural that the king provide them with the proper garments to sit at the royal table. It would not do for them to attend the feast in their regular attire. The story tells us that when the king entered to examine the feast for his son, one person had neglected to put on the garments graciously provided for him. The original guests insulted the king by not responding to his invitation, now this guest insults him by wearing his old clothes (or his own clothes) rather than the special garment provided by the king. The story ends with the just punishment of the one who was at the banquet table but whose heart and spirit was not right for the occasion.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

I said that parables are stories that mirror unseen realities. In this parable the unseen reality is God's relationship with Jesus, and the Kingdom He came to establish. Before this parable was spoken Jesus had made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem but had not been welcomed by any of the Jewish leaders. As a matter of fact, the next day He was confronted and rejected by them. This parable is largely in response to their (and by extension the Jewish nation's) eventual rejection of Him and His gospel. With this information as the key (Jesus as the Messiah is always the key) we can lay this parable alongside Israel's rejection of Jesus and see what God says about the kingdom.

1. The experience of the kingdom of heaven is like a feast with the king. A joyful experience with God.

2. God invited the Jews to be part of this experience, but they repeatedly rejected the messengers who invited them (prophets) and ultimately killed some (John the Baptist).
3. The rejection of the Son is the rejection of Jesus, which was eventually carried out by crucifying Him without just cause.
4. In response to this God sends His army to destroy those who rejected and executed His son (The Roman army laid siege and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its people in 70 AD).
5. The king now invites the common people (Gentiles) to come to the feast (kingdom/heaven) through the Apostles (messengers). All were welcome, all could come to the feast.
6. The king provides the wedding garment (the garment is the righteousness of Christ obtained through faith expressed in repentance and baptism - Galatians 3:26-27). This garment (righteousness) enables the guest to be in the king's presence.
7. One guest enters in but on his own terms, without the robe (some want to be followers of Christ on their own terms - without following or obeying the gospel).
8. The king removes the guest without the wedding garment (God will judge all those in the church and remove those who are there under false pretenses. This same point is made in the parable of the fish and net).
9. His final word - "Many are called but few are chosen" has been troubling and difficult to interpret.

In order to understand this phrase, we need to keep it in context of the parable and what the parable is explaining. This refers to those who will or will not come into the kingdom. Many are called (actually, all are called through the gospel of Jesus), and many are given the chance to enter in (they hear the words and know what they must do) but they

refuse the invitation (do not obey the gospel). They have been called but they do not answer.

Those who answer, however, become the "chosen". The words called and chosen are both adjectives in the original Greek, they modify or describe nouns. For example, the "called" are many; there are a great number of them. The "chosen" are few; not many answer the call. If you answer the call (come to the feast, put on the robe / believe in Jesus/ put Him on in baptism) you become one of the chosen. Answering the call makes you one of the "chosen ones" of God. If you do not answer the call (do not come to the feast or sneak in without the proper cover) you become the many who are on the road to destruction (the lost).

Calvinists have often used this verse as a proof-text for their version of the doctrine of election. The idea is that man does not have the spiritual insight to respond to God's offer of forgiveness - he is too corrupted, too morally blind. The result, therefore, is that God is required to choose some to be saved and others to be damned because man is helpless to make the decision on his own. For this way of thinking, the many called and few chosen are those who are chosen or rejected by God for the purpose of salvation.

The Bible does teach the doctrine of election, but not in the way that it has been taught by Calvinists. Let me explain:

Although man has been weakened by a sinful nature, he still has the ability to exercise his free will, and in doing so often does not make the right choices. However, man can still choose to believe and obey God's directions (e.g. Abraham chose to follow God to Canaan). Other examples of Bible characters who exercised their free will to choose include Moses, who reluctantly chose to go back to Egypt; Joshua who famously challenged the people to, "Choose this day whom you will serve.." Joshua 24:15; and one of the thieves crucified next to Jesus chose to ask for forgiveness while the other did not. Every presentation of the gospel in the New Testament challenges people to obey or not. We see that some do (the 3000 on Pentecost Sunday - Acts 2) and some do not (King Agrippa - Acts 26:26-30), some fall away and come back (John

Mark - Acts 13:13), and then there are some who fall away and choose to remain unfaithful (Demas - II Timothy 4:10).

God also chooses, but He does not choose which person will be saved or will be lost. God only makes one choice regarding salvation: He chooses who will save man, and in this regard He chose Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:4). It is in this way that Jesus becomes the chosen one (Luke 23:35).

Jesus, on His part, makes only one choice as well concerning salvation: to accept or not the cup of suffering. He does so in the garden by saying to God, "not my will but Thy will be done" (Luke 22:42). He made the choice to die for our sins.

We also make only one choice concerning salvation: to believe and obey Jesus or to reject Him - the same choice the Jews and Gentiles had in the first century. When we choose Christ we then become the "chosen" of God. Many are called by the gospel, but not many respond to it, and for this reason only a few become the chosen.

SUMMARY

What, therefore, have we learned from this parable concerning the kingdom?

1. In its fulfilled state it will be a glorious, royal, enjoyable and happy experience - much like a wedding feast. This image helps us to understand and be patient when the kingdom in its present form has flaws, requires effort and is oppressed from many sides.
2. There will be a joining, an integration that will take place, like a wedding. In other words, the kingdom of heaven on earth (the church) will be perfected and glorified by the Holy Spirit, and then joined to Christ and the kingdom as it exists in heaven. This will take place when Jesus returns at the end of the world (I Thessalonians 4:16-18).
3. All are welcomed to enter in (many are called). Some received a special invitation (the Jews), some were called in a general way (by

hearing the gospel) but all have been invited to the same feast. The same kingdom is open for all.

4. You must be dressed for the occasion. God is the one who provides the covering for us (Christ), but we must put the garment on if we wish to remain. God offers salvation through grace (forgiveness is free, we cannot buy it, make it or earn it), and we must receive it by faith. The Bible tells us that our faith in Christ is properly expressed by confessing His name, repenting of sins and being baptized in water (Acts 2:37-38). This is how you put on the wedding garment (Galatians 3:26).

5. Those who refuse the invitation and those who do not accept the invitation in the proper way will not be welcome at the feast. This is the only feast because there is and will only be one kingdom.

4.

Parable of the Bridesmaids and Talents

The parable of the Bridesmaids or Foolish Virgins and the one that follows it, the parable of the Talents, are both looking forward to the time when the kingdom of God on earth will end. They refer to the reckoning or sorting out that will take place before the kingdom on earth is joined to the kingdom in heaven. Each point to this time but have different things to teach us about life in the kingdom and the judgement that will come at that time.

PARABLE OF THE BRIDESMAIDS

Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for

yourselves.' And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.'

- Matthew 25:1-12

THE STORY

There were three stages to Jewish weddings.

- The engagement - when the families agreed on the marriage and a formal arrangement was arrived at by the fathers of the couple.
- The betrothal - a ceremony was held in the home of the bride's parents where mutual promises were made by each party and gifts were given by the groom to his future wife (dowry paid). The betrothal was a serious commitment in that if the man died before the wedding the woman would be considered a widow, and breaking a betrothal was equal to divorce. For example Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, required a bill of divorcement to annul his betrothal to Mary.
- After a year or so the marriage took place at a feast usually held in the groom's home or place of his choosing. Normally the bridegroom, surrounded by his friends, went to retrieve the bride at her home. The bride, dressed in her best, would sometimes be carried in a basket, with friends and family around her, as a long procession carrying lamps and torches would light the way to the bridegroom's home for the wedding feast. Once the feast was over, the guests would leave and the couple would remain in their new home.

Jesus describes a group of young girls who would be part of this kind of procession, and as part of it would light the way and ultimately go into

the groom's home to celebrate the wedding. There is a delay in the bridegroom's coming and all fall asleep, but suddenly an advance person appears to alert them that the procession is coming.

Some of the maids did not bring enough oil to restart their lamps or torches for the final joyful procession. These try to borrow oil from the others but are refused and told to go out in order to find some at the last minute. The maids who are ready with their lamps are eventually brought along to the feast, and when all are present the door is closed to guard against any uninvited persons entering the house. The other maids arrive later and are not only denied entry, they are not even recognized by the groom.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Before speaking this parable Jesus prophesied about the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. With this parable He makes a reference to the end of the Jewish nation as well as the end of the world when He will return. Remember that parables were directed at those in the kingdom, so this is a warning and teaching for those who are already believers. He is saying that if they are in the kingdom there are things they have to watch out for:

1. There will be an end to the kingdom as it now exists on earth. The end of the Jewish nation was brought about by the destruction of Jerusalem (by Rome in 70 AD). The end of the kingdom on earth will be an assimilation (a marriage between the bride / Church and the groom/Lord when He comes).
2. The end of it will come suddenly. We know who we are waiting for and what will happen when He returns, but we do not know when He will return.
3. Everyone in the kingdom will be responsible for themselves. This is the key idea in this parable. We are in the kingdom because of God's grace but must faithfully remain in the kingdom in order to be saved. In the end there will be no time to

make things right or restore oneself to faithfulness after Jesus returns.

4. Once the union is made, it is permanent. Judgement will not be a time for discussion and appeals because those who truly belong to Christ will be with Him, and those who do not belong will be apart from Him permanently.

The parable of the bridesmaids is an encouragement to those in the kingdom to be patient while they wait for the Lord: and for others who are in the kingdom but are running out of oil (running out of God's grace because of neglect, unfaithfulness, laziness, sin, etc.) to be careful that they do not get caught dry when He comes.

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

"For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey.

Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

"Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I

will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

"And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'

"But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'

"For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- Matthew 25:14-30

THE STORY

The story here is fairly straightforward and easily understood by any culture or generation. A wealthy master entrusts a sizable fortune to his slaves to trade with and manage while he goes away for a long time on some undisclosed journey. A talent was not a specific aptitude or coin, but rather a measure or a weight of money. Sometimes the talent consisted of minted coins or bars of gold and silver.

Each slave receives a different amount based on the perceived skills that the master believes each possesses. The point, however, is that each has enough to do something in order to make a profit. After a long absence the master returns to settle accounts. The first two slaves come forward eagerly to report that they have doubled their master's money (different sums, same success).

As a result they are each rewarded with a larger scope of responsibility as well as a closer relationship (more trusted, intimate) with their master. For a slave this was a great privilege.

The third slave, who had received the one talent, hid it in the ground. He incurred no risk (would not lose it in the market, no one could steal it, no depreciation) and followed the path of least resistance. When confronted by the master to explain why he did this (note that the other two immediately showed results and made no excuses) he blamed the master. The slave explained that he acted in the way he did because the master was hard and unfair.

The master denounces him as wicked (because he blames his evil on the good master) and lazy (because this is why he did nothing, he was lazy). He also tells him that if it was true that he was hard and unfair, what he should have done was put it in a place that was both safe and slightly profitable, like a bank.

This, of course, would have required thought and effort; something lazy people hate to do. The surprise comes when he gives the talent to the most successful servant to now use, and the lazy slave is cast out to be punished.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

This parable, like the one for the Bridesmaids, refers to the people in the kingdom and the return of Jesus. However, this is where the similarity ends. In the parable of the talents the Lord is teaching that everyone in the kingdom has received a blessing of some kind that is to be used for God's profit. There are a variety of blessings:

- Health - Position - Spiritual Gifts
- Intelligence - Wealth - Opportunity
- Charisma - Natural skills - Beauty
- Leadership - Wisdom - Success

The parable teaches that when Jesus returns, each one will be held accountable for what they have done with these. Unlike the parable of the bridesmaids, this story focuses on the reckoning that will come for those within the kingdom.

We know that those who reject Christ are condemned (Mark 16:16), but in these parables Jesus wants to show how He will weed out those who confessed His name and associated with the kingdom but will not be allowed to remain when He returns. Concerning His return and the reckoning with the kingdom itself, this parable teaches us that:

1. God will look for results, not excuses. We have been saved to serve, to bear fruit, to confess and follow Christ, and when He returns it will be obvious to Him who has and who has not been profitable.
2. Everyone has a different talent(s) but we all have the same responsibility. When He returns it will be obvious who has invested it in the world, who has invested it in themselves, who has buried it through neglect and who has made a spiritual profit. At the end, when He comes, we will not be able to blame someone else for our failure to bear fruit in the kingdom.
3. Some will rejoice and some will weep. Like the parable of the bridesmaids, the prepared ones went into the feast and the unprepared ones were left out.

In this parable the fruitful ones are allowed to stay with the master, rejoice in his presence and are given even more responsibility. Paul says that when Jesus comes the church will judge angels and sit at the right hand of God ruling with Him (I Corinthians 6:13; II Timothy 2:11); this is an important responsibility and opportunity to experience great joy, certainly more than what we have now.

On the other hand, those who are unfruitful will no longer be able to remain in the presence of their Lord. The unbelievers are never in the presence of the Lord. However, disobedient, lazy, sinful Christians are, for a while, in the presence of the Lord. Jesus says that this will end

when He returns and the consequences will be suffering (gnashing of teeth) and regret (I should have...).

Jesus reinforces the warning to disciples in the kingdom that before the kingdom on earth is brought up to be with the kingdom in heaven there will be a reckoning, and Christians need to be ready and fruitful.

SUMMARY

Some worry that they are not ready, others that they are not fruitful enough. The idea is that if you are faithful and fruitful in the name of the Lord, you are ready. Continue to use your talents in service to the Lord as you have opportunity, and you will always be ready.

5.

Parables of: Hidden Treasure, Pearl and Debt

⁴⁴ "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.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, ⁴⁶ and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

- Matthew 13:44-46

Here again the stories are obvious and easy to understand.

1. In the parable of the treasure, the man working in a field is probably a hired worker or someone sub-contracting the land for farming, or someone assessing land for a purchase. He finds a treasure by accident. It is so precious that he sells all he has in order to buy the field and become the legal owner of the treasure.
2. In the parable of the pearl, the person is a merchant who is deliberately seeking fine pearls. Like all precious jewelry it requires knowledge and training to spot and evaluate the true worth of these items - especially pearls. In his search he finds not only a good pearl, but one of such exceptional beauty and value that he sells all that he has in order to own it.

These stories are basically the same except one person finds a treasure by accident and the other is actually looking for it. However, both find treasures and both give up all they have in order to possess the treasure they have found. Simple stories with happy endings, but for those who were listening with an ear to understand, a few more facts about the kingdom were revealed:

1. The Kingdom is not Obvious to Everyone.

Sometimes you find it without expecting to. For example, someone shares the gospel with you or, in a moment of difficulty, you find the Lord. Perhaps you read the Bible or some other book that leads you to Christ. Sometimes you go through a long period of searching going from one church to another and spend time praying for God to lead you. Many talk to people about religion or spiritual things looking for ... truth, God, whatever. The kingdom is there but most people are oblivious to it.

They see a field, not the treasure. They see clams, not pearls. They see religion and church buildings, but not the living Christ.

2. The Kingdom is Worth Everything You Have.

Note that both persons liquidated everything they had in order to possess the treasure, the pearl. They did this in order to become wealthier than they already were. The kingdom is like that. In order to enter in you need to leave everything behind.

- Your former beliefs for exclusive faith in Christ.
- Your former goals and dreams for the goal of heaven and righteousness.
- Your sins and worldly pleasures in order to maintain fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

However, whatever you leave behind (good or bad) the Lord will bless you one hundred times over in the kingdom. The kingdom provides peace, joy, confidence in salvation, freedom from death and

condemnation, and most importantly the sweet experience of knowing and serving the Lord. The kingdom is not obvious to everyone but if you find it, it is worth giving up your life to possess it.

THE PARABLE OF THE DEBT

This parable was spoken at a time when the Apostles were keenly interested in life within the kingdom. They were grappling with Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and for the most part believed that the kingdom Jesus spoke of was to be some kind of earthly domain. This matched the common hope that the Messiah would usher in a golden period of power and prosperity for the entire Jewish nation.

Up to this point the Apostles saw themselves as co-rulers with Christ in an earthly kingdom that resembled the worldly kingdoms that existed at that time. This is why a little before this parable they ask Jesus who among them would be the greatest in His kingdom (they desired position and honor from men). Of course, Jesus answers them by saying that the greatest in the kingdom are the least, those who are like children.

After this, the Lord describes another characteristic of those who are in His Kingdom, the ability to forgive and the need to maintain unity by being reconciled to brothers we offend or who offend us. At this point Peter, wishing to show that he is leadership material for the kingdom, asks a question about forgiveness. That question sets the stage for the parable about the debt in Matthew 18:21-22,

²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

In Jewish culture the maximum number of times you needed to forgive, if asked, was three. Peter, wanting to show he had potential to be a leader in the kingdom, says that he is prepared to forgive seven times. Jesus responds that forgiving a limited or set number of times is

forgiveness according to rules and law; in the kingdom forgiveness is a natural characteristic (70x7= infinity). As many times as required and as much forgiveness as needed, this is how much you offer. Jesus then gives this parable to demonstrate the magnitude of forgiveness available in the kingdom and the attitude one must have as a citizen who dwells there.

²³ For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

A slave in a high stewardship position has made bad investments or lost his master's money in some way. The amount of loss is staggering (10 - 20 million dollars today).

²⁵ But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' ²⁷ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

The lord had complete power over him, and the judgement was fair since he had been entrusted with a fortune and lost it. He pleads to have a chance to repay (which was impossible) in order to avoid punishment. The master, feeling compassion, goes one great step further, he forgives him the entire debt. This is exactly what the idea of forgiveness means: to pay off another's debt owed to you. The master also returns the slave to his former position of responsibility.

²⁸ But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' ³⁰ But he

was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

The same scenario repeats itself but this time another slave who owes 100 denarii (\$20.00) asks the former slave for mercy in repaying the debt. His pleas fall on deaf ears, and the slave is cast into prison by the former slave.

³¹ So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

This conduct is reported to the master who rebukes his unforgiving servant for being so hard hearted, especially after receiving mercy himself for a debt that he was incapable of paying. This time he is put into prison and tortured until all is repaid.

³⁵ My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Jesus now speaks directly to His disciples. He summarizes the parable by warning them that if their forgiveness is not sincere for their brethren - they also (who have been forgiven by God) will receive the punishment they originally escaped.

There are several things we learn about the kingdom in this parable:

1. Offenses are Possible in the Kingdom

The kingdom, as it exists here on earth in the form of the church, has not yet been perfected in glory, and so there are still many problems caused by sin. People offend and hurt each other intentionally or by mistake.

Some hurts are huge and others are small, but either way someone is offended and someone has to make that right.

People who are offended or discouraged with the church because it is imperfect, need to understand that there will always be sin and hurt in the body of Christ because it is filled with sinners who are in the process of becoming saintly. Jesus acknowledges that from time to time we will be in debt to each other for various things.

2. Mercy is the Answer

In the world we look for justice, fairness or compensation to take care of offenses and mistakes. In the kingdom, mercy is the solution and normal response to offenses and mistakes. We must remember that it was God's mercy that allowed us entry into the kingdom in the first place - not justice, fairness or compensation. God so loved us that He gave up His Son, Jesus, in order to offer us forgiveness for every sin great and small, and welcome us into His kingdom.

3. Mercy is our Guarantee

God's mercy guarantees us a place in the kingdom, and our mercy toward others guarantees that we will keep our place in His kingdom. However, if we don't show mercy to our brethren for their offenses against us then our lack of mercy will guarantee that we will lose our place in the kingdom.

SUMMARY

The Lord adds more pieces to this puzzle about the "kingdom." The kingdom is not easy to find, but once you have found it, it is worth all you have to possess it. Those in the kingdom are rich in spiritual treasure. There are growing pains in the kingdom and the basic virtue that guarantees your place and your growth is mercy because it reflects perfectly God's nature and involvement in your own life.

Many church buildings are built to be functional, comfortable and pleasing to the eye. If, however, people who go to them do not find the church pleasing to their hearts as well as their eyes, they will not stay.

A church that is pleasing to the heart is a church full of mercy and kindness for those who have made big mistakes in life. Let us make sure that God is glorified not only with the building we build and maintain, but also by the love and mercy that exists within that building.

6.

Parable of the Sower and the Seed

Many refer to this parable as the parable of the soils because it is not really about the sower or the seed - it is about the different kinds of soil that the sower puts his seed into. This parable has 3 sections in it:

- The parable itself.
- An explanation of why Jesus used this style of teaching (parables).
- An explanation of the parable of the Sower and the Seed.

This is not a personality or story driven parable. It is based on a common observation that any person could make then as well as now.

In chapter 12:46-50 of Matthew's gospel we read about the family of Jesus attempting to bring Him home with them. The next chapter continues the story with what happened next.

¹ That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. ² And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.

³ And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; ⁴ and as he sowed, some

seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up.
⁵ Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. ⁸ And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."
- Matthew 13:1-9

Vs. 1 - The Lord apparently went home with them but on the same day returned outside and went to the water's edge.

Vs. 2 - Because He was crowded in, He used a boat as a makeshift stage so He could be separated from the people and be seated while teaching them as was the custom of the times.

Vs. 3a - At this point He begins to tell them a parable. As far as we know, this parable was the first one spoken by the Lord in His ministry.

Vs. 3b to 8 - The story is simple enough. A sower/farmer goes out to sow wheat or barley (usually sown by hand in Palestine in those days). The patch of land is not necessarily large, has no fences and has a road running alongside or dividing it somehow. Some of the seeds fall on this pathway and are eagerly eaten up by the birds. This is not done on purpose, it is simply seed that lands there while spreading on the patch.

Much of Palestine is rocky and so much of the tilled soil has spots where the rock is barely covered by the earth. The heat of the rock provides a good temperature for the soil to germinate seed but does not contain enough moisture to keep it alive in the hot sun. This is why plants take and grow quickly but do not last.

Much of the soil has thorns (weeds), which are cut but soon grow back with the crop and choke its growth. On the good soil (that which has depth, moisture and properly weeded) the seed sown produces a

harvest. Like any harvest, each grain sown produces a variety of yield - but produces a harvest, nevertheless.

Vs. 9 - Jesus tells His hearers that this simple story has a special meaning and if they try to understand they may grasp it.

In Mark 4:10, Mark says that His Apostles along with other followers came to Him for an explanation of the parable and asked Him why He taught in this way. If anyone tried to understand the parable, they would realize that they could not without help. The people who came to Him were those who were listening and searching for the answers.

Jesus begins His response by explaining the reason why He teaches in parables (because it is the first time, He teaches this way), and this will help these hearers understand not only this parable but all of the others as well.

THE REASONS FOR PARABLES – MARK 4:11-17

Jesus acknowledges that He is speaking in parables and He is speaking in this way for a number of reasons:

1. The knowledge of the kingdom is a blessing

God is the one who reveals the mysteries of His thoughts and intentions. Through the parables He can hide the meaning and knowledge of the kingdom from those He does not wish to have it.

¹¹ Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

The Apostles and disciples have been granted the privilege to understand and penetrate the mysteries of the parable (Jesus will explain in a moment). The scribes, Pharisees and those who follow them, along with unbelievers, will not be permitted to understand. The reason for this, of course, is that they will not come to Jesus who is the only one

who can explain the parables and who is the central figure or key to all of the parables.

¹² For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

Those who have begun to seek, follow and listen to Jesus will receive more knowledge and insight (eventually about the resurrection and reception of the Holy Spirit, etc.). Those who have simply listened to the parable and rejected Christ will drift away from Him eventually forgetting the parable, and ultimately will become His enemy.

¹³ Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

For this reason (because some are believing, and some are disbelieving) Jesus is beginning to separate the two by using parables. Parables become a sort of sifting device. Their disbelief (hearing without understanding; seeing without perceiving) will be made evident by Jesus through His use of parables. The knowledge of the kingdom is a blessing reserved only for believers. Disbelievers are filtered out by use of parables.

2. Their use was prophesied

¹⁴ In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;

You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

¹⁵ For the heart of this people has become dull,

With their ears they scarcely hear,

And they have closed their eyes,

Otherwise they would see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart and return,
And I would heal them.'

The prophet Isaiah said that the people would ultimately not believe because they had cultivated a disbelieving attitude. This did not happen all of the sudden. Generations of half-hearted worship, disobedience, rejection and manipulation of God's word had produced a nation that was dull of hearing and unprepared spiritually for their Messiah. What Jesus was doing, and the reason for it, was not a surprise or last-minute thing - it was known and spoken of beforehand by the prophets.

3. The fullness of time had come

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

They were blessed because they were living at a time when all of these things were about to be fulfilled. The patriarchs, the judges, kings, prophets - even the angels (I Peter 1:12) only saw the shadows, the promises and the visions of the coming Messiah. But they were blessed because they were living at a time when these things were actually being fulfilled, and they could hear, see, touch and be taught by the Messiah Himself.

Some did not see or hear because they were born too soon. Others did not see or hear because their hearts were dull and unbelieving. Still others were born at the right time, believed in the right person and were privileged to gain knowledge of the kingdom long promised and finally come.

THE MEANING OF THE PARABLE - VS. 19-23

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, this parable is not about seed or the sower but about the soil. Jesus describes four kinds of soil that receive seed and how the seed fares in each type of soil. We learn that

the soil is a person's heart (his attitude, feelings, beliefs, will); the seed is God's word of the kingdom; the sower is Jesus. The parable explains that a person's spiritual life, death or development is based on how that person receives God's word in his heart.

1. Hard Soil

¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.

The side of the field on the pathway is hard packed in dirt. The birds come and take the seed away even as it is being sown.

We see this happening with people who are full of disbelief, cynicism, skepticism or the hard heart of a sinful life. The birds are all the reasons and excuses Satan sends to prevent these people from believing. For example, they say that the word is not inspired or that it is all exaggeration in order to frighten men. They often use the excuse that "Christians are hypocrites" as a reason for their disbelief. Some secretly think that belief may interfere with their sin (whatever it is). The net result is that the word produces nothing except a faint recollection that it landed on the conscious mind for a moment before being snatched away.

2. Rocky Soil

²⁰ The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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.

This is the thin layer of warm soil with hard rock underneath. This is the person who receives (understands) and quickly shows much promise in

the Word. Enthusiastic at first, ready to join in, knows the plan and encourages others to follow him into Christ. Plants need the sun and heat to grow. Christians need the heat of trials and struggle to grow as well. This person's hard heart is never dealt with or seen at first.

The hardness could be basic selfishness or any of the sins that all people struggle with from time to time (pride, fear, laziness, greed, lust, etc.). When the word begins to force him to deal with these issues he is immediately gone. This is the person who wants a blessing, wants grace but is unwilling to die to self or allow the Holy Spirit to deal with him as a Christian. When his faith costs him something, he is unwilling to pay and is quickly gone. He is quick to convert and even quicker to revert back to the world.

3. Thorny Soil

²² And 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 wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

Here the plant dies but the death is a slow death, unlike the seed in rocky ground. It takes awhile for the weeds and thorns to completely choke a good plant. Jesus describes two particular thorns present in this person's heart.

Worry of the world. Each generation has its things to worry about. This is normal. In this case a person allows these worries to overcome his life in the kingdom. He invests more emotional energy into concerns over worldly things than concern and involvement in the kingdom.

Deceitfulness of riches. The world along with its wealth and attractions seduce one away from the kingdom. Many Christians start well but become distracted and finally pulled completely away from Christ because they are:

- Too busy

- Too stressed
- Too involved
- Too many bad habits
- Too worldly

For these people the Word has no impact, no challenge, no authority, no comfort or inspiration any more.

4. Good Soil

²³ And 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.

The good soil (heart) is described as being one that hears and understands. Hears with the ears and the heart. Understands the primary and secondary meaning of the parables.

This is a person ready to believe and obey the Word. This heart will put forth a harvest where each seed will produce differently.

We are stronger in certain parts of our spiritual life and service than in other parts. We bear different fruit in different areas of our lives depending on sin, knowledge, talent, etc. The important thing is that unlike the other soils, there is a harvest and it is plentiful.

SUMMARY

From this parable we glean several more pieces of information for our kingdom puzzle.

1. The kingdom is planted in a person's heart. This is where the growth and perception of it is.

2. The kingdom is planted by means of the Word. The kingdom exists in a person's heart through the agency of the word of God. This is how you have it in your heart.

3. The kingdom can be destroyed.

- By total disbelief and rejection.
- By a refusal to persevere with Jesus.
- By too great a concern over worldly matters or worldly riches.

4. The kingdom grows at different rates in different people. Some mature quickly and bear much fruit. Others take longer to grow or are slow in professing their faith. In the end, however, there is a harvest to offer the Lord.

5. The kingdom can be missed. When you patiently teach and explain to no avail, do not feel bad if some just do not get it or do not want to get it. Do not blame yourself. Jesus said that three of the four soils would not have a harvest.

People rejected Jesus, the one who spoke the parables and died for their sins, so we should not be surprised if certain ones do not understand or respond to us. There are still hard, rocky and thorny soils that exist in abundance today.

7.

Parable of Wheat and Tares

This parable follows the one concerning the sower and the seed where Jesus used agricultural examples to teach about the kingdom. By its proximity to the first parable (Sower and Seed), the parable of the wheat and tares may have been the second parable that Jesus spoke during His ministry.

THE PARABLE

²⁴ Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. ²⁷ 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?' ²⁸ 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?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ 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 tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."'

- Matthew 13:24-30

Vs. 24 - This parable is about the kingdom, not about the world. It takes place and describes events in the kingdom. It is important to remember this.

Vs. 25 - Tares or darnel are a weed-like grass that resemble wheat but have a firmer root system. The landowner sows good wheat and while the laborers are sleeping the darnel/tares are sown by his enemy.

Vs. 26 - The fact that tares have been sown only becomes evident when both begin to grow.

Vs. 27 - The workers question the possibility of there being tares among the wheat. How could this be so? The owner gives them the reason why this has happened.

Vs. 28-29 - The workers want to identify and remove the tares, but the owner tells them to allow both to grow side by side to full maturity. In the case of the tares, their close and strong roots might damage the good plants if they were to be torn out. Also, they resemble the good crop and because of this the good plants might be uprooted by error.

Vs. 30 - The owner instructs the workers to wait until harvest when it will be easier to separate the good from the bad and deal with each accordingly - one for keeping, the other for burning.

EXPLANATION OF THE PARABLE

Like the parable of the sower and seed, there is a break in the story where Jesus, in this case, gives another parable and reasons why He spoke in parables.

³⁶ Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." ³⁷ And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, ³⁸ and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age;

and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.

⁴¹ The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, ⁴² and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁴³ Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

- Matthew 13:36-43

Vs. 36 - Apparently after going out on the boat He taught several parables and then returned to the shore and went back to His family's home. This is when the disciples come asking for an explanation of the parable of the tares and wheat. Jesus had spoken another parable about the mustard seed and they did not ask about this one. Perhaps the parable that contained a judgement stirred them to ask for an explanation.

Vs. 37-39 - Jesus gives a quick rundown of the characters in the parable and who they represent in real life. Jesus Himself is the Sower and refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This expression is first mentioned in Daniel 7:13 where Daniel is seeing a vision that represents the end of the world where God gives to this "Son of Man" all dominion and authority and establishes his kingdom forever.

In Daniel's vision, "Son of Man" refers to the Messiah to come. Jesus rarely uses the term king or Messiah for Himself because these terms were heavy with meaning for the Jews. Instead, He uses this Old Testament term for Himself because it did two important things:

1. It was a Scriptural term referring to the Messiah, His work and His kingdom.
2. It was not a term that the Jews normally used or invested any kind of meaning (good or bad) into.

The field is the world itself. The seed of the kingdom is planted all over the world by Jesus. The good seed are the sons of the kingdom.

Before, the seed was God's word. In this parable the seed is what it eventually produces - Christians, those who make up the kingdom. The tares are the sons of the devil. These are the ones who have believed Satan (whether they know it or not) and follow him. If you do not follow Jesus, you follow Satan, whether you are aware of it or not. The tares are sown in the kingdom.

They are the hypocrites who talk like Christians but do not act like Christians. They are the spies who are with the people in the kingdom but only because it suits their purposes - money, prestige, comfort. They are the backsliders and sinners who have begun to be influenced more by Satan and the world than by Christ and His word. They go through the motions of Christian living, but their hearts are not in it.

The influence that produces these evil and unbelieving ones is the devil. Just as the Word has the power to create a Christian and transform him into Christlikeness, Satan and his deceptive ways have the power to transform people into evil and unbelieving individuals as well.

The harvest is when Jesus returns and the end of the world as we know it takes place. The reapers (workers who separate) are angels. Paul said that the angels will have a voice at the end of the world and will accompany the Lord (I Thess. 4:16). He also says that they will come in "flaming fire" at the end (II Thess. 1:7).

Vs. 40-43 - Jesus continues to make the parallel between this parable and the end of the world.

The separation of the tares and wheat is a mirror of what happens at judgement for those who are in the kingdom, not the judgement for the entire world. At the end there will be a judgement between believers and unbelievers. Jesus says that there will also be a separation between those who believed and those who said they believed but did not belong.

Those who belong in the kingdom will simply remain there; those who aspire to be in the kingdom but who give offense (to the brethren, to the Lord, to the world) and those who practice sin (lawlessness) will be

removed and be placed in hell. After this separation the righteous will be:

- Glorified - new bodies that will equip them to exist in the heavenly realm.
- Exalted - lifted up to be with God forever.

They will be of light: pure in intention, thought and conduct, just like the heavenly Father. Jesus warns everyone, even His disciples, to pay attention and be careful to abide by the teaching of this parable.

SUMMARY

The parable of the tares and wheat also gives us significant insight into the kingdom, especially at the end of time. Some of the things we learn:

1. The kingdom is universal. God's kingdom is all over the world. Wherever people respond to His gospel, there will grow the good wheat of the kingdom. Also, there is good soil everywhere, our job is to go plant the seed.

2. There are pretenders in the kingdom. People leave the church because they discover that there are hypocrites and sinful people there who show no repentance. It has always been true that there are secret sinners and spies who have no business being in God's assembly but remain nevertheless in order to carry out their own agenda. However, this must not discourage sincere Christians, and is not a sign that the Kingdom has failed. It is, in fact, a sign that Satan is at work!

3. No one escapes judgement. Many think that their job is to find out who belongs in the kingdom and who does not. As the two previous parables have taught us, the Christian's task is to sow the seed of the kingdom and bear fruit in the kingdom, not seek out the imposters. Jesus guarantees us that when He returns at the end of the world, all those who do not belong in the kingdom will be rooted out, judged and punished. Only those who have been planted by Him will remain.

8.

Parables of: Seed, Mustard Seed and Workers

We have arrived at the last chapter in this book on the parables of the kingdom. Our goal was to understand the nature and character of God's kingdom from the teachings about it found in these kingdom parables.

We, in the church, are the kingdom. Every time Jesus says, "The kingdom is like..." He is also saying, "The church is like..." or "in the church this is the way things happen or this is what will take place."

Studying these parables is really about studying ourselves as Christians. What we have learned so far is that:

1. **Small but Powerful.** Although small in comparison to others in this world, the church has great proportional influence - even if it is unseen.
2. **Great Privilege.** It is a valuable privilege to be a member of the church.
3. **Different Rates.** People in the church grow at different rates depending on how they respond to God's word. Greater obedience = greater growth.

4. **Mercy: First and Last.** God's mercy is what allows entry into the church; faithfulness toward God and mercy toward others is what keeps us in the church.
5. **God will Judge.** God will purify His church at the coming of Jesus by removing all the hypocrites, disobedient and unfaithful from the kingdom.

In this chapter I would like to examine three final parables and share some insights about these in order to make our study complete.

THE PARABLE OF THE SEED

²⁶ And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; ²⁷ and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. ²⁸ The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

- Mark 4:26-29

This parable is one of the simplest and most ordinary of stories. Jesus recounts the cycle of planting and harvest. Once the seed is planted the farmer waits (sleeps) without worry for the harvest to come. The seed and soil do their work independently of the farmer's concern or lack of concern. In the end, the harvest will announce itself and it will be time for the farmer to do his work of collecting the crop.

Jesus describes a natural cycle with each stage happening in order and in its own time. As a parable about the kingdom Jesus is saying: once the seed of the kingdom is sown, the cycle of reproduction and harvest has been set into motion.

Despite storms, or trouble and time delay, this cycle will come to fruition. The job of the farmer (the workers) is not to figure out how the

seed grows, or worry about its rate of growth, or force its growth. His task is simply to plant the seed and wait for the harvest.

There will be a harvest.

In a larger sense, Jesus is saying that God's plan of sending Jesus to plant the kingdom and then returning for it at the end of the world, will come to fruition. Nothing will stop it once it has been set into motion. To His workers (disciples serving according to their talents), He promises that their planting will be rewarded with a harvest of some kind. They need not worry or become impatient.

The growth of the kingdom seems imperceptible, even to those within the kingdom, but the harvest (good works, changed lives, new Christians, etc.) will be visible in the end. This parable adds the idea that the church is fruitful if it follows the natural cycle of planting (the seed / word) and harvesting (good works, saved souls).

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

³⁰ And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? ³¹ 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, ³² 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

It is interesting that this is the only parable about the kingdom mentioned by three of the four gospels. There are no kingdom parables in John. The story in the parable is of the mustard seed, truly a small speck of a seed compared to other types of plant seeds. However, this plant/bush could grow into a shrub of over 10 feet in just a few weeks given the proper conditions.

People of that place knew the amazing growth rate of the shrub that Jesus described in this parable.

The point of the story was that such a small and insignificant seed could in short order provide shelter for the birds of the air. Something that took regular trees years, even decades to accomplish, was done in a relatively short time by this plant.

Again, the parallel is with the kingdom. The Bible provides a vivid description of the speed of growth the church had in the beginning. The parable speaks of rate of growth and provision for the birds. The parallel to the mustard seed is the story of the Lord's church beginning in dynamic fashion when 3,000 were converted in one day on Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2:1-47).

- Within a few years there were nearly 50,000 converts in the area.
- Within thirty years it had spread throughout the Roman Empire.
- After four centuries it was the official religion of the Roman world.

Judaism, or any other religion for that matter, had never grown so big or as quickly as Christianity. The birds finding shelter can be the lost finding shelter or safety in the kingdom, or can refer to the fact that the Gentiles found rest and protection within Christianity - something they never found in Judaism or paganism.

The church began with an executed leader and 12 Apostles preaching His message. Christianity overcame every religion as well as every political and philosophical group that tried to bar its way. This parable reinforces an idea about the church already made in other kingdom parables: that the church is small and weak-looking in comparison to other things, but has great proportional influence, growth and strength.

Parable of the Workers

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

² When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went.

⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

¹⁰ When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

¹¹ When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,

¹² saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' ¹³ But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?

¹⁴ Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last shall be first, and the first last."

- Matthew 20:1-16

This story was an unusual one. A man hired people at different times of the day to work in his field. He paid all of them the same wage even though they worked different hours. The crew hired first and who had worked all day grumbled, feeling that it was not fair that they received

the same amount as those who had only worked for an hour. The landowner replied that he had indeed been fair. He paid the first crew what they agreed upon for the work they had been contracted for (a denarius was above average for that time). He paid the other men the same amount, not because of their work but because he wanted to be generous.

Jesus finishes by warning his audience that not all things will be as they seem. Sometimes the first end up being last and those who are last are given a better position. Unlike the parables of the harvest or the mustard seed, this parable has no easy or natural application / parallel in the everyday world.

For the kingdom however, this parable teaches us several things:

1. Being in the Kingdom is a Matter of Grace.

None of the workers had employment, the money was more than any of them (even the first crew) would normally receive. In the same way, being in the church is a matter of God's grace. He finds us through His gospel; we enter in through the blood of Christ; we remain because of His grace, and we receive more than we ever deserve in material and physical blessings. God initiates our entry into the church, enables us to remain and blesses us every moment of our lives forever, all because of His grace.

2. The Order in the Kingdom is not Like the Order in the World.

The first crew's attitude was indicative of a worldly attitude: I was first, I worked longest, I worked the hardest; I deserve the best, the most.

This may be logical and just in many ways, but this is not the way things work in the kingdom. In the kingdom or church:

- The prize goes to the one who believes, not the one who deserves.

- The reward is for the one who trusts God, not the one who trusts in his work.

The one who pays His workers does so based on His goodness, not the goodness or value of the work of His workers. This is why some who think they are first in God's eyes (like the unbelieving Jews in the first century; or self-righteous people of today) may be last in His eyes; and those who seem to be last (sinners, those who struggle, those who come to Him late in life, those who have little to offer) may be first -- because of His kindness and their trust in Him.

In the church the rules of the world are turned upside down:

- The first are last; the last first.
- The weak are strong; the strong are blind.
- The leaders are servants, etc.

SUMMARY

In finishing this study, I want to add two last ideas to the five major ones we have drawn from the parables about the kingdom:

1. The church/Kingdom will continue to grow until its final harvest when Jesus comes. Nothing will stop the growth of the Kingdom because God is the one who began it and He will be there for the end. We should not worry about the destruction or failure of the church.

2. Things in the church function differently than things in the world. In its best mode the world operates on a principle of justice or fairness. In the kingdom, however, everything operates on the principle of grace: God's grace for us and our grace towards one another.

Jesus provides the conclusion and encouragement for these kingdom parables:

⁵¹ "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." ⁵² 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."

- Matthew 13:51-52

If you understand these things (kingdom parables) you are now like Scribes (those who taught and copied the scriptures). You are able to teach not only what the Old Testament said and meant, but now can add this new knowledge concerning the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the person of Jesus and His kingdom. If someone knows these things, he knows the full gospel, the revelation of God in Christ, and is now qualified to teach the Bible accurately.

I hope each person who reads this will find encouragement and security in the knowledge of these things about the kingdom / church.

I also hope that if you are not a member of Christ's church you will come confessing your faith, repenting of your sins and accept baptism for the remission of your sins (Acts 2:37-42), for this is the only way you can become a member of the kingdom of God which is the church.

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