

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

AN EXPOSITION OF THE KINGDOM PARABLES OF JESUS CHRIST IN
MATTHEW 13

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ABSTRACT

Title: AN EXPOSITION OF THE KINGDOM PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13
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This project investigated the impact of the exposition of Christ's kingdom parables in Matthew 13 as a means of teaching about mysteries of His kingdom. These expositions were given that believers would grow in their obedient worship of the King and understand more of His kingdom, and that unbelievers would surrender to His lordship. The series was preached at Newtown Bible Church in the summer of 2011.

Chapter 1 develops the purpose, goals, context, rationale, definitions of key terms and limitations employed in the project. The major goals of the project are to have the congregation apply the kingdom parables to their lives, to present to them the sovereign God who reveals and withholds knowledge for His own glory, to bolster their confidences in consecutive biblical exposition, to undergird the importance of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, and to lift high the Lord Jesus as the Master-Teacher that they might worship Him better.

Chapter 2 provides the theological and exegetical foundations for Jesus' usage of kingdom parables. The first part of the chapter surveys the unfolding of the King and His kingdom, as revealed first in the Gospels, then in Matthew's record, and finally by the Lord Jesus Himself. The chapter continues by giving definitions for parable and kingdom, as they provide significant insight for the study at hand. The chapter ends with textual research that contributed to the sermons.

Chapter 3 sets forth the history of parabolic interpretation, as well as the principles that should guide our interpretation of the parables of our Lord. It also gives some rationale for His teaching in parables.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the methods used to gather supporting data. Sermon scheduling, test group selection, focus group interaction, test surveys and sermon summaries were the collection strategies.

Chapter 5 assesses the goals and points to the effectiveness of the project in light of the analyzed data outcomes. It also identifies theological reflections and pinpoints areas for further study.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Purpose..... | 1 |
| Goals | 2 |
| Context..... | 9 |
| Rationale | 14 |
| Definitions and Limitations | 14 |
| | |
| CHAPTER TWO: THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR JESUS' USAGE OF KINGDOM PARABLES..... | 18 |
| Introduction..... | 18 |
| The Gospels' Presentation of the King | 18 |
| Matthew's Presentation of the King | 20 |
| Jesus' Teaching of the Kingdom Concept | 25 |
| Defining "Parable" for Study..... | 27 |
| Defining "Kingdom" for Study..... | 33 |
| Exegetical and Theological Basis for Kingdom Sermons | 36 |
| | |
| CHAPTER THREE: INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES..... | 58 |
| History..... | 58 |
| Principles..... | 62 |
| Jesus' Rationale for Using Parables..... | 76 |
| | |
| CHAPTER FOUR: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PREACHING PROJECT | 84 |
| Sermon Scheduling | 84 |
| Test Group Selection..... | 84 |
| Pre-Project Testing..... | 85 |
| Project Sermon-Series Preached..... | 86 |
| Post-Project Testing | 99 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Data Collection and Evaluation | 99 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT | 101 |
| Analysis of Project Data | 101 |
| Summary of the Study | 108 |
| Assessment of Ministry-Project Goals..... | 110 |
| Evaluation of Process..... | 115 |
| Theological Reflections | 116 |
| Conclusion | 116 |
| Implications for Further Study..... | 117 |
| | |
| APPENDICES | |
| Appendix A: Survey for Parable Study | 118 |
| Appendix B: Focus Group Questions | 121 |
| Appendix C: Sermon Outlines | 122 |
| | |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 140 |
| Reference Works..... | 140 |
| Journal and Periodical Articles | 140 |
| Unpublished and Online | 141 |
| Books and Multi-Author Works | 141 |

TABLES

| | |
|---|-----|
| 3.1 Figurative Language | 69 |
| 4.1 Demographic Data Chart | 103 |
| 4.2 Understanding of Key Concepts | 104 |
| 4.3 Changes in Biblical Knowledge..... | 106 |
| 4.4 Changes in Attitude..... | 107 |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------------|---|
| BDAG | Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3d ed. Chicago, 1999 |
| <i>BSac</i> | <i>Bibliotheca sacra</i> |
| MCEV | Contemporary English Version |
| ECNT | Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament |
| MNTC | MacArthur New Testament Commentary |
| NASU | New American Standard Update |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| PNTC | Pillar New Testament Commentary |
| <i>SJT</i> | <i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i> |
| TDNT | <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964-1976 |
| TEV | Today's English Version |
| NAC | New American Commentary |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of the project is to introduce the congregation to Jesus' kingdom parables in Mathew's concentrated presentation of them in his thirteenth chapter. My fellow pastor and I were desirous of beginning a home Bible-fellowship group to enhance the body life of Newtown Bible Church. This particular venue would provide another opportunity for Bible teaching, as well as more time for life-on-life, Gospel-centered fellowship. The Lord providentially showed us that this was the right time to start this group, with the hopes of starting more groups in the future as the Lord provides the teachers and the interest in different locales represented by our church. God providentially orchestrated all the events leading up to this series including, but not limited to His placement of me in the Doctor of Ministry program before moving here, placing a desire in my heart to exposit the Gospel of Matthew, even the placement of the Kingdom Parables in Matthew 13, making it the only place for an extended series for the preaching project when it comes due. This preaching project is just a simple desire to submit to the providential hand of God in fulfilling what is expected of me in the program that He so graciously placed me in, while faithfully shepherding those allotted to my care. My desire is that the living and active Word will work mightily in our lives through this extended discourse of our Savior—that this series will increase our love for Christ as well as our expressions of that love in worship and service.

The following goals were set as a yardstick for the work of God that is anticipated in this series—work of biblical knowledge that would lead to godly attitudes which, in turn, will foster worshipful adoration and obedience. Expository application is the goal of all preaching, which not only brings fulfillment to the preacher, but most importantly, glory to God (Phil 2:1–13; 1 Tim 4:7–9; Jas 1:22–27). Michael Fabarez gives helpful insight saying:

When Jesus spoke of ‘hearing the word,’ He made a radical distinction between delivering the sermon to His audience’s ears and delivering the sermon to affect their lives. In reference to His own preaching, Jesus often said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear!’ Obviously He meant something far more than people having an auditory experience, or even a mere learning experience. Jesus’ goal in preaching was to produce a ‘life-changing’ experience.¹

There are various beliefs and actions that God desires to change through His Word as He conforms His children into Christ-likeness and makes them more obedient worshippers of Him.

Goals

The first goal of the project calls the members of Newtown Bible Church (NBC) to evaluate their lives in regard to expository application of the teaching of the kingdom parables in their lives. The preaching and ministry practices that had gone on here for the first several years had been the kind that fosters a momentary decision to be made, but a preaching which did not encourage people to count the cost of following Christ and surrendering to His Lordship, with all that it entails. In dialoguing with the folks in the congregation, it was found that many of them walked the aisles at an altar-call but had not heard that coming to Christ demands such sacrifice and commitment by would-be disciples that Jesus Christ demands absolute surrender to His lordship (Luke 9:23). These

¹ Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), xi.

altar-call practices that call for human decisions, typically elicited by emotional manipulation, make no moral demands on sinners. Unfortunately they think people can believe in Christ but not repent. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives an accurate assessment of the pitfalls and danger of calling for decisions as he encourages preachers to not only preach clearly on the sovereignty of God in salvation, but to also allow His Spirit's sovereign work to control the methods in the evangelistic appeal during preaching. His chapter on "Calling for Decisions" is quite helpful.² He says:

If they have found salvation and are rejoicing in it, they will want to come to tell you about it. They will do so in their own time; let them do so. Do not force these things. This is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. His work is a thorough work, it is a lasting work; and so we must not yield to this over-anxiety about results. I am not saying it is dishonest, I say it is mistaken. We must learn to trust the Spirit and to rely upon His infallible work.³

This practice of not explaining the demands of those who claim that they want to follow Jesus Christ is called easy-believism. Easy-believism is a gospel presentation that calls people to "ask Jesus into your heart" and make Him your Savior, without surrendering to Him as your Lord.⁴ This contemporary error of modern churches not only had an effect on NBC but has infiltrated the masses of evangelicalism. The witness of Scripture testifies that what God saves, He also sanctifies (1 Cor 6:9–11). Those who follow Christ are to pursue sanctification, or they demonstrate that they are not kingdom citizens (Heb 12:14). There is no such thing as a life of faith that does not demonstrate good works as fruit of their new life in Christ (Rom 6–8). James says that a faith which does not manifest itself in works is not saving faith (Jas 2:14–16). Paul states that

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1972) 265–82.

³ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 282.

⁴ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008), 20.

salvation is by grace and through faith, but it is for the purpose of good works (Eph 2:8–10). Christ asserts that he who does the will of the Father will enter His kingdom (Matt 7:21). Titus was taught that the salvation God brings to man instructs one to deny ungodliness and live righteously and godly in this age (Titus 2:11–14). Noted Bible expositor, John MacArthur, has clarified the meaning of true salvation, discipleship, and kingdom living. He says:

The gospel according to Jesus explicitly and unequivocally rules out easy-believism. To make all of our Lord’s difficult demands apply only to a higher class of Christians blunts the force of His entire message. It makes room for a cheap and meaningless faith—a faith that has absolutely no effect on the fleshly life of sin. That is not saving faith.⁵

Matthew’s account gives clear instruction of what it means to be a true follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of going through religious ritual, but a call to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance,”⁶ as John told the religious crowd in the wilderness of Judea (Matt 3:8). Contrary to the wide way to heaven that is being promoted in many gospel presentations, Jesus said, “the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are *many* who enter through it” (Matt 7:13). And He follows that statement by noting there are *few* who find the narrow gate leading to life (Matt 7:14). In contrast to the masses that may be religious or make a religious decision at one time or another, only a few make it into the kingdom. In other words, there are many who think they are going to heaven but are not. Much of the confusion exists because *the way* has been muddied by encouraging people to simply pray a prayer, based on a minimal presentation of gospel truth, often leaving out important elements like the

⁵ MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 37.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations in this dissertation are from *The Updated New American Standard Bible* (NASU) translation, The Lockman Foundation, 2003.

holiness of God, the reality of sin, letting the Law of God produce proper conviction, or the need for a repentant faith in Christ. A repentant faith exhibits itself in fruit; it shows life, otherwise it is thrown into the fire and burned (Matt 7:19). Christ further asserts that “not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter” (Matt 7:21). There exists an absolute willingness to honor and obey and submit to Christ as Lord. It is not a matter of professing Christ as Lord, but in showing that He is the new Master in life. This manifestation is shown not just in religious performance (Matt 7:22) but in hearing the words of Christ and acting upon them (Matt 7:24).

The second goal of the project is to provide rationale for the members of NBC concerning why Jesus reveals certain truth only to believers, but withholds it from unbelievers. Folks have a tendency to look on this as unfair. Why would the Lord withhold “rightful” information about heaven and eternal life from people, such as what we see stated in Matthew 11:25 and explained in Matthew 13? What is the extent of God’s sovereignty and what right does He have to determine who understands His truth and who does not? I trust that when this series is completed God’s people will have a higher view of Him than before it was taught. This series seeks to unfold God’s grand attribute of sovereignty, with His absolute right to reveal His truth to those who are submissive to it and conceal it from those who are obstinate and hardened in their sin. The Pauline corpus of NT revelation further instructs on the hardening of sin that Christ introduces in Matthew 13.⁷ Paul wrote to Timothy about the reality of seared consciences (1 Tim 4:2), which darkens the understanding of unbelievers who are without the life of

⁷ For more on Divine hardening in the OT see Robert B. Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” *BSac* 153 (1996), 410–34.

God, leading them to the practice of more sin (Eph 4:18–9). Rather than the revelation of further truth, God’s wrath abides on those who suppress His truth (Rom 1:18, 21–24).

Since they *will* not believe, God assures them that they *cannot* believe (Matt 13:13).

The third goal of the project is to bolster their understanding of, and confidence in, consecutive biblical exposition as the correct and preferred means of instructing the local church in God’s truth. This goal is not suggesting that there is never a time for an expositional sermon on a larger portion of Scripture. After all, the next series in our home-fellowship group will seek to enhance our congregation’s understanding of how each biblical book contributes to the one Book, which is the Bible, and we will do this by delivering one sermon for each of the books of the Bible. However, our conviction is that the best way to teach the Scriptures is for each author of a biblical book to present his inspired writings one verse at a time, consecutively. David Murray gives a concise list of the benefits of verse-by-verse, consecutive exposition:

- The pastor and congregation are ‘stretched to preach on and hear about subjects that would not be normally chosen.
- The preacher and hearers are immersed in one book of the Bible for many weeks and months.
- It helps to keep passages in context.
- It teaches people how to read and study their Bibles.
- It provides a balanced diet and prevents pastors from sticking to their ‘hobby horses.’
- The pastor does not need to agonize over his choice of text each week.
- There does not need to be so much introduction and background given each week.
- The overall argument or narrative of the book is better grasped and understood.
- It helps people to see the overall plan of Scripture.
- It encourages people to prepare ahead by reading and thinking about the passage.
- It emphasizes the centrality and authority of Scripture.⁸

⁸ David Murray, “Pros and Cons of Consecutive Expository Preaching.” <http://headhearhand.org/blog/2011/08/24/pros-and-cons-of-consecutive-expository-preaching/> (accessed

Furthermore, if the goal of exegesis is to understand authorial intent, then exposition is the clear communication of authorial intent. The conviction maintained is that “God’s purpose in granting biblical revelation to the human race was to make His will known, not to create uncertainty among the recipients of His revelation.”⁹ A book of the Bible must be studied and proclaimed completely, considering what the author taught previously and subsequent to the text. The following section on context will flesh out the great necessity for biblical exposition in the congregation. The expositor who desires to be faithful is one who follows the example laid down in Scripture, whether it be the example laid down by Ezra who stood at a wooden podium to “read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Neh 8:4, 8) or Jesus who used the OT to explain or interpret (διερμηνεύω) the Scriptures to His disciples (Luke 24:27).

The fourth goal of the project is to instruct and reinforce their understanding of the grammatical-historical approach of hermeneutics. The typical means of topical preaching, unaided by grammatical-historical hermeneutics, that occurs in many churches has not only hampered the spiritual growth of those who have come from such congregations, but has also lessened the proper understanding of what God means by what He has said in His Word. Furthermore, this topical approach to Scripture (without concentrated attention to context) greatly minimizes Scriptural authority, as it leaves open various so-called “interpretations” of any given text. They need to be shown how the

September 22, 2011). This article does not present an exhaustive list of reasons, but can be supplemented with Dr. Clint Arnold’s article, “7 Reasons in Support of Consecutive Exposition of the Scripture” (<http://talbot.edu>) or Matt Weymeyer’s, “A Case for Consecutive Exposition” (<http://expositorythoughts.wordpress.com>).

⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 226. A helpful list (to be used cautiously, see pp. 125–27) of how to arrive at the author’s intended meaning is offered in Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 106–108.

culture of the original audience explains how they would have understood any given text, for what it meant to the original hearers is the same meaning that has been frozen in time in the pages of Scripture for the contemporary audience. “The meaning of the biblical text is fixed and unchanging.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the grammar and syntax, as written in the original languages, explain in detail the author’s message.

The preacher’s view of Scripture (in addition to the previous list on the benefits of consecutive exposition) should influence and even control how he teaches it. There are several different kinds of preaching: topical, textual, theological, thematic, and expositional. Yet, if he desires to remain consistent with his conviction that he is called by God to preach the Word (2 Tim 4:2) which is inspired (2 Tim 3:16), inerrant, and infallible, then he will typically do verse-by-verse, consecutive exposition, though he may step outside that normal practice from time to time. Since the Bible is inspired, this kind of preaching reflects God’s intent in addressing books to people, which are given for a specific purpose that elicited the book being written in the first place. Since the Bible is inerrant (Rom 3:3–4; Ps 19:7) and is given divine trustworthiness, its order and arrangement is to take God at His word in the most literal sense. It is not arranged randomly or haphazardly, so to follow the flow of thought as it is unfolded is to practice inerrancy in exposition. Finally, since the Bible is infallible (Matt 5:18; 24:35), each chapter, paragraph, and verse stands on its own authority and deserves individual sermonic attention.

The fifth goal is to reveal Jesus as the Master-Teacher. I desire to show what elevated Christ’s teaching from the scribes, namely that He had inherent authority to proclaim God’s message (Matt 7:29), as opposed to their dependence on other rabbis. He

¹⁰ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 145.

told parables to capture attention (Matt 22:33) and drive for a decision, but did so in His preaching/teaching ministry. Though the rabbis often used parables, Jesus took that familiar tool of teaching and transformed it, using it as a form of divine revelation. “In His development of the form Jesus is much superior to the Rabbis, whether in the wealth of imagination, the power of short and realistic depiction, or the spiritual force of the ideas presented. His parables express His disturbing new thinking as compared with Judaism.”¹¹ If He told stories, why are contemporary preachers not allowed to turn from a ministry of proclamation to narrative? What makes the message so compelling that it must be obeyed? Where does the authority come from? The outstanding feature is that because Jesus was God, He thus spoke as One with inherent authority, not following the rabbinic custom of the day which required them to quote other rabbis to substantiate their authority.

Context

I have the privilege of being a regular teaching elder at NBC. This church is located in southwestern Connecticut. It was formerly known as Bible Baptist Church of Newtown. This congregation held its first public service on August 12, 1962, at the Newtown High School, after it had already met for a year through weekly prayer meetings. It was organized as a Baptist Church, associated with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, on March 13, 1963. Several people in the congregation have come from Baptist churches and did not understand the difference in belief and practice between their former Baptist churches (or any church, for that matter) and that of this Bible church. We rely on grammatical-historical hermeneutics and expository preaching

¹¹ Gerhard Kittel, “παραβολή” *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 5:754.

to direct us in what we believe and practice. We are still baptistic in that we practice believer's baptism; it is only open to those who profess Jesus as Savior and Lord, as opposed to paedobaptism. We baptize out of obedience to the Lord's command to the church to do so as we go about making disciples (Matt 28:19). As the Lord adds to His Church through salvation, believers are baptized (Acts 2:40).

We are a church that subscribes to a regenerate membership (Eph 2:11–3:6). Yet, one of the features that we emphasize in the ministry here is the way that members are taken into the church. This membership is not initiated through baptism. In many churches, people are brought into membership through baptism.¹² Since the Bible sets forth the importance of shepherding people through the issues of life and bringing clarity to Scriptural teaching, we offer classes to educate people on what baptism signifies. With the many false assumptions of baptismal regeneration,¹³ it is imperative that the pastor shepherd people through the issue of baptism so that they understand that they, in this act, in no way contribute to their salvation. In many churches, a person can make a profession of salvation, go through the waters of baptism, and join the church all in the same day. Former National Representative of GARBC, Paul Jackson, stated in his book on Baptist churches that “water baptism is the means by which believers are publicly inducted into discipleship (Matt 28:19–20) and added to the church.”¹⁴ This custom has taken place in the history of this church. It is a practice that can contribute to the high attrition rate in churches. The sheep need to be shepherded. They need to be instructed on the real

¹² Edward T. Hiscox, *Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications), 74–75.

¹³ Hiscox, *Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches*, 482.

¹⁴ Paul R. Jackson, *The Doctrine and Administration of the Church* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press), 59.

possibility of false professions (Matt 7:21–23) and the frightening reality that those who fall away from Christ demonstrate that though they profess to know Christ, they do not have saving faith (Matt 13:21) and they demonstrate that by leaving the fellowship of the brethren (1 Jn 2:19). A new members' class that teaches about the responsibilities and privileges of membership is taught regularly at NBC. We make a concerted effort not to automatically accept people into membership based solely upon their profession. An author and pastor of the previous century concurs that “many Christians, deemed evangelical, not a few Christian teachers, and some entire denominations do not agree; such persons claiming that nothing more than good moral character and a serious disposition to attend to religious instruction should be demanded in candidates for Church membership.”¹⁵ The first step of being a biblical church is a firm commitment to the saving gospel, for without regeneration, there is no church (Eph 2:11–3:6). Then, *after* someone gives a credible profession of repentant faith placed in Christ alone (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 11:18; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:10; Isa 55:6–7), confession of Jesus Christ as their sovereign Lord (Rom 10:9–10; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11), and then are instructed on biblical membership, they can be assimilated into the gospel ministry of membership. Our Lord and His apostles were emphatic that the Church consists of those who manifest marked difference from the world around them. It “grows into a *holy* temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21), because it is God’s “workmanship, created in Christ for good works” (Eph 2:10); it consists of saints, in this case, saints at Ephesus (Eph 1:1). The church is made up of those who manifest that they have been delivered from their present evil system (Gal 1:4); those who have been called out of darkness into light, from the kingdom of the evil one into heavenly places (Eph 2:1–6). Mark Dever and Paul

¹⁵ Hiscox, *Principles and Practices*, 64.

Alexander address this misguided practice of many churches, which serves as a practical warning, not only to NBC, but to other such churches. The biblical basis comes from Matthew 13, which will be taught on in this series:

At the end of the day, we simply have to admit that the wheat will grow with the tares (Matt 13:24–43) until the Lord returns. But that fact doesn't give us license for pastoral irresponsibility in the way we take new members into our churches. We need to be faithful to do all we can to externally ensure that no unconverted person becomes a member of our local church. Perhaps it sounds unloving to question people's salvation when they ask to become members of our churches. But if membership is a local church's external affirmation of a person's spiritual conversion, then the most *unloving* thing we can do is mislead condemned people into thinking they are saved by conferring membership upon them too hastily. If we love people, and if we care about the corporate testimony of our local church, we will protect both by being careful about whom we accept into membership. Don't leave the front door unlatched.¹⁶

There may be a minimal time between someone being born again and their following the Lord in obedience to believers' baptism. However, there should be an opportunity for time to pass in order to confirm the sincerity of their profession of faith. It provides a chance to demonstrate the fruit of regeneration before church membership is conferred on them. We should heed the caution of one learned minister that:

No amount of attestation can make the world believe that he is a Christian whose conduct does not correspond to his profession. And if there cannot be a good degree of conformity between the professed and the practical, persons had better remain out of the Church than to enter it...those pastors make a grave mistake, and are grievously in fault, who hurry persons into the Church without giving the body a fair and full opportunity of gaining evidence of their regenerate state.¹⁷

Membership is the way in which a church, a local assembly of believers, endorses a person's salvation. They do not have absolute knowledge that their membership is made up 100 percent of true Christians, but to the best of their ability, they have covenanted to

¹⁶ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 65.

¹⁷ Hiscox, *Principles and Practices*, 71–72

serve their Savior together with likeminded disciples. The least loving thing the body of believers can do is confer membership on a person who is self-deceived, with no understanding of justification. Rather than aid in the delusion, the church's responsibility is to address the issue of true, biblical conversion.

Another area of ministry that absolutely must be addressed is the centrality of the pulpit to biblical ministry. Preaching is the best and the God-ordained manner of educating the Church on Gospel ministry. It is at the preaching events that the church is collectively gathered together for instruction and fed the Truth by one who has studied its meaning. Michael Lawrence points toward biblical ministry in asserting:

God has spoken through His written Word (and the lips of his human vessel). In His Word, He has revealed who He is, who we are, and how he calls humanity generally and His people specifically to live. Non-Christians are saved and Christians grow in grace through the preaching, teaching, counseling, and speaking of God's Word, applied by God's Spirit. Our goal as pastors and Christians in ministry is to present the Word to others, so that the Word might do its work...everything that we say, sing, pray, and practice in our church gatherings should come from the Bible.¹⁸

All of what is done in the church and by the church—worship, service, evangelism, etc.—is informed by God's Truth and becomes an outgrowth of the proclaimed Word. Fortunately, the historical preaching context of NBC has been faithful, expository preaching on a weekly basis, for at least the past 15 years. This history runs contrary to many churches, where the sermons on a weekly basis consist of a set of verses, a verse, or a part of a verse, which the preacher uses as a launching pad for his address to the congregation. Often such a practice is done without any (or minimal) attention to context, especially in regards to the historical-grammatical approach used by Bible expositors.

¹⁸ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16–17.

Rationale

I chose Matthew's account as the first book to preach through at this ministry with the express purpose of deepening my own love for Christ and leading the congregation in His footsteps to accomplish the same results. This desire permeated my heart before leaving seminary. My own desire was to walk with the Savior on a weekly basis in my expositional ministry. The deciding factor in choosing the kingdom parables of Jesus for a preaching series is because chapter thirteen is the next text in Matthew to take the congregation through. It was not my desire to leave the current study in Matthew for the preaching series. Thus, God's providential hand determined the preaching series for this congregation and pastor.

Definitions and Limitations

Definitions

Expository Preaching

Richard Mayhue gives a cogent definition of expository preaching. He says it “focuses predominantly on the text(s) under consideration along with its (their) context(s). Exposition normally concentrates on a single text of Scripture, but it is sometimes possible for a thematic/theological message or a historical/biographical discourse to be expository in nature. An exposition may treat any length of passage.”¹⁹ In *Power in the Pulpit*, Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix define an expository sermon as “a discourse that expounds a passage of Scripture, organizes it around a central theme and main divisions which issue forth from the given text, and then decisively applies its

¹⁹ Richard L. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 7–8.

message to the listeners.”²⁰ Expository preaching is a bold proclamation from a biblical text that expounds the thought of the author rather than imposing foreign ideas on the text (called “eisegesis”). Thomas’ comments are instructive again in asserting:

Our goal is the objective meaning of Scripture. Let us not become distracted from pursuing it. It is within the capability of the Spirit-illuminated believer to arrive at objective meaning—i.e., the meaning God intended to transmit through His human authors...hermeneutics needs to accentuate the positive value of objectivity and eliminate negative concessions to subjectivity.²¹

The main points of the passage are extracted through careful exegesis (study of original languages and structure), drawing out the original meaning, being careful not to read into the text one’s own meaning, but diligently applying the original meaning to the present-day hearer, giving the hearer the sense of the text. The exegete studies the text in its own historical, grammatical context and communicates its truth, with the goal of expositional application.²² So, to exposit is to expose, to make visible, to make known the truth of God—that is, to show something for what it really is. It helps the hearer understand a subject so that he applies its principles to life in the sanctification process. In other words, the Bible expositor *exposes* his hearers to the text of Scripture, he *explains* the text of Scripture, and he *exhorts* them to obey/apply the text of Scripture to their lives.

²⁰ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 29

²¹ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 57.

²² Expositional application is the general term utilized in this paper that covers any of the biblically expected responses (in attitude and/or action) to the Bible of obedience (Matt 7:21; John 15:14ff; Rom 16:26; Jas 1:19–25; 1 Pet 1:2), worship (Rom 12:1), and service (1 Cor 15:58; Eph 4:12; Rev 22:12; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 2 Cor 5:10) to name a few. The preacher should urge his congregation to ask: Are there doctrines to be believed, commands to be obeyed, warnings to be heeded, models to be imitated or avoided, and promises to be treasured and trusted?

Hermeneutics

This term refers to the discipline of applying a set of principles to the text of Scripture in order to determine its meaning. Fuller ramifications of the importance of hermeneutical principles are highlighted in chapter three, giving principles of the grammatical-historical approach to studying the Bible, which “offers a system of checks and balances designed to assure the accurate reception of this communication.”²³ Great importance is given to this chief element because it is imperative for the Bible-expositor to show people publicly how to interpret their Bibles on their own. These are guiding principles for practicing exegesis, the explanation of the meaning of Scripture. It is only once the text is interpreted that it can be applied to life.

Parable

Though *parable* will be defined more in depth in the next chapter, a simplified definition is that a parable is a word-picture. Jesus took an everyday feature that His hearers were familiar with and put that concept next to the spiritual truth about His kingdom that it illustrated.

Mystery

Another vital term to define is *mystery*. Jesus used parables to instruct His disciples about different aspects of His kingdom. A mystery was something that had previously not been understood until the appointed time. In the NT, the word connotes a secret of the OT that had now become known in the progress of revelation. It is not something that is a puzzle, but something previously only known by God Himself until, at His appointed time, He chose to reveal it. A passage like Ephesians 3:4–10

²³ Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 426.

demonstrates that Gentiles, being fellow heirs with the Jews in one body, the Church, was a mystery unknown in the OT, but revealed in the NT.

Kingdom

A final term that needs some clarification is that of *kingdom*; more particularly: ‘What kingdom is He referring to?’ It is no small feat to define such a term clearly and with an economy of words. In essence, it consists of both the *realm* and the *rulership* of the rightful King, Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Limitations

The subjects that are contained in this study—parables, the kingdom, hermeneutics, expository preaching—are so broad, that this paper could not exhaust them. This study does not seek to present a comprehensive resource on any of the topics that are discussed; however enough of each subject is covered to give clarity to how it bears on this particular study of the kingdom parables found in Matthew 13 for the expositional series.

CHAPTER TWO
EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR JESUS' USAGE OF
KINGDOM PARABLES

Introduction

The Bible expositor who seeks to understand the parables of the Bible in general and Jesus' kingdom parables in particular is in for one long and exhausting, but rewarding, journey. It will prove to be a fun and rewarding adventure as well, both for him and those he teaches. Though there is so much to be said about parables, this expositor has sought to highlight Matthew's focus on the kingdom parables, while also carrying on faithful shepherding of his congregation and family. There are many more parables than this study seeks to address and much more to be said about the kingdom than the scope of this paper entails. In order to gain a preliminary understanding of the breadth of the kingdom, as taught by Christ and revealed through the pages of Scripture, a survey of the biblical text must be conducted. It is best to begin with the larger overall context of the Gospels, then narrow down to Matthew's presentation, and finally see how Jesus Himself presented His kingdom.

The Gospels' Presentation of the King

The gospels lay the foundation for the rest of the NT. They are not situated first in the NT canon because they were written first, but because they are the foundation upon

which Acts and the epistles are built.²⁴ In fact, they provide the historical and theological background for the entire NT. The four complementary views of the life of Jesus Christ tell the story which lies at the heart of Christianity. Neither the growth nor the life of the Church, which are expanded upon throughout the rest of the NT, would make any sense if removed from the foundational remarks of the four gospels. The NT is not arranged chronologically, but theologically, according to the unfolding of biblical revelation. The NT is organized in categories. The first five books are historical, followed by twenty-one epistolary letters, and ending with one a prophetic book. The Gospels record the coming of the King with His kingdom message. The rest of the NT records the kingdom's expanse and expectations through the church, which is part of that kingdom. The NT begins with the arrival of the King and His message of the kingdom and continues with the propagation of the King's message throughout the known world. It then expounds on the explanation of the King's message, and culminates with the consummation of the kingdom. Craig Blomberg mentions "Matthew contains the greatest number of links with Judaism and the OT. It probably was placed first in the collection of Gospels when they were initially brought together in the second century and viewed as on par with the already existing Hebrew Scriptures, precisely for that reason."²⁵

The central personality of OT prophecy is the coming great King who will rule in God's future kingdom. His coming is first promised in Genesis 3:15, when the LORD God told the serpent that the woman's seed will bruise his head. Christ the King is seen in many shadows, figures, and types, even as the chief cornerstone which the builders would

²⁴ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the New Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 303.

²⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, NAC*, vol 22, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 3.

reject (Ps 118:22), but in Whom people would find refuge (Isa 28:16). It is because of the many prophecies of the Messiah in the OT that Jesus could turn to the OT to instruct His disciples in all the passages pointing to Himself (Lk 24:27). Over and over we are told of a special individual who has the righteousness, wisdom, power, authority, and right to reign—not only over Israel—but the whole earth. He is the One that is revealed in the Gospels. Though paradise was lost in the Garden of Eden due to sin, all of redemptive history past had looked for the One who would subdue the wicked one (Gen 3:15) and establish His kingdom of righteousness.

Matthew's Presentation of the King²⁶

The Messiah is magnificently portrayed in the pages of Matthew—who came not only to offer Himself as Israel's Davidic king, but as the King of His own kingdom that eventually extends to all corners of the globe and beyond, even to hidden recesses of the human heart. Rather than use a strict chronological timeline, Matthew thematically presents Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the Promised One of the OT prophecies. The manner in which the nation of Israel gradually rejected her Messiah is of great significance. It started first with the religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees. Then others joined from the fickle crowd who would eventually call for His death, just as the Pharisees had done early on in Matthew's account when they plotted for His death (Matt 12:14). As Matthew presents Israel's King, he emphasizes many varying facets of Christ's life—His genealogy, fulfilled OT prophecy, His authority and power—all to show Christ's Messianic credentials. Jesus' baptism, messages, and miracles all point to the same

²⁶ Inherent in the usage of this term is also the kingdom, including both a realm and a rulership. There can be no king without people to rule over. It would also be foolish for one to assert himself as king if he had not the power or authority to maintain his throne.

inescapable reality: Christ is King. He is the King come from God who has clearly been revealed, rejected, and yet will return.

Person of the King

Matthew begins his gospel account by presenting the *person of the King*. He tells how Jesus had a supernatural birth and devoting thirty-one verses in all to demonstrate Jesus' royal-yet-human descent to the Davidic throne through Joseph, and also had divine qualifications since He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He then details Jesus' baptism to be a type of coronation service, as His Father and the Holy Spirit were present to affirm Him as God's beloved One. Then Matthew goes on to detail the temptation account where Jesus victoriously withstood the temptation of the wicked one and thus began His public ministry and the proclamation of His Messianic Kingdom (Matt 4:12).

Preaching of the King

Matthew then records the *preaching of the King* in the longest recorded sermon of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). The first part of this sermon could be viewed as the Monarch's Manifesto, which details what the citizens of His kingdom look like from the inside out. It teaches what attitudes are characteristic of His servants; how they demonstrate that they are citizens of His kingdom. He even teaches some precepts of this kingdom that far-surpassed the minimal standards of the Pharisees and scribes—precepts that truly are the essence of God's moral law. The religious leaders had been guilty of lowering the standard that God had established—that of absolute perfection (Matt 5:48). They lessened it so that it could be attained by sinful man instead of upholding God's absolute standard which could only be satisfied by the perfect Mediator, the Messiah. Jesus even assaulted the hypocrisy that had come to be associated with Judaism in that

day. He closes His famous sermon with a call for those who are possessors, not mere professors, of this new kind of life in His kingdom to show it forth, by attentively hearing His words and acting upon them (Matt 7:24).

It was this amazing kind of teaching that astonished the crowds and set Jesus Christ apart from the teachers of Judaism, “for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:29). He spoke as one who demanded absolute adherence to God’s law, which would permeate one’s entire life from the inside out. This kind of teaching about the kingdom is not what the Jews had expected. They had planned on the Messiah ushering in a political, earthly kingdom. But a person *cannot* read much of Jesus’ revelation of His kingdom without seeing that it has a spiritual component to it as well.

Proof of the King

Matthew continues to present the King and His kingdom by giving *proof of the King*. In fact, Matthew devotes nearly two full chapters to show Jesus’ power as the reigning Monarch of the universe. Christ demonstrated power over defilement (Matt 8:1–4), distance—not needing to even be present in order to heal (Matt 8:5–13), disease (Matt 8:14–17), the disciples (8:18–22), the deep (Matt 8:23–27), and demons (Matt 8:28–34). He further showed power over sin (Matt 9:1–17), death (Matt 9:18–26), darkness (Matt 9:27–31), dumbness (Matt 9:32–34), and disease (Matt 9:35). He not only claimed to be King, but also demonstrated that He held the power of kingship—He demonstrated the very power of God.

Program of the King

Matthew next concentrates his teaching on the *program of the King*. This program of gathering in Christ's harvest of souls is at first entrusted to a mere twelve men. Jesus calls and commissions these men to carry forth the gospel of the kingdom. This program is rejected gradually, beginning with the rejection of the King's witness, John the Baptist, who is in prison (Matt 11:2). In the first of several uses, Jesus exhorts His hearers to hear the message of the kingdom: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt 11:15). Yet humble reception is precisely what the Jews—mostly through her religious leaders—were unwilling to do. It did not matter whether it was John the Baptist or Jesus Christ of Nazareth, they did not want to repent, even though the kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Those who were supposed to be shepherding the people, knowing God's truth and teaching it (rather than the traditions of men) to others, were unwilling to change and unwilling to respond to the message of Jesus and His representatives. Instead, they had put exorbitant burdens on those who wanted to follow God (Matt 23:4). They had substituted their traditions (Matt 15:3), interpretations and additions to the law of God for the truth.

Then, after calling all the burdened to Himself (placing Himself in contrast to the false prophets of the day), Jesus exerts His own lordship over the Sabbath. Chapter twelve is where Jesus challenges the religious leaders and even refuses to engage them on a miraculous level by performing signs (Matt 12:39). He shows that He is Lord over ceremonial law (which was upheld in strictest loyalty), by supporting His disciples' actions on the Sabbath because He is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–8). To bring to the surface how far the Pharisees had departed from God's law and love, Jesus heals a man

on the Sabbath, knowing it would induce hostility: they had asked if it was lawful to do such a thing on the Sabbath, seeking to accuse Him (Matt 12:9–14). Though they saw the same miracle as the other onlookers, they were not wondering, “Is this man the Son of David?” (Matt 12:23). Instead, they plotted on how they could destroy Him, saying that He did this great deed through the power of Satan. As they rejected the work done by Jesus through the power of the Spirit, they also were rejecting His lordship, forgiveness, and kingdom. They were not with Him, but against Him. They did not desire to gather with Him, so they scattered abroad. Not willing to submit to His lordship, they maintained rule of their own lives, or so they thought.

It is at this very point that Israel, mostly in the form of its religious leaders, rejected Jesus’ kingdom. They were happy to receive His good deeds of compassionate healings, but would not accept His message to which those same works attested to. Therefore, Jesus would no longer address the crowds with His clear, unambiguous message of the kingdom, but would speak to them in parables. As will be stated later in this paper, His parabolic teaching will conceal His truth in judgment upon those whose hearts are not open and it will reveal His kingdom concepts to those who are members of that kingdom and who follow Him in obedience. It is Matthew alone who will later record the parable of the wedding feast in which Jesus shows how Israel will be unbelieving for a time and so He will turn to those who will be faithful to the revelation given (Matt 22:2–14). Since they rejected His public ministry, they brought about the beginning of this different presentation of His program.

Chapter thirteen begins the third of Jesus’ major discourses, and at this juncture shows a definitive turning point in His ministry. Here we find Jesus begin to use to the

fullest extent His characteristic method of teaching in parables. The parabolic teaching method must be clearly understood since it comprised one-third of His teaching.²⁷ To misunderstand His parables is to misunderstand a great deal of His ministry. He used this method so much among the crowds that Matthew and Mark record: “and He did not speak to them without a parable” (Matt 13:34; Mark 4:34). From Matthew 13 forward, Jesus having been rejected by His own, will only teach the public in parabolic fashion so that they will “keep on hearing, but will not understand” (Matt 13:14b) because they have hard hearts.

Jesus’ Teaching of the Kingdom Concept

It is important to come to an understanding of the kingdom since Matthew’s Gospel refers to it so often. An understanding of the kingdom aids not only in explaining the meaning of Matthew, it also aids in explaining the teaching of the whole Bible. The kingdom is the unifying theme of Scripture. However, people have often been guilty of over-simplifying this concept because they explain it based on isolated verses of Scripture rather than sorting through what all of Holy Scripture says on the subject. Dr. Hoyt points to the reason for varied views on the kingdom which “...have grown out of the fact that men have dwelt upon some one aspect of the kingdom to the exclusion of the other aspects. This has produced inadequacy and ultimate falsity in these views.”²⁸ Instead, a diligent student must base his understanding of this doctrine on an inductive study of all the scriptural evidence in regard to the kingdom. Furthermore, the exegete cannot oversimplify the wealth of biblical data on the kingdom nor the variety of

²⁷ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 14.

²⁸ Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2006), 168.

different aspects of the kingdom that comparative texts teach. George Ladd challenges that, “If you will take a concordance of the Bible, look up every reference in the New Testament alone where the word ‘kingdom’ occurs, write down a brief summary of each verse on a piece of paper, you will probably find yourself at a loss to know what to do with the complexity of teaching.”²⁹ If anything, the student of Scripture should understand the grandeur of this subject, not limiting it to one simple aspect that any single verse may address. He must not be content with a package or paradigm that oversimplifies and reduces this rich and complex concept of the kingdom. It is something that is vast in scope throughout history and extends into the eternal state, which is often referred to simply as heaven.

The only possible way to understand to what kingdom Jesus refers and what it is like is to think about what kingdom would come to the mind of His listeners while He taught. Christ never paused to define the kingdom. It was assumed that they already had learned of the kingdom in the OT Scriptures; it was understood. The only kingdom Jesus could be referring to is the one spoken of in the OT. Those who heard His teachings of the kingdom were students of the OT, so they never asked Him to explain what this kingdom of God is all about. Though the teachings in the OT of the kingdom are only in seed form and much remains a mystery until NT teaching (in the progress of revelation), it is there nonetheless. The OT gives only limited and incomplete glimpses, but it does in fact instruct on much of the kingdom of God, especially its physical aspects. Its spiritual ramifications, brought about by the new birth are introduced in the NT. In reality, most of the OT prophecies point *not* to the first coming of Jesus, as the baby of Bethlehem, but to His second coming, as the conquering King. They speak of the establishment of the

²⁹ George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of The Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1959), 16.

earthly aspect of His kingdom during the Millennium, but nothing is said of the present aspect of His kingdom in the hearts of His people during the Church Age while He is physically absent from the earthly throne.

The concentration of parables in Matthew 13 is referred to as kingdom parables because they expose the facets of the present kingdom until the earthly, eternal kingdom is set up.³⁰ Though the nation of Israel had rejected Jesus' message of the kingdom, He continues to teach on the arrival of the kingdom in His own personhood. He declares, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Matt 4:17) as did His forerunner, John the Baptist (Matt 3:2). Fulfillment of Old Testament promises had finally started to unfold. Each of these parables explores and expands the theme of the kingdom a little further.

Defining "Parable" for Study

The first question that must be answered in coming to the parables of Jesus is, "What is a parable?" The word "parable" comes from the Greek verb Παραβάλλω, meaning "to throw/lay beside," or "by,"³¹ even "compare."³² It is from the Hebrew word מִשְׁלָּה, which means "similitude" or rendered "discourse" or "oracle" in places like Psalm 78:2.³³ It is too simplistic to say that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning"³⁴ because it entails so much more than that.

³⁰ For more on this concept see the textual basis for sermons, later in this chapter.

³¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 593.

³² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and aug. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 758.

³³ Merrill Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 960.

The parable could be classified as one of the many forms of figurative language utilized in the Bible. This is because it will use a real truth in the realm of nature or human life to illustrate, teach, and give perspective to the truth being expressed therein. The similitude from nature, human relationships, and customs is used simply as a teaching technique. There is some variation in its usage, as it refers to an abbreviated simile (a comparison, often using *like* or *as*) or an extended story. It is different in form from the allegory, which is also used for illustrative purposes. But what separates it from an allegory is that it makes a comparison from nature, human objects, or human experiences to something not that it becomes such. In an allegory, the item becomes or acts like another. Several well-known allegories in Scripture are the LORD as a Shepherd (Ps 23:1–4) or Jesus as a Shepherd (John 10:1–16) or Vine (John 15:1–6). This particular teaching genre is also different from the fable, for parables take their material from real life, rather than the imagination.

It is used in diverse ways, especially in the Old Testament: a proverbial saying (1 Sam 10:12; Ezek 12:22); a byword, or proverb (Ps 41:14; 69:11); a prophetic utterance (Num 23:7); an allegorical utterance (Ezek 17:1); teaching involving similitude (Ezek 24:3); poem (Num 21:27–30); proverbs and wise sayings (Prov 10:1; 1 Sam 24:13); riddles (Judg 14:12); and allegorical parable (2 Sam 12). It has a clear heritage in wisdom literature that gives examples from real life (Ps 1; Prov 22:17–23:10; 23:13), often using the comparative “as” to form a spiritual or moral parallel to a life situation (Prov 25:11–13; 26:18). “However, a narrower sense of the term developed in the Old Testament and

³⁴ Sally Michael, *Things Hidden* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2000), 13.

rabbinic literature—that of illustration or figurative essay.”³⁵ In using it, the teacher takes something true to life to teach a spiritual truth, weaving it around a main theme.³⁶ The OT term לְפָרֹשׁ is translated forty times as παραβολή (parable)³⁷ in the Septuagint (LXX). So this term which was used often in common speech, wisdom literature, and prophetic utterances, was used in the LXX in reference to Παραβολή. It is also translated by the Greek term παροιμία on occasion.³⁸ This term is used in the NT to mean “parable” or “proverb.” Both of those words come from the same Hebrew word *marshal*, with παραβολή being limited to “illustration” and παροιμία confined to “proverb.” The writers of the Gospels prefer themselves to the LXX usage, using it for short sayings or long stories.

Jesus, as the Master Teacher, could have used several effective means to convey truth, but He chose this unforgettable tool, which is the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceives it in abstractions. “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”³⁹ There is something intriguing about a parable. It has an engaging character to it. As Unger states so well, “The mind takes a natural delight in this manner of teaching, appealing as it does not to the understanding

³⁵ Stanley A. Ellisen, “The Hermeneutics of the Parables” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1964), 60.

³⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 208.

³⁷ Bauer, *BDAG*, 612.

³⁸ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 755.

³⁹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow, Great Britain: William Collins Sons, 1983), 16.

only, but to the feelings, to the imagination, in short to the whole man, calling as it does the whole man, with all its powers and faculties, into pleasurable activity; and all things thus learned with delight are those longest remembered.”⁴⁰ Jesus, in confining Himself to a simplistic, human language, takes a metaphor from everyday common life to make the lesson vivid to the mind, even memorable. Through this intriguing manner of instruction, “hearers and readers, by sensing the comparison or analogy between the story and their own situation, are prodded to think.”⁴¹ As the hearer begins to think, he is forced to get involved in the teaching moment by asking, “What is the point of the story? What spiritual truth is being illustrated? What analogy is being made?” After all, that is the nature of all effective teaching—taking the known to instruct hearers on the unknown. Looking at the word’s etymology, there is παρά (“beside or alongside”) and βαλλεῖν (“to throw”).⁴² Therefore what we have in a parable is a true-to-life story thrown alongside the truth to illustrate and adorn that spiritual truth in a memorable way. It is a story that places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching; putting the known next to the unknown so that we may learn something from it.

Language experts suggest that the parable became an important tool of proclamation in the lips of the prophets. They would use parables to make their preaching more impressive, using common concepts to illustrate their spiritual points like Isaiah’s reference to farming technique or Ezekiel’s mention of burning wood (Isa 28:23–29; Ezek 15). Furthermore, “the special feature of the OT parable is that it is not just an

⁴⁰ Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 961.

⁴¹ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991), 194.

⁴² Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 593.

extended comparison but a story complete in itself, so that its real point can remain completely hidden from the hearer...in hidden parabolic speech, which provokes reflection, the prophets convey to dull hearers the divine summons which seek to awaken their conscience or religious perception.”⁴³

One of the more thorough definitions was constructed by Stanley Ellisen in stating that a parable is “a figurative history, true to life, designed for the pedagogical purpose of conveying some specific spiritual truth, usually relative to the kingdom.”⁴⁴ Some constituent elements that parables, in Jesus’ usage, must contain are as follows:

- Narrative—in that it contains a sequence of actions.
- True to life—in that it is within the realm of probability. It may or may not have happened to some specific person in view, but it does occur. Jesus drew His parabolic illustrations from nature (Mark 4:1ff.), familiar customs like leavening bread (Matt 13:33) or marriage (Matt 25:1–13), noted events in history (Luke 19:14), and situations that occasionally arise in real life (Luke 15:11–32; 16:1–9; 18:2–8).
- Designed—adapted by the speaker (Christ) with a specific point in view. It is artificial (often a story made up for teaching purposes) rather than historical.
- Conveying—in that it represents transference of knowledge from what is true in one sphere to what is likewise true in another sphere. The teller uses the known to teach the unknown.
- Kingdom—in that its purpose relates in some way to the development of the kingdom concept which forms the main thrust of the Gospel accounts.⁴⁵

Another definition that captures the essence of a parable, given by Vernon Doerksen, is “a similitude or full-length story, true to nature and to life, a picture of something which can be observed in the world of our experience, which was told by our Lord to illustrate a divine truth.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Gerhard Kittel, “מִּשְׁלָּה” *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 7:890.

⁴⁴ Ellisen, *Hermeneutics of the Parables*, 62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

A fine illustration of why there must be a clear definition of what constitutes a parable is the sheer diversity of opinion as to how many kingdom parables there are in Matthew 13. The majority position—including such men as Boice, Hendriksen, Broadus, Hagner, Morris, Lange, Brown, Barbieri—suggests that there are only seven parables in Matthew 13.⁴⁷ Yet, a minority of proponents presents eight in their various commentaries. This group includes men such as MacArthur, Price, Wenham, Carson, Robertson, and Turner.⁴⁸

Therefore, for this series, to hold to the pattern laid out of what a parable is, I concur with an understanding of eight kingdom parables in Matthew 13. There is The Sower (Matt 13:1–23), The Wheat and Tares (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43), The Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31–32), The Leaven (Matt 13:33–35), The Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44), The Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:45–46), The Dragnet (Matt 13:47–50), and The Householder (Matt 13:51–52). The householder, though not a full-length, drawn-out story like the first one in Matthew 13, is a similitude, likening the kingdom to a householder. It is true to life in that the householder was a common person in their culture (Matt 13:27, 52; 20:1; 21:33) and it conveys knowledge about the gospel scribe.

⁴⁶ Vernon D. Doerksen, “The Interpretation of Parables,” *GTJ* 11, no. 2 (1970): 3, http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NTeSources/NTArticles/GTJ-NT/Doerksen-GospelsParables-GTJ-70.pdf (accessed June 1, 2010).

⁴⁷ For examples see: James Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 230; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1973), 549; John Broadus, *Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press), 285; Donald Hagner, *Matthew, WBC* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 362; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew, PNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing), 334; John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1980), 237.

⁴⁸ For examples see: John MacArthur, *Matthew 8–15, MNTC* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 343; Charles Price, *Matthew* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 167; D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 8:303; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1930), 1:101; David L. Turner, *Matthew, ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 354.

Defining “Kingdom” for Study

There is so much to be said about this subject, but the remarks made in this paper are meant to elucidate the truths of Matthew 13 by sufficiently covering the topics contained therein, while at the same time abbreviating the comments, knowing that this paper could not adequately deal with the full scope of each topic, especially the kingdom.

There can be no overemphasizing the importance that an understanding of the kingdom has upon biblical interpretation. The word “kingdom” appears over four hundred fifty times in the Bible and approximately two hundred of those times it refers to a divine eschatological kingdom.⁴⁹ Therefore, to understand the Bible one must understand this concept. It is generally agreed by Bible expositors that the parables cannot be understood apart from a proper understanding of the kingdom or vice versa. Stanley Ellisen makes a good point that “in this sense, hermeneutics and theology regulate and complement each other.”⁵⁰ Thus, incorrect understandings of the kingdom contribute to wrong interpretations of the parables. Texts validate explicitly that the parables Jesus taught were done so to explain the kingdom. A casual observation of the often-repeated introductory phrase to them states “the kingdom of heaven is like.” And since the kingdom concept was the central element/focus of the parables, they are referred to as kingdom parables. This component is central not just because of the special format of teaching in parables, but because the ministry of Jesus was all about the kingdom, as He unfolded more of the details (referred to as mysteries) of the main OT theme, the coming kingdom of the Messiah.

⁴⁹ Hoyt, *The End Times*, 167.

⁵⁰ Ellisen, *Hermeneutics of the Parables*, 112.

The kingdom is the central theme of Matthew's major discourses of the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse. It was the focus of Christ's predecessor John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and the message of the apostles that He commissioned (Matt 10:7). There was no denying that His message was inextricably linked with the Messianic program of the OT. However, there have been a plethora of wrong views on the kingdom, often because they are not built on an inductive study of all the teachings of Scripture on the subject. These wrong views of the kingdom, in turn, lead to wrong interpretations of Scripture. A thorough development of the kingdom will teach each aspect of the kingdom in light of the others. It was Alva J. McClain who was helpful in listing the eight historically prominent wrong views⁵¹ with the main ones abbreviated here: it is not Heaven, not the Church, not the Millennial kingdom, and not Christendom.

The Kingdom is not Heaven.

This interpretation seems to have been the most popular and persistent one down through history. Though Heaven is a part of the kingdom, it is not the entirety of the kingdom. For example, the field in which the good seed of the kingdom is planted is the world, not Heaven (Matt 13:38). Though the kingdom culminates in the Messianic kingdom, of eternity and heaven is part of the kingdom, it is not the totality of the kingdom.

The Kingdom is not the Church.

This was the interpretation of Catholicism as well as the Reformers. The Catholic Church applied it to the visible body of NT believers, while the Reformers applied it to the invisible. Again, there are many points of resemblance but the body of Christ is only

⁵¹ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 7–15.

part of the kingdom. Though the Church is *in* the kingdom, it is not *the* kingdom. The two entities are present in the world today—the Church, which began at Pentecost, and the kingdom, which preceded the cross. The Church will be raptured out of the world while the kingdom will continue afterwards.

The Kingdom is not the Millennial Kingdom.

In studying and interpreting the gospel accounts, it must be understood that Christ came to actualize the kingdom foretold in the OT, yet because of Israel's rejection, her expectations for the Messianic kingdom were postponed. It is at this point of rejection that the mysteries are revealed regarding the new program of the Church which is not revealed in the OT.

The Kingdom is not Christendom,
Consisting of Professors and Possessors of Salvation.

The kingdom contains only those who have been born again (John 3:5). Though some have thought that Matthew 13:41 gives credence to evil members being part of the kingdom, “gather out of” (συλλέξουσιν ἐκ) should be translated “from the midst of” which can signify place or location. The tares mingle with members of the kingdom, but they are not members themselves. Though the world is not the kingdom, it is in the midst of the citizens of the kingdom and the Sovereign King's working out of His kingdom agenda.⁵²

⁵² Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982), 196.

Exegetical and Theological Basis for Kingdom Sermons

All true and faithful exposition is biblical. It starts with a biblical text, explains that biblical text, and ends with an exhortation to obey that biblical text. It presupposes prayerful, diligent study of the Bible (2 Tim 2:15). The expositor must be one who trembles at God's Word and recognizes he has nothing spectacular to say apart from God's Word. Exposition must begin with thorough exegesis to extract the meaning from a text.

Parable of Sower (Matt 13:3–9, 18–23)

The phrase *καὶ διὰ* in verse 6 is an infinitive of cause⁵³ and can be translated “and on account of” or “because.” The reason that the seed, which appeared to have life, was scorched by the sun is because there was no root system. Though there was a small amount of soil over the bedrock, there was not enough to sustain life. Granted, there was a promising beginning, but as soon as the seed sprouted, it shriveled and died, because it could not form a sufficient root system for nourishment. Though there is the façade of sufficient soil, there is not enough depth to support life.

The only viable soil in this story is that which yielded fruit. The verb is *δίδωμι* and is literally translated “to give.”⁵⁴ This is the only soil which gives the evidence of life—fruit bearing. The tense of the verb is changed to the imperfect to show that this fruit-bearing sign of life was not temporary but ongoing from the point of the seed-sowing. This is the tense that the writer uses to portray action in process or in the state of being, existence. According to Wallace, the only difference between the imperfect and

⁵³ James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery. *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), 138.

⁵⁴ Bauer, *BDAG*, 242.

the present, which it mirrors, is that the imperfect is used for past time⁵⁵ (in this case, the past time of the story that Jesus told in narrative fashion).

Jesus starts His explanation of the first parable by a clear, passionate admonition to hear what He is saying. Hearing is often used figuratively, as here, whether it is the parent who says to his child, “Listen to me,” or James who tells his listeners not to delude themselves into thinking they can listen without doing what they hear (Jas 1:21–25). Matthew places the emphatic “You” at the beginning of verse 18 to get their attention: “You who have ears to hear, make sure you understand this vital message by living in light of it.” Jesus clearly teaches in His explanation of the parable that one can ἀκούωντος (hear)⁵⁶ the word of the kingdom but not συνίεντος (understand)⁵⁷ it. As He explains in verses 10–17, there is a kind of hearing that does not hear, because though it enters the ears, it is not perceived and received by the heart. The word literally means “to set together” and is used figuratively as “understand” or “to have insight into, to comprehend, to perceive.”⁵⁸ It is the same term used back in verse 13 and will be used again in verse 23. This is an action that, according to Paul, is utterly impossible for unregenerate man (Rom 3:10). According to OT conception, insight is not something that is a faculty natural to man, but it is a gift from God. Though it is a gift, it must be sought after and prayed for. It is a feature provided by the organ of the heart, metaphorically,

⁵⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 541.

⁵⁶ Bauer, *BDAG*, 38.

⁵⁷ Bauer, *BDAG*, 972.

⁵⁸ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 429.

that must be inclined towards it. This teaching is borne out in wisdom literature (see Prov 2:1 and many others).⁵⁹

The Master-Teacher also includes, in verse 21, that affliction comes. The word means, “to press, oppress, squeeze.” The English word is from the Latin *tribulum*, the roller used by the Romans for pressing wheat.⁶⁰ There are events that come into each person’s life that reveals their heart response to the message. Just like an orange that produces juice when squeezed, so difficulty reveals the condition of the heart. What is inside becomes evident. If a person is overtaken by issues of life—affliction or persecution—and falls away from their profession of faith and commitment to Christ, their profession is shown to be temporary. Again, what may have appeared to be new life was only a hoax. There is no persevering grace which saving faith brings. Rather than responding to Jesus in love, faith, repentance, and obedience, he falls away, literally “is offended.” The term is *σκανδαλίζω* from which we get the word scandalize. It was used of the bait stick of a trap, so that when an animal touched it, they were trapped. Rather than find in Jesus’ message of the kingdom a reason to believe, this type of person is offended at the message and the demands that the Master makes upon him; it is too constrictive. This is the same response Jesus will get when He returns to His hometown of Nazareth (Matt 13: 57). He already had pronounced blessing upon those who did not take offense at Him (Matt 11:6). He had said to John the Baptist’s disciples, as a verification that He was the Coming One, to report back to John what they heard and saw from Jesus. That is what became the main issue; people refused to believe and come to

⁵⁹ Gerhard Kittel, “συνίημι.” *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 7:890.

⁶⁰ Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:106.

the right conclusion about Jesus, though it went against what they saw and heard. There could be only one response to His deeds and preaching: He is Messiah.

Jesus' Rationale for Parables (Matt 13:10–17)

The disciples asked Jesus the question in verse 10 “Why do you speak to *them* in parables?” The ones who, from that point forward, would only be taught in parabolic form were the large crowds that often gathered around Him (Matt 13:2). It was to the public, not His committed disciples, whom “He spoke many things to them in parables” (Matt 13:3). His answer begins with the word *ὅτι*, which is a subordinating conjunction expressing cause. There can be no doubt that Jesus is giving the bottom line of why He has chosen to change His whole teaching dynamic in public to the Jews surrounding Him.

The first part of Jesus' explanation for parables is a statement on divine, electing favor. He uses the emphatic “You” in speaking privately to those who were committed to following Him, including His disciples (cf. Mark 4:10). To this particular group that He had sovereignly and graciously called to Himself, He gave the *gift* of understanding. The verb *granted* has the idea of pure grace. It is *δίδωμι* and means “to give”; it is not something earned, but granted. It is in the passive voice which conveys the subject being acted upon; they are the receiver of the verbal action, often referred to as the “divine passive” when God is either the stated or implied agent.⁶¹ This asserts that understanding cannot be worked up from within a person, but a person must wait upon and plead with God to give this gift. There is the absolute necessity for divine illumination, which the rest of the NT reveals to be impossible without salvation and submission to the purposes of God. The natural man without Christ will not accept the things of God (1 Cor 2:14).

⁶¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 437.

Only God can turn on the light to blinded eyes; only He can give light and life to those to whom the gospel is veiled (2 Cor 4:3–4). Jesus is about to unpack the significance of what the Jews were doing. Since they would not turn to Christ, the veil over their hearts remained (2 Cor 3:12–15). Mysteries of the kingdom of heaven would only be taught to those who, by God’s sovereign grace, had committed to following Him. They were given the gift to understand and perceive the spiritual realities of His kingdom.

In contrast to this submissive group of obedient hearers is the crowd. Since they would not respond to the truth of the kingdom that had been so graciously given, they would not enter the kingdom. The saving truth would be taken away (ἄρῳ) in divine judgment (Matt 13:12). What they had spurned would be withdrawn from them. So the parables, which would be instructive for believers, would be disciplinary for unbelievers. So began the judgment of concealing truth since they would not believe. They *saw* with their eyes His miracles that attested to His Messiahship, but they would not *perceive* and believe with their hearts that He was indeed God in human flesh. They saw, but did not truly see. Though they heard His messages of kingdom realities, they would not make the undeniable conclusions that if He is the King, they were to be His servants. They heard, but did not truly hear. For Jesus, this situation of rejection fulfilled what Isaiah prophesied in his day, foreshadowing what Israel would do (Isa 6:9–10). The Jews of Jesus’ day, as a whole, did not anticipate being the ones who would reject their Messiah and cut Him off as prophesied (Dan 9:25–27), but that is exactly what happened. Isaiah’s prophecy was fully realized in the rejection of Christ’s works and words. The rejection was being filled up and fleshed out completely (ἀναπληρώω).

The issue is that they kept on hearing but would not understand and make the logical connection of loving obedience and submission to Jesus. They would read the OT prophecies and listen to Jesus' very words, but they would not make the connection between what was clearly taught in the OT and what they heard from the lips of Christ. So, since they hardened their hearts in disobedience and would not believe, they could not believe. Here is where the Teacher starts explaining divine hardening. He shows that constant exposure to divine truth, unheeded, leads to hardness of heart where the person(s) cannot believe. Isaiah was commissioned to go on behalf of the LORD and deliver His message. Though Isaiah would proclaim the message, the people would not respond in obedience and would thus acquire insensitive hearts through constant exposure (Isa 6:10). There is a popular saying that states, "The same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay," and in a similar vein Jesus teaches that the same message that provides salvation (Matt 7:24–25) and light (Ps 119:105) to the penitent person, also becomes the condemnation for the rebellious (Matt 7:26–27). God commands man to turn to Him for salvation, placing the responsibility to believe on their shoulders. "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isa 45:22). Yet, the Lord sovereignly orchestrates the initiation of saving faith so that man can rejoice, "*the Lord God* has opened my ear; and I was not disobedient" (Isa 50:5) so that He receives all the glory. God has been lavish in bestowing grace upon grace (Jn 1:16). He reaches out in grace and patience, for He "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11). But the time for grace is closed when man's heart is hardened through persistent rejection instead of the exercise of faith and obedience. Matthew uses the strongest negation here οὐ μὴ.⁶² It is emphatic, that they would *never*

⁶² Bauer, *BDAG*, 646.

understand and *never* perceive. The gift of God's grace would be removed. Truth scoffed at would be taken elsewhere. Since they were determined not to perceive and understand, God intends from that point forward that they will not understand. The parables of the kingdom, to them, would be nothing more than a puzzle. They would not understand spiritual realities. The issue was their heart condition; it was dull. The word's cognate adjective (παχύς) occurs with pachyderm and other thick-skinned animals, like a rhinoceros or elephant. They were not just openly hostile, but passively indifferent with calloused hearts.

Yet, the Master-Teacher, who just pronounced judgment on the hard-hearted, returns again to the condition of His followers, those who have been granted an understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom. To them He pronounces blessing (Matt 13:16–17). Because they submit themselves to the reality of the King's presence, they truly see and hear. They have teachable hearts that are inclined to believe. They would now have further revelation on aspects of the kingdom that were not revealed to anyone before in biblical history. The OT is full of righteous men and prophets who understood the kingdom, but had no idea about the form that God's kingdom would take in the Church Age when Israel rejected her Messiah. Nor did they comprehend how it would all merge into the eternal kingdom. Those who turned to Jesus and kept His word were guaranteed further progress in their knowledge and blessings of the kingdom.

Parable of Wheat and Weeds (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43)

This starts the list of the next six parables that Jesus told expressing what His kingdom is like. He continues to compare spiritual, kingdom realities to everyday items or events that the common Jewish person of the day would be very familiar with. He

taught by way of object lesson—literally, “set another before them.” The verb παρατίθημι is used in the NT, in reference to teaching, only here and in verse 31.⁶³ What the NASU translates as “present” is used in the teaching sense. The Master-Teacher knew the best form that His teaching should take. He presented information about various aspects of His kingdom in the best formula conducive to their learning. This comparison (of what the kingdom is like) is made eight other times in Matthew, just over half of its NT occurrences. It implies that the kingdom has become like these illustrations; in essence, taking on a different form than it had. Whereas Judaism was for centuries waiting for her Messiah to come, Jesus came teaching that the kingdom *has* come, even though eschatological judgment at His second coming has been delayed. John the Baptist, the forerunner to Messiah and Jesus Himself upon the launch of His public ministry declared, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17). Jesus also commissioned the apostles to announce that it is at hand (Matt 10:7). Upon the Pharisees blaspheming against the Spirit, Jesus diagnoses the reason for their rejection of Him: because they would have to submit to the Kingdom of God that had come upon them (Matt 12:28). Since the aorist passive is what is used, this kingdom parable and others like it refers to the present aspects of the kingdom, whereas the other passages that use future passives of what the kingdom is likened to is the kingdom in its future aspect. Currently, Jesus is teaching on the kingdom *inaugurated* through His ministry, but at other times will teach about its consummation (Matt 7:24, 26; 25:1).

The tares, or weeds (ζιζάνια), properly called *lolium temulentum*, pertained to bearded darnel, a common weed that plagued grain fields in Palestine. It often breeds a fungus, which if eaten by animals or man, is poisonous. Wheat and this weed are

⁶³ Bauer, *BDAG*, 772.

botanically close and difficult to distinguish at the early stages of growth. Identifying the difference is nearly impossible.⁶⁴ So there is similarity of appearance, and also the issue of being so closely and abundantly intermingled with the wheat. The darnel grows in quantities far-exceeding the wheat.

In contrast to the good seed sown, the enemy resowed over the same ground—he sowed weeds upon (the prefix ἐπι is added) the good seed. And to make it clear how mixed the mess was, the Greek makes clear that it was a thorough distribution throughout the crop and not confined to one spot; the weeds are among (ἀνά μέσον) the wheat. This was clear sabotage by the enemy, just as he snatches away the good seed (Matt 13:19) as he blinds people (2 Cor 4:4) and hinders the work of God. Some say the roots of darnel are stronger and deeper than wheat and many agree that the roots of both twist together and entangle themselves around each other. This, given by the Great Teacher, illustrates the intermingling of the wicked among the righteous. They work together, socialize with each other, have recreational events together, hunt and fish with each other, and even serve in the visible church together, not knowing the hidden heart condition of others (cf. 1 Sam 16:7).

At the consummation of the age, the angels will collect the wicked out of the kingdom and everything that is offensive. This appears to be a free rendering of Zephaniah 1:3 that speaks of the removal of the wicked. At that time, all who are offended and scandalized by Jesus will be shown to be offensive to Him. This final act of gathering the wicked out is all that is necessary for the Messianic kingdom to be rendered universal. As the first parable encouraged the hearers to ask, “What kind of soil am I?” so this parable encourages the hearers to ask, “Am I a son of the kingdom or a son of

⁶⁴ Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1340.

wickedness?” and “Will I survive the final harvest?” It remains vitally important for every hearer to examine his life to see if he is in the faith (2 Cor 13:5) to be “diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Pet 1:10).

Parable of Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31–32)

This parable, no doubt, grabbed the attention of its hearers as Jesus compared His kingdom to the smallest of all known seeds in Palestine, the mustard seed. There were other seeds in different parts of the earth that were smaller, but not in Palestine. This seed was so popularly viewed as the smallest seed that in rabbinic thought it became proverbial for smallness.⁶⁵ The smallness of this seed with its relatively large growth made it a great figure for the expansion of the kingdom. Jesus must have caught the attention of His audience with the picture of a man taking the smallest known seed out to plant it in a large field. Then, the point is made that the smallest seed, when full-grown, becomes a tree. Though not classified as a literal tree because it was considered a garden plant, it was the largest garden plant soaring over all others. This exaggerated term is to show the incredible contrast in size. The mustard plant could range in height anywhere from ten to fifteen feet.⁶⁶ Though not a large tree, when talking of garden plants, this is huge. This particle from agriculture shows forth growth from seeming insignificance. It became a great picture in Scripture of a large empire, this large tree with many branches (Judg 9:15; Ezek 17:22–24; 31:3–14; Dan 4:7–23).

There is debate in regard to what the birds nesting in the branches represent. Some immediate and some remote textual indicators seem to point to the birds

⁶⁵ George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 20

⁶⁶ Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 1335.

representing evil: both prior parables have evil present in them, Jesus uses this same parable to describe the Jewish leaders' evil opposition in Luke 13:10–19; the context for the parables being presented because of Christ being rejected, and the birds of the air dwell in Nebuchadnezzar's sinful kingdom (Dan 4:12). However, one of the great abuses of parables is spiritualizing the details of the story. The simple and clear understanding of this parable is that Jesus is teaching His kingdom's small beginning and mature end. The birds in the branches are not a main teaching point they are simply a detail of the story to be able to convey the basic understanding of His kingdom's growth. If the birds represent anything at all, they are a positive presentation of protection and growth to all nations that they encompass. People would find peace and safety within this kingdom. The audience would be acquainted with the account of when Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a tree that became so strong that its top reached to heaven and underneath it the beasts of the field found shade and on its branches the birds of the air came to perch, or nest (Dan 4:12). Ezekiel also speaks of how the birds of every kind will nest and find shelter in the shade of its branches. Many prophecies point to the Gentiles, the foreigners, who would come to the LORD (Isa 49:12; 59:19; Mal 1:11) to seek His favor (Isa 56:6–8; Zech 8:20–23). Just because birds represent evil in some contexts does not mean that is the case here, as context must prevail. Each context determines the meaning of the figures that are used. In a similar vein, the next parable will utilize a figure that is often used negatively, in a positive light in order for the Master-Teacher to grasp attention for the lesson at hand. Once the branches of this kingdom become rigid, birds of many kinds find shelter from the storm, rest from weariness, and shade from the heat of the sun; they will find delicious food, like the small black seeds which they remove from the pods of the tree.

Regardless of how someone interprets the birds, it does not change the main teaching point of the parable.

Parable of Leaven (Matt 13:33–35)

In this parable the kingdom is likened to leaven. Some dynamic-equivalent translations give a misleading translation of *yeast*—CEV, TEV, and NRSV, even the paraphrased LNT. The problem with translations such as these is that the translators were more concerned with bringing the text into modern understanding by interpreting, rather than staying with their job of translating and leaving it up to the Bible expositor to take his hearers back to the NT custom of using leaven. This, again, is part of the historical-grammatical approach to interpreting Scripture. An understanding of the customs and culture of Palestine adds clarity to the understanding of Scripture in its own context. Normal practice was to take a portion of the previous week's dough to make the current week's dough rise. That which had already been fermenting was placed into the new lump of dough and placed by the fire until the yeast within the dough had permeated the whole lump. It only took a little leaven to leaven the whole lump of new dough (1 Cor 5:6).

As already stated, context must determine the meaning of the various symbols and figures in Scripture. For shock value, Jesus takes what was often used in a negative connotation (like “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,” for example) and uses leaven in a positive light. Though some interpreters see the leaven as having a negative meaning, referring to the presence of evil in the present aspect of the kingdom, there is no reason it cannot have a positive connotation here. Metaphors have a diverse usage in Scripture, so as a lion can symbolize Jesus, as the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David (Rev

5:5), it can also symbolize Satan as a roaring lion seeking someone he can devour (1 Pet 5:8). Yeast is used in a positive light in relation to sacrificial offerings (Lev 7:13—peace offering; Lev 23:17–18—feast of weeks). The Master-Teacher’s hearers would think, “WHAT?! Are you comparing the kingdom of heaven to *leaven*?” That shock would arouse interest and rivet their attention, as an illustration from an unusual and unexpected source typically does. In a similar fashion to the previous parable, this one conveys the benevolent power of Christ’s rule of grace which secretly yet effectively produces its great results. These twin parables teach some of the greatness of Christ’s kingdom, that it will grow astronomically and will utterly transform those within it. Once leavening starts, it cannot be stopped; it has an inevitable effect. Receptive soil and saving faith plant the seed of growth within. There will be fruitful growth in faith (2 Pet 1:5–11). They are bound to bear fruit from the vine that they are so vitally connected to (John 15). The kingdom of heaven operates, though it may do so ever so quietly and originating from small beginnings, as it was inaugurated without grand displays and pomp. This vital clarification was needed by Jesus’ followers, especially as they would be zealous for its manifestation in power and glory. They were not to concentrate on its future fulfillment, which would certainly be culminated in God’s sovereign timing, but they were to focus on faithfulness in evangelism, preaching and teaching the message of the kingdom until active disciples were formed.

Jesus speaking in parables is conveyed in the imperfect tense having the force, “He used to speak.” It points to His habitual mode of teaching. It’s not that He had never taught in any other way, but His customary practice from this point forward (with the clear rejection of His kingdom message) was to teach through parables. He would not

speak openly of His kingdom to the public anymore nor cast pearls before swine, but would only “explain everything privately to His own disciples,” those with receptive hearts to hear and obey (Mark 4:34). The obstinate crowd would only receive parables and figures of speech that they would not understand (John 10:6).

Matthew expressly states that the rendering of kingdom truths through parables is itself a fulfillment of Scripture as similarly stated in Matthew 2:13; 8:17; 12:17. The conjunction of purpose ($\delta\pi\omega\varsigma$) is utilized to express the goal or aim of the action stated.⁶⁷ God intended in His sovereign plan to reveal things that had been hidden previously, but were at this particular time graciously given. What was once unknown and unobtainable by human search was revealed to those with ears to hear. These parables that were meant to be unsolved riddles to conceal God’s precious truths from unbelievers who have no inclination to understand and obey would at the same time be highly illuminating illustrations for believers whose hearts are inclined toward their Master.

Parables of Hidden Treasure and Priceless Pearl (Matt 13:44–46)

Digging for treasure was a common practice in Palestine. As far as the law was concerned, if someone purchased a parcel of land and found any buried treasure it automatically became his property.⁶⁸ It was normal practice to hide valued possessions in the ground if traveling to a far country or serving during a war. If the owner died on the journey or in battle, his secret would die with him. The ground provided the safest banking depository, so if money was needed or the land owner desired to buy, sell, or

⁶⁷ Wallace, *Greek Beyond the Basic*, 676.

⁶⁸ Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 41.

trade, he would go to his secret place at night, take out the desired item, and then rebury the rest of it. In this story, the man sells all of his earthly possessions out of joy in order to buy the field that contains the treasure. To him, nothing else matters but the treasure. This parable is used to tell of the exceedingly infinite worth of the kingdom—disciples joyfully abandon everything else to secure it. There is a need to honestly assess the cost of becoming a disciple and gaining entrance to this kingdom.

Pearls in the ancient world were precious, beautiful and scarce, and thus expensive. Diving for them was dangerous, and many people lost their lives in search of this valued commodity. They were the most precious of gems. Back in Matthew 7:6 Jesus warned kingdom citizens against casting pearls before swine, He emphasized the priceless value of the gospel and all its truth, which unbelievers regard as worthless. In this parable Jesus again speaks of the valuable gospel of the kingdom and teaches that it is worth selling all to buy it. This ruler, realm, and rulership are worth giving up all else in life to gain. It is a matter of the heart being transferred from other noble interests to the supreme interest of Christ. The former Pharisee, the apostle Paul, illustrated this when he exclaimed, “whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:7–8). The blessing of being a child of God through faith in Christ is utterly priceless, more valuable than all the possessions of the richest man; it is “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away” (1 Pet 1:4). Matthew’s change from one tense to another and yet another (perfect, imperfect, aorist) shows a vividness and depth to the story. The

merchantman went off and sold, then bought. He made lively action rather than sitting on the knowledge—he would not rest until his search for this perfect pearl had been acquired.

Parable of Dragnet (Matt 13:47–50)

There were several different ways of fishing: using a rod and line, spear, and net. There were two types of nets. One was a casting net, a hand net that was cast from the shore. There was also the dragnet (σαγήνη).⁶⁹ The seine was a long-drawn net that would be about eight feet wide by several hundred feet long, having floats at the top edge and weights at the bottom. The ends of the net would be fastened to two boats, or one end could be anchored on the shore. It was the largest kind of net, sweeping a large portion of the sea, and then drawn together, gathering in everything in its path. The point is that the net collects fish indiscriminately and was bound to draw in all kinds of things; its contents were a mixture. Once fishermen reached the shore, it was necessary to separate good fish from the rubbish, which was then thrown back into the water or discarded.

Jesus views all of mankind in two basic classes: the good (καλός)⁷⁰ and the bad (σαπρός). The term *bad* is more literally rendered “rotten, decayed.”⁷¹ This term cannot be taken literally of fish that were taken straight from the sea, for they were still alive but it refers to how worthless they truly are. They are not good for the market so they are discarded, having no value. This similar contrast between the righteous and the unrighteous was made earlier by Christ when He spoke of the good tree (bearing good

⁶⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁷⁰ Bauer, *BDAG*, 504.

⁷¹ Bauer, *BDAG*, 913.

fruit) and the bad tree (Matt 7:17–19) and also when He spoke of the wise versus the foolish man (Matt 7:24–27).

In telling this parable, Jesus teaches about the final separation that will take place. *Separate* (ἀφορίζω) means “to mark off by boundaries.”⁷² People will be evaluated according to whether they are clothed in Christ’s perfect righteousness or the rags of their own self-righteousness; whether they do the Father’s will or not (Matt 7:21). Though there is the coexistence of believers and unbelievers, righteous and unrighteous, the time is coming when God’s patience will end and His judgment will begin. Though initially in the kingdom there are righteous and wicked, a thorough sorting out will certainly take place. In the present age, this time of grace and mercy, evil persons are allowed to live together with the righteous.

Parable of Householder (Matt 13:51–52)

Here, towards the end of the kingdom parable discourse, Jesus returns to the subject of understanding. He asks His disciples if they understand, literally “put together” these things. Unlike the crowds who had no desire to follow Jesus, He asks if they perceive the spiritual realities of the kingdom that He had taught them. He was not content for them just to have heard with their ears the words He spoke, but to comprehend. The comprehending feature of the mind includes the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, in the same way a person collects the pieces of a puzzle to assemble it. The Master-Teacher is concerned that His students grasp the depth of these concepts and their eternal significance. Rather than hard-heartedness, His disciples demonstrate insight and understanding. It is doubtful that that they understood

⁷² Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 139.

all the ramifications of Jesus' teaching and it is even doubtful that Jesus was asking if they had comprehensive understanding. In fact, soon after they would be rebuked for their dullness (Matt 15:16). However, they clearly understood more than the curious crowd, for they were teachable. They understood the main thrust and what they did understand, they believed. So this whole parabolic teaching method that Jesus had adopted was effective. The purpose, of which they had questioned in verse 10, though was a good one. Jesus' parabolic teaching method had instructed them and enabled them to teach others also, as the Church would be laid by some of these same disciples (Eph 2:20).

The interpretations of verse 52 are numerous. Commentators often view this as referring to scribes who have become disciples of the kingdom or joined the Christian community. The simple understanding of this parable, as Jesus was speaking to His disciples, is that He is speaking about *them*—those who teach this doctrine of the kingdom. It sheds light on the previous seven parables answering the tension maintained between the continuity and discontinuity of the OT and NT. Jesus' teaching on the kingdom did not negate the instruction given by the prophets of the OT, but simply added clarification with further details. The householder would bring out of his storeroom new things and old things. He was constantly adding to the storeroom, while carefully preserving the old; he despises neither. Jesus points out that there are fresh insights in the progress of revelation that are of value and there are other that have stood the test of time. His "new sounding" teachings did by any means do away with the old teachings, but fulfilled them (Matt 5:17). In fact, they are the key to understanding them. A new age has dawned, as the kingdom has come near, in which the disciples would have fulfillment of

many OT prophecies, the explanation, and new extension of many precepts, in addition to the more correct understanding of the old Messianic hope. In Judaism, the scribe was the Scripture's scholar-teacher, one who was trained in the interpretation of the Torah. He was a learner, interpreter, teacher of the law. Yet, the scribes of the day (whose righteousness must be exceeded in order to inherit the kingdom—Matt 5:20) were those whose vast knowledge of the law was only superficial. Jesus is referring to a new kind of scribe, one whose study of Scripture proceeds from a genuine humility and love for God. Under Jesus tutelage, each of the twelve was becoming a true scribe. They were not only hearing the message, but also understanding it and being readied to teach others. Because of this (διὰ τοῦτο) understanding that they had gained as Jesus by sovereign grace has *made them* (aorist, passive participle) disciples (μαθητεύω), and they are to instruct others. This is the vital connection of students to teacher. Those who have become followers in doctrine and conduct of life are to be *committed* students. They are not just learners of the law superficially, but are caught up in the message of the kingdom and could not but proclaim it to others. The message welled up from within to such an extent that it was cast out (ἐκβάλλω)⁷³ of the rich treasury of being schooled by the Messiah. These new scribes give forth from their overflowing supply of rich kingdom treasures (Matt 6:19–21; 12:35; 13:44; 19:21).

Jesus' Return to Nazareth (Matt 13:53–58)

The beginning of verse 53 is a textual marker showing that the rightful number of kingdom parables in Matthew 13 is eight. It was not until the parable of the householder was given that Matthew states that Jesus finished these parables, ending another

⁷³ Ibid., 236.

discourse in his gospel account. This is a section ending similar to that of Matthew 7:28 when Matthew finishes his record of the Sermon on the Mount.

In fact, Jesus received the same response from His teaching in His hometown as He had received when He delivered that famous sermon. At both preaching events the crowds were astonished. The folks in Nazareth were amazed at His wisdom. Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Nazareth a year earlier indicates that they were not just amazed by the *form* of teaching but at the *substance*, the "gracious words" (Luke 4:22). They were astonished at His words and works. Though they may not have witnessed many of His miracles, they were only twenty miles southwest of Capernaum where the majority of His miraculous works of compassion were manifest.

The people could not get beyond their familiarity with Jesus of Nazareth whom they thought they knew so well. They knew His earthly father, Joseph, who was a leading carpenter—or perhaps the only—carpenter in town. Mark states in his account that Jesus had worked at His father's trade (Mark 6:3), as it was the custom of Jews to teach their sons a trade, even if they were wealthy and did not need to work. These people focused on their earthly wisdom of Jesus' human lineage, human work, and even His human brothers and sisters who still lived in the area. They assert in their skepticism, "we know *this fellow*." Their derogatory tone is used in both verses 54 and 55. The placement of these particular words conveys their disgust, wondering "How does *this fellow* set himself up to be so much?" They did not doubt His wisdom, for they heard His teaching; and they did not doubt the fact of His mighty works, for they saw them. Yet they did reject His claims. On another occasion, the Jews question why He is saying He came down from heaven because they knew Him to be the son of Joseph and Mary, whom they

knew personally (John 6:42). Therefore, they took offense at Him (Matt 13:57). The term is σκανδαλίζω and refers to them being repelled by Him. In the same way that the bait stick would cause the capture of an animal, so His claims stood as a barrier that trapped them in their rejection. They found in Jesus obstacles to belief, even though the real obstacles were hardness of heart and refusal to believe. They could not get beyond the fact of His upbringing by common parents, having common siblings, and working a common job. And this response to Jesus became their ongoing response. As the imperfect passive conveys, they continued in this offended and hostile attitude. Knowing Him as they did, they could not (or would not) bring themselves to think that His wisdom and works were of divine origin. They were sure there was something wrong—it was unthinkable for Jesus to not be commonplace like them. Furthermore, to admit the obvious about Jesus, that He was indeed Messiah, sent by His Father, they would have to submit to His kingdom and kingdom message.

Some might wonder why Matthew arranged his account this way. Yet, it must be remembered that he does not arrange things chronologically but thematically. This account of Jesus' return to Nazareth is not out of place, but instead it provides a fitting illustration of the results that Jesus' kingdom parables had on the unbelieving. The wrong response to Jesus' message was not just given by the religious leaders of the scribes and Pharisees who blasphemed Him, but this hostility and rejection extended even to His hometown, to His friends and family. Though previously in Matthew's account Jesus had pronounced blessing on those who do not take offense at Him (Matt 11:6), they were in fact offended. Thus He would not continue to perform miracles there, for it would turn

His ministry into a sideshow, rather than a ministry of reconciliation. Their unbelief prevented the greatest blessing they could have known.

CHAPTER THREE
INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

History

The history of interpreting the parables goes back to the age of the apostles. It is a history filled with allegorical (instead of a literal) interpretation.⁷⁴ Friedrich Hauk suggests, “Already in the NT period there commenced a movement towards allegorical interpretation.”⁷⁵

Starting with the early church fathers in the Patristic period, men like Clement and Origen believed that a figurative meaning was the appropriate way to handle this genre of writings, leading to every point of the story having a spiritual truth to convey. This “spiritualizing” of Scripture seeks to find meanings in hidden symbols, assigning secondary meaning to them, dismissing the literal, historical event. It seeks to identify each of the individual details of a parable as having spiritual significance.

Origen was a master at allegorizing Scripture and even turns faulty, allegorical interpretation into an art form with the parable of the vineyard laborers. Archibald Hunter in his book on the parables suggests that Origen deserves the name maestro in this art of allegory. He mentions how Origen in this particular parable uses it to sketch out biblical

⁷⁴ For more on this, see: Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 4; Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 13.; Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 14.

⁷⁵ Kittel, “παραβολή” *TDNT*, 5:753.

history, as he sees the first shift of workers representing the generations from creation to Noah; the second group representing those from Noah to Abraham; the third, those from Abraham to Moses; the fourth, those from Moses to Joshua; the fifth, those up to the time of Christ. He also sees the householder as God and the penny signifying salvation.⁷⁶ This may be fanciful storytelling but it does not make for proper Bible interpretation, as the exegete's responsibility is to understand what God means by what He has written, as understood by its original audience. He needs to find out authorial intent in each passage.

A further example comes by way of Clement. In the parable of the mustard seed, he sees the mustard seed representing Jesus Christ. The productive nature of the seed represents Jesus' manifold influence. Furthermore Clement says that since "mustard lessens bile, that is, anger, and stops inflammation, that is pride. From this Word (Christ the seed) springs the true health of the soul and its eternal happy temperament."⁷⁷

Allegorical interpretation was not only applied to parables, but to many other genres of biblical writings as well. Fortunately there were glimmers of hope as some men would cry out against this loose handling of parables, men such as Irenaeus and Chrysostom. In fact, though Chrysostom was not always consistent in interpreting Scripture literally, it was said of him, "He comments sensibly, rarely seeking for allegorical meanings, with a superb sense of authority, in a rich prose that flashes like the prose of John Donne."⁷⁸

Since then, there have been men raised up by God in church history who believe in interpreting the Scriptures literally (rather than spiritually), in their grammatical-

⁷⁶ Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 25.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁸ Robert Payne, *The Holy Fire* (Crestwood, NY: ST Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 210.

historical context. It was during the Reformation Era that there was a renewed interest in interpreting the Bible based on the original languages. There were certain Reformers that stood against the rampant allegorization of Scripture, particularly John Calvin. “Thus the way was prepared for a new approach by the Reformation scholars to the interpretation of the parables. Grammars and lexicons now became indispensable aids for exegetes; a fresh emphasis was laid on the plain and obvious meaning of Scripture...they did not feel compelled to find in the details of the parables subtle ‘under meanings’ which were never in the mind of Jesus when He uttered them.”⁷⁹ It was Martin Luther who sought to give attention to the historical setting that each text was found in, along with its grammatical structure, even though he did not repudiate the allegorizations of the early church fathers. But it was his protégé, Calvin, who rejected allegorical interpretations for parables, and sought to show forth one main point of each parable, disregarding the peripheral details that pertained only to the ability to tell a story.⁸⁰

Despite the efforts of various scholars, by the late nineteenth century the majority of Bible interpreters still used an allegorical approach to the parables,⁸¹ trying to find many lessons and symbols in almost every detail of parables. Finally, though, in 1899 Adolf Julicher published his landmark, two-volume work on the parables.⁸² In this book he debunked the allegorical approach to the parables. “In his war against allegorizing Julicher completely rejected both allegorizing and the genre of allegory. He denied that Jesus used allegory, which he defined as a series of related metaphors, or allegorical

⁷⁹ Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, 31.

⁸⁰ Kistemaker, *The Parables*, 14–15.

⁸¹ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 5.

traits, where a point in a story ‘stands for’ something else in reality.”⁸³ He was followed thirty-six years later by C. H. Dodd’s work, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, in which Dodd emphasized the necessity of interpreting parables within the historical setting of the Gospels.⁸⁴ For Dodd, the kingdom was the key to unlocking the mysteries of parables. It was J. Jeremias who, a dozen years later, furthered the work of Dodd in *The Parables of Jesus*⁸⁵ by shedding light on the land, culture, people, and languages of the Bible with his vast understanding of these vital items.

Men had long used the method of telling parables in their teaching, though these teachers were never as effective as the Master-Teacher in utilizing parables. Jesus Christ did not invent the usage of parables, for they were used by the Greeks and Hebrews many centuries before He came to earth. Though the Greeks used parables, it was the Hebrew usage, especially in the Old Testament canon, to which Jesus appealed to, knowing that any Jewish person familiar with it would understand the method of parables involved in teaching. Though parables are rare in the Old Testament (OT), they were, nonetheless, used. One of the well-known OT parables was used in the prophet Nathan’s confrontation of King David for his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1–4). The key to interpreting the story told by Nathan is when, after engaging David in the plot of the story, he accuses David in verse 7 saying “thou art the man.”

⁸³ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 5.

⁸⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Great Britain: William Collins Sons, 1983).

⁸⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963).

Principles

The next question needing an answer now that the parable has been defined is, “How is a parable to be interpreted?” The task of the expositor is to understand and explain what God means by what He says. Thus it is imperative to dig into the historical-grammatical context in order to determine what the meaning was to its original hearers. It is the expositor’s responsibility to reconstruct the original situation as much as he is able. What, after all, was in the minds of Jesus’ audience when He spoke the parables?

With all that has been said of the fallacy of interpreting parables allegorically, the Bible student should not feel that he needs formal training in theology or advanced hermeneutics (Bible study technique). Though parables are not as easy to interpret as they might at first appear, all that is required is for a student to apply basic principles of interpretation that pertain to all of Scripture. These principles will help bridge the gap between the original audience that was clearly expected to understand and obey God’s Word; to have ears to hear. Though the parables, like all of Scripture, require work to expose their meaning, it can be done...in fact it is expected. Yes, the disciples asked what Jesus meant from His parables, but after His transition into the teaching mode of parables preceded by His rejection as Messiah, Jesus only interpreted two of His parables. Jesus interpreted the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and weeds. He does not interpret more than these two, indicating that He expected His hearers to hear and understand what He was teaching. In fact, Jesus invites His followers to “hear the parable of the sower” and then goes on to demonstrate how to interpret this kind of teaching. The disciples were to understand the spiritual truths conveyed by things that they were accustomed to—things like farming (in their agrarian society) and fishing (since that was

a main part of making a living there on the Sea of Galilee where He spoke). What follows is a series of guidelines that apply to parables, though regular principles for proper Scripture interpretation apply as well.

The first guideline is to *read the text in its natural sense*, seeking to find nothing in the text that is not explicitly stated. Included in this principle is reading it without presupposition as to its form or meaning or assuming that a parable must conform to some theory of parables or must teach a particular theology. Parables have already been defined as stories used to illustrate the truth by analogy. So of first importance is to understand the historical or cultural story setting that the original audience in Palestine would have clearly understood as something taken out of ordinary life for illustration. Snodgrass insightfully says, “Any interpretation that does not breathe the air of the first century cannot be correct. That requires listening in a context not our own and presumes some familiarity with that context.”⁸⁶ When studying Scripture, man cannot superimpose his culture on the texts of Scripture that were written in a different time, to a different people, in a different land and cultural setting. Instead of likening leaven to yeast like many translations refer to,⁸⁷ it must be understood in light of the custom of the day of using a lump of old dough to ferment the new lump. Remember, the parables are taken from issues and items of life that poor, agricultural common people could clearly comprehend, also including culture and customs common to the Jewish population of first-century Palestine. “The pictorial element of the parables is drawn from the daily life

⁸⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 25.

⁸⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 353.

of Palestine.”⁸⁸ A good Bible student, or teacher for that matter, is one who learns to think as the people did in the days in which the texts of Scripture were written. That is why discerning instructors of hermeneutics have cautioned the Bible student “that one should never preach again on any parable until he has made himself familiar with this material...” because “in the interpretation of every parable it is necessary to recover as much as possible the local color employed in it.”⁸⁹ Then, once the interpreter understands the normal life situation, it is possible to explain the message of the parable. The farming community of the day would clearly understand Jesus’ usage of the farmer sowing his field, plowing it up, and harvesting it. Knowing that the small mustard seed can grow into a tree eight or ten feet tall gives great depth to Jesus’ teaching on the growth of His kingdom, or even that one speck of leaven permeates enough dough to serve over 150 people.⁹⁰ “A fishing net, a vineyard, a wedding banquet, oil lamps, talents of money, a fig tree still barren after three years, the value of a single coin to a housewife, the people’s despicable attitude toward tax collectors, the meaning of pounds or minas— understanding these elements sheds light on the significance of the parables and helps make the right transition to the spiritual truth.”⁹¹

It is the OT that the Jews of Jesus’ day were so well acquainted with, so the interpreter cannot overlook the concepts which are so clearly developed there. For instance, how does one ascertain the kingdom principle that is repeated throughout

⁸⁸ Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 11.

⁸⁹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 282.

⁹⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 390.

⁹¹ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 211.

Matthew 13? The kingdom can only be understood as it relates to the one kingdom talked about all throughout the OT. Jesus took the topic that His hearers clearly knew about and then expanded upon its significance as it related to Himself. That particular kingdom that the prophets spoke about is what He came to rule over.

Secondly, it is important to figure out the issue that called forth the parable. It could be either an attitude or a question that prompted the parable, for the parables were not spoken in a vacuum, removed from all situations and problems around them. This could also be called the *principle of context*. Context is paramount. “Context is a determiner of meaning—in the end the only determiner of meaning, for words themselves have only *possible* meanings apart from context.”⁹² Once it is determined what called forth the parable, it then becomes possible to start unfolding the meaning of the parable(s). The interpreter must ask, “What were the circumstances in which it was spoken?” This, of course, is another value of verse-by-verse consecutive exposition, as the background and flow of events and thoughts is a lot easier to construct, having followed the biblical author through his presentation of the truth. Many things in the context can give clues to the meaning of the parables. David Turner points out, “The preceding context can be crucial, since parabolic imagery is tied to key characters and issues in the narrative. At times a concluding general comment applies the parabolic imagery to a contextual matter.”⁹³ For instance, in Luke 15 there is a series of lost things (sheep, coin, son) which shows God’s concern for lost souls and His joy once they are found by the Savior. The context previous to Matthew 13 introduces us to the rejection of Jesus’ Messiahship by the religious crowd, primarily the scribes and Pharisees. From the

⁹² Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 26.

⁹³ Turner, *Matthew*, 334.

point of opposition onward, Jesus' primary teaching method became that of parables in order to conceal the truth from them and reveal it only to those who have ears to hear. It is in paying attention to what Snodgrass calls "the rule of end stress,"⁹⁴ the ending context of the parable, that the meaning is discerned. For most of the extended parables, it is at the end that the clinching details which speak of intent are exposed.

Then, in spite of the spiritualizing of every detail in parables (which has had a long history in parabolic interpretation) it is important to ascertain the *one main point* conveyed in the parable. You cannot find the whole of Christian doctrine presented in a given parable, as there was only one aspect of truth that answers the teaching need of the moment. What happens when people try to make parables "walk on all fours" is that they end up emphasizing the peripheral details that contribute to the story, but not the spiritual teaching of the truth. This is what is called spiritualizing the text, rather than exegeting the text for its intended meaning. One example of this in the early history of the church is Augustine. He took the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:16–24) and interpreted the five yoke of oxen as the five senses that man has—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching—though they are not emphasized by the text. He also noted that they were in pairs—two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, the tongue and the palate, and the inner and outer touch. These senses are doubled: the eye sees light and darkness, the ears hear harsh and musical sounds, the nose smells sweet and offensive odors, the mouth tastes bitter and sweet, and the touch feels smooth and rough.⁹⁵ This ascertaining of one main point is consistently an ingredient in parabolic interpretation emphasized by most conservative

⁹⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 30.

⁹⁵ R. G. MacMullen, "Saint Augustine: Sermon on the Mount," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 6:447.

Bible scholars. Some of the more respected contemporary exegetes like Pentecost, Kistemaker, and Zuck have stated this in their works on parables and interpretation, respectively:

- “A parable is designed to teach one essential truth; the details of a parable may be merely incidental.”⁹⁶
- This being one of the differences between parables and allegories, Kistemaker notes, “Parables should not be given a point-by-point analysis and interpreted as an allegory, for then they lose their significance.”⁹⁷
- “Usually a parable, like a sermon illustration, is teaching a single truth.”⁹⁸

The interpreter cannot seek to find a spiritual truth in every small detail of the parable. Every constituent part does not need to be dissected and turned into a spiritual truth, but each one is used simply to adorn the main point of the parable. “The danger in parabolic teaching at this point is to interpret as meaningful what is drapery.”⁹⁹ This was taught by the golden-mouthed preacher and early church father, Chrysostom. He said,

Neither is it right to inquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learnt the object for which it was composed, to reap this, and not to busy one’s self about anything further...we must not be curious about all the points in the parables.¹⁰⁰

The extra details are meant to flesh out the story and give rich, cultural vividness. However, when interpreters spiritualize the central message of the parables, their true meaning is lost altogether. To search for meaning in every detail is to allegorize and make it “walk on all fours” which the Savior never intended for His parabolic sayings.

⁹⁶ Pentecost, *Parables of Jesus*, 14.

⁹⁷ Kistemaker, *The Parables*, 11.

⁹⁸ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 215.

⁹⁹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 283.

¹⁰⁰ George Prevost, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 10:394.

One particular example of contemporary commentators who have forced a wrong interpretation upon parables is found in the Matthew commentary written by respected NT scholar John Walvoord. He says:

The pearl is uniquely formed organically; its formation occurs because of an irritation in the tender side of an oyster. There is a sense in which the church was formed out of the wounds of Christ and has been made possible by His death and sacrifice. The parable emphasized that the church has been made possible by the merchant who sold all that He had to secure the great parable.¹⁰¹

Though what Walvoord says is doctrinally correct, this is not what Jesus was teaching in this parable. In the parable of the pearl of great price, the main point that Jesus teaches is that the kingdom is of such incomparable value, it is worthy of selling all to gain entrance within. Nowhere in the parable is the Church stated or implied. This spiritualizing of the details of the story has led to an improper emphasis on the Church, rather than *reception* of the gospel message which makes someone part of the Church (which is also part of the kingdom but not the sum and substance of the kingdom). The details of the story are subordinate to the main point, that one must be willing to reckon all else loss in order to gain the pearl in responding to the gospel of the kingdom. Long-time Bible exposition professor and instructor of hermeneutics, Jim Rosscup states in his class syllabus:

If I can ascertain the one great and comprehensive idea of a parable, I have fixed a reference point or obtained a master key for the interpretation of each detail which serves it. I can see how the details lend to or fit in with that main thrust. This anchors me within a certain defined area so that I am not so likely to wander off on my own tangents or blind alleys.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 105.

¹⁰² James E. Rosscup, "Hermeneutics" (class syllabus, The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley, CA, 2001), 93.

Another absolutely crucial principle to apply to parabolic interpretation is how to interpret *figurative language*. Because of the figurative language employed in parables, it has often been the mistaken practice of interpreters to interpret them allegorically. Yet, even figurative language has a way that it is to be “literally” interpreted, based on whatever kind of figurative language is being employed. Once the natural sense of the picture is identified, it is to be solidly transferred over to the spiritual truth to which it points. There are many forms of figurative language used in the Bible and the parable needs to be distinguished from these other types of language.

| Term | Definition |
|----------|--|
| Simile | A comparison between two items is expressly stated using <i>like</i> (ὡς) or <i>as</i> (καθὼς); a basic figure of speech based on some point of resemblance; e.g., “I am like a pelican in the wilderness” (Ps 102:6). |
| Allegory | An extended metaphor using a comparison by representation or personification; a fictitious narrative which may or may not be true to life. But wherever they occur in the Bible, they are accompanied by their interpretation. The parable differs from the allegory in that nearly every detail in the allegory has meaning. The best known extra-biblical allegory would be John Bunyan’s <i>Pilgrim’s Progress</i> . Even C. S. Lewis’ <i>Chronicles of Narnia</i> is essentially allegory. Parables are simply true-to-life stories from which one main point can be drawn with a few other truths subordinate to that point; e.g., the vine and branches (John 15:1–6). |
| Ellipsis | Deliberate omission of a word or phrase for the purpose of emphasizing the part which is not omitted; e.g., Matthew 13:32 “which indeed is the least of all seeds [supply words from preceding clause, “which a man takes and sows in a field”]....” In this case, it is not the least seed <i>absolutely</i> , but only the least of those familiar in Palestine. |
| Metaphor | A stronger form of simile, but without the use of <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> ; it is an inferred comparison. Whereas the simile |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| | gently states the resemblance, the metaphor boldly says that a certain thing <i>is</i> another; e.g., Matt 5:13–14; 10:16; 26:26 “This is my body.” |
| Paradox | Two seemingly contradictory statements, but harmonious once the “sense” of the passage is reached; e.g., Matt 10:39 “He who finds his life will lose it.” |
| Irony | The conveyance of a thought that means the opposite, such as when someone speaks “tongue in cheek”; e.g., Luke 13:33b. |
| Hyperbole | An exaggerated expression that conveys a thought with more force; e.g., John 21:25; Matt 5:29; 23:24; Mark 9:23b “all things are possible to him who believes.” |
| Synecdoche | A figure of speech that refers to a part for the whole, or whole for the part; e.g., Mic 4:3 swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (the abandonment of two weapons); Matt 19:28 “you shall sit on twelve thrones judging twelve tribes of Israel.” In this case, <i>you</i> obviously does not include Judas—the “twelve” is used collectively. |
| Litotes | Speaker states a truth in a negative rather than positive way; e.g., Acts 1:5 “not long after these days” is a way of saying “within a few days”; Matt 2:6; 10:29, 38. |
| Personification | A thing, quality, or idea is looked at as a person or animal; e.g., Ps 148:2, 11–14. |
| Paronomasia | A pun or play on words for effect; e.g., Matt 16:18; 8:22. |
| Proverb | A brief, wise saying given to govern life, hammered out on the anvil of time; it is closely aligned with the usage of <i>parable</i> in the OT; it is from the term מִשְׁלָּה in the OT and παροιμία in the LXX, thus called παραβολή in the NT (Luke 4:23). ¹⁰³ |

TABLE 3.1 Figurative Language

Parables even differ from fables, as fables are not real situations. The parables of Jesus are far different from Aesop’s fables with their talking animals. Jesus used credible real-life situations to convey biblical truth. With over two hundred types of figurative language that have been utilized in Scripture, it is important to not only distinguish parabolic teaching from other types of figurative language, but also to classify parables in

¹⁰³ This is just a partial list of over 200 kinds of figures used in the Bible. A further list can be built by consulting several resources such as: Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*; Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 143; Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 148–61.

this realm of Biblical literature. There is a big difference between an allegory, which is a clear part of figurative language, and allegorizing, which is a poor handling of the text. This poor handling reads into the text a meaning not called for by the text itself. Allegorizing is the assumption that the biblical author meant something different than what is literally expressed, even if the literal meaning is conveyed through a figurative means. This practice is not proper exegesis (extracting the meaning from the text), but eisegesis (foisting onto the text a foreign meaning)—that of the interpreter’s own making. The Bible interpreter cannot treat the parables like modeling clay in his hands, shaping the text according to his own whim. Just because God’s kingdom is likened to something does not mean it becomes that thing. For example, when Jesus said the mustard seed grows into a tree, He did not mean a tree in the literal sense, since it was a plant. Jesus was obviously using this figure of speech to convey the idea that once the plant is full-grown, it overshadows the rest of the garden plants in stature, growing up to ten or fifteen feet tall.¹⁰⁴ The literal truth that God desires to convey to man hinges on a literal interpretation of His Word. Just because figurative language is used does not mean that the student of the Word can abandon a literal interpretation. Figurative language demands a literal interpretation from that which is known from the life and times of the original audience, to the spiritual truth that Christ desired to instruct on by means of the parable. God promises to bless His Word, not some fanciful form of man’s imagination imposed on the text. Finding “hidden” codes and meaning may be novel, but it does not make one an approved workman that does not need to be ashamed (2 Tim 2:15).

¹⁰⁴ William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 565.

A fifth rule in interpreting parables is what is referred to as *cross-reference*. The rest of Scripture must bear out the theological truth being taught in the parable. However, just because a certain word is used to mean something in one part of Scripture, that does not necessitate the same meaning in the parable. Remember that context is primary. The context determines the different nuances of meaning intended. As one seeks to understand any given parable, it should be compared to the other gospel accounts that might contain the same parable so that any differences can be noted. If any detail was left out or added, one must ask “Why? What was the author’s reason for retelling the parable in the way he did? What was the intended audience?”

A sixth interpretive principle is the *Christological one*. In some of His parables, Christ is the main character, or at least the parable is directly related to Him or His Word. “Thus in approaching any parable we must ask ourselves this: how does this parable relate to Christ? Are any of the persons in the parable Christ? Does the parable concern the word or teaching or mission of Christ? Only when we thus approach each parable Christologically do we obtain the correct perspective.”¹⁰⁵

Jesus sought through His teaching in parables to manifest His own presence and message in the lives of His hearers. They were to take to heart and consciously respond to the crucial demands of His kingdom. Ronald Wallace adds:

The key to the interpretation of many of the parables is in our hands when we regard them as challenges thrown out by Jesus to those who stood before Him to make a judgment about Himself, to be definite in their attitude and response to His ministry, and to take comfort or warning according to whether they yielded to His appeal or hardened their hearts against Him.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 280.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald S. Wallace, *Many Things in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1963), 203–204.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ is the only infallible interpreter of His own parables. It is incumbent on every interpreter to notice the interpretation that Jesus Himself gives of many of His own parables. He gives His trustworthy interpretation on such parables as the sower, tares among wheat, and the ten virgins.

Closely related to the Christological principle is the *kingdom principle*; Christ's message. Jesus came preaching that the kingdom was at hand. One of the important keys to understanding the parables in Matthew 13 is to notice the priority that the concept of the Kingdom plays. These particular parables are dubbed the kingdom parables, and without understanding the role that the Kingdom is in Jesus' presentation of His program, it is impossible to rightly interpret the proper meaning of these parables. Alva J. McClain underscored this point in his landmark book, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*: "In no area of the Word of God is there greater need for caution on the part of interpreters than in the parables, and especially in those concerned with the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."¹⁰⁷ All interpretation of these parables must be based upon a thorough understanding of the kingdom of God (or *heaven*, as Matthew often employed) and how Jesus and His Gospel relate to it. It is of utmost importance that the expositor asks several questions to unpack what the Great Teacher was unfolding about His kingdom:

- What does this parable reveal about what God is doing to establish His kingdom (now or later)?
- What does it say about who will enter the kingdom?
- How they will enter?
- What will they look like?
- How do they view it?

¹⁰⁷ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 324.

What exactly is the kingdom? “The kingdom of heaven is that sphere over which the sovereign God rules.”¹⁰⁸ This kingdom is one that has already been inaugurated by the coming of Christ, so in this sense, it has already come. From the very first of Jesus’ preaching people were entering it. They did so by the new birth (John 3:3). Such people as tax collectors, harlots, and sinners were entering it during His earthly ministry (Matt 21:31). So, in some respects, the kingdom is already here as Jesus Christ reigns and rules in the human heart through faith in Christ, and continues to advance through this present age.

Yet, this kingdom is also eschatological (future). Since the Messiah was rejected, the Davidic form of God’s rule on earth has been postponed. This is part of the mystery that Jesus came to give instruction about (Matt 13:11). Though this is the same kingdom that the OT saints looked forward to, they were unaware that their rejection of Messiah would necessitate Jesus coming to earth twice. The first time He came was as a baby of Bethlehem Who lived a perfect life and died as a sacrifice for sin for all who would believe. The next time He comes to earth will be as the Conquering King, Who will subdue all rebellion and establish the Davidic throne forever.

Jesus teaches that there will be a harvest at the end of the age. Though now there are tares sown in with the wheat, there will be a great separation on that day of true believers from false professors. So, an important consideration to give each parable is recognizing which aspect of the kingdom is being spoken of. Is it the present, spiritual aspect, of the kingdom or the future, physical aspect, of the kingdom that comes to realization at the end of the age?

¹⁰⁸ Pentecost, *Parables of Jesus*, 17.

The last principle, which could also be considered first in importance, is that of *regeneration*—a heart surrendered to Jesus’ Lordship, eager to obey and do His will. Those who had been repeatedly exposed to the person and power of Jesus already had time to respond to His message of the Kingdom. Jesus was not interested in casting pearls before swine (Matt 7:6), to those who had already shown their opposition to Him. Now that Jesus has changed his manner of teaching to parables, which would only be explained to His committed disciples, His truth will remain concealed from the hearing and understanding of the passive crowds and hostile religious opponents.

What is certain is that the use of parables on this occasion was a penalty for judicial blindness on those who will not see. Though they see, they do not see with comprehension. This judicial blindness is something that comes upon those who refuse to believe, who hard their hearts toward God. It is only once a person surrenders his life to Jesus that he is given the spiritual aptitude and desire to understand and obey divine truth. Charles Price speaks to this issue in his commentary:

What is the key ingredient that makes sense of spiritual truth but that otherwise would only compound our confusion? The answer lies in the relationship of the disciples to Jesus Christ. The first ingredient in the capacity to understand spiritual truth is not intellectual capacity but a moral disposition towards God. Jesus said on one occasion, ‘...you do not believe because you are not my sheep’ (John 10:26). Their incapacity to believe derived not from an intellectual barrier, for he had just said to them, ‘The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me,’ and were evident to any observer. Their incapacity to believe derived from their relationship with him, ‘you are not my sheep.’ Their disposition towards him created the incapacity to understand and believe him.¹⁰⁹

The apostle Paul writes on this point to the Corinthians and states, “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). When left

¹⁰⁹ Charles Price, *Matthew* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 169.

to himself, mankind does “not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend” (Isa 44:18). It is only once man is willing to reckon with his sin and rebellion against God, when he turns in repentant faith to God, that his transgressions are wiped out (Isa 44:22) and then he will know that He is the LORD and there is no other.

Regardless of how blind a person is without the Spirit of God to instruct him, this concealment of God’s truth does not apply to the sincere inquirer. The unpardonable sin was not pronounced on the person who seeks to know who Jesus is, only on those who reject the light they have already received. It is when men continue to request undeniable signs, further than what has already been shown in God’s revelation of truth, that God will not reveal the mysteries of His kingdom (Matt 13:11–12). God honors those seeking Him by bestowing on them understanding when they seek to hear His Word. For those who asked for understanding, who desired to follow Jesus, He granted it. Notice how He provided explanation of the parables upon such an honest, believing request (Matt 13:36).

Jesus’ Rationale for Using Parables

Jesus, the Master-Teacher filled His teaching with masterful words that astonished the people. He even used awe-inspiring parabolic-type gems in an abbreviated form prior to when they became His only form of teaching to the crowds. In these kernels of parabolic thought He used on various occasions He spoke of a lamp being placed under a bushel (Matt 5:14–16), the wise builder versus the foolish builder (Matt 7:24–27), new and old garments and wine (Matt 9:16–17), the picture of children playing in the marketplace (Matt 11:16–17), and an evil spirit returning to his home (Matt 12:43–45).

Matthew thirteen is where Jesus Christ determines to teach only in parables, and they appear in a concentrated manner here. Matthew indicates that Jesus “said nothing to them without a parable” (Matt 13:34), and Mark mentions “He did not speak to them without a parable” (Mark 4:34).

One might wonder why there is such a dramatic shift. After telling the first prolonged parable on the various responses people give to the gospel of the Kingdom, Jesus explains why He has chosen to teach with these word-pictures. In Matthew 13:10 Jesus’ disciples ask Him why he spoke in parables and His response is found in verses 11 through 17. Just by the disciples asking the question, a dramatic shift in Jesus’ teaching method is shown.

William Barclay suggests about this Master Craftsman:

It may be that we have never fully realized that every one of Jesus’ parables was produced on the spur of the moment... What an insight we get into the sheer genius of the mind of Jesus when we remember that the parables are not carefully composed works of art, but sudden, lovely improvisations in the dust and heat of conflict. Apart altogether from their religious value, they stand supreme amongst the products of the mind of man.¹¹⁰

It was in the perfect God-man, Jesus Christ, which eternal brilliance was on display. No wonder people were amazed and continue to be amazed at the hearing or reading of His parables. Surely Jesus was the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24, 30).

One dually stated reason for teaching in parables, Christ explained, is to reveal truth to some, while hiding the truth from others. An often overlooked fact is that there is always a mixed multitude—in the church at large today and in the large crowds that followed Jesus. There were those who received Jesus’ kingdom message and Messiahship and those who rejected it. Since it is impossible to separate the two groups—the wheat

¹¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 14–15.

and the tares—it became important to teach in a manner that was conducive to the type of audience which always exists. Though it has been made clear why Jesus used parables for believers, it has been a source of great discussion as to why Jesus desired to conceal truth from unbelievers.

One reason suggested for this concealing ability of the parables is to keep from adding responsibility to unbelievers. Though it was a judgment, it was a judgment full of mercy, for they were saved from the responsibility of rejecting more truth than they already had. The vast crowds were wondering if Jesus was the promised Son of David (Matt 12:23), and it appears that they seriously considered recognizing Him as Savior and Messiah. However, the leaders did not grant approval. They, in fact, accused Jesus of doing His miraculous works of casting out demons through the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons (Matt 12:24).

Since the nation was in the process of rejecting her Messiah, the Davidic throne in all its fullness in the kingdom would be postponed. Further explanation of the kingdom would be given only to those who, by faith, had entered into it. If Jesus continued to instruct concerning the kingdom, leaving its understanding open to those who rejected it, they would incur even more of a judgment, because they hear (Mark 4:24), since “everyone who has, more shall be given” (Matt 13:12; 25:29). Jesus, in mercy, would not give them more light when they would not respond to the light already given them.

Another reason for the usage of parables may be stated as historical. Often in the history of the Jewish world they were familiar with the value of using parables. This method of teaching was a way for Jewish rabbis, as well as OT prophets, to assist their hearers in seeing the truth. One of the most notorious parables in the OT canon is found

in 2 Samuel 12:1–7 where the prophet Nathan confronted King David over his sin. Nathan tells this powerful parable, which vividly portrays the reality of David’s sin and produces conviction in him. The story is simple, but profound. Many other parables are found in passages like Isaiah 5:1–7 and Ezekiel 17:1–10; 19:10–14; 23:1–29.

The *משל*, periodically translated as “proverb,” is used to create an example before the people. For instance, Saul functioned as a proverb, an example to the people of one whose public disgrace should not be emulated (1 Sam 10:12).

In a similar way, OT writers would use a person(s) as public examples or object lessons to those around them. *משל* is translated, at times, “byword,” a symbol of a particular feature (Ps 44:14; 69:11; Job 17:6). Israel became a symbol to the nations around them and Job was an example to his acquaintances. These are no less than object lessons to convey a point in teaching others. The *mashal* had “a clearly recognizable purpose: that of quickening an apprehension of the real as distinct from the wished for...of compelling the hearer or reader to form a judgment on himself, his situation or his conduct...This usage...comes to its finest expression in the Parables of Jesus.”¹¹¹

However, it was a powerful medium employed not just by the OT writers, but also by the Rabbis.¹¹² This parabolic method was not created by Jesus, but simply honed and improved, giving them great depth and frequency. No one used parables as frequently or as effectively as Jesus Christ in the record of the gospels.

Jesus, the Master-Teacher, took what ordinary people had used to effectively teach and perfected its artistic form. He took the ordinary events of life to illustrate

¹¹¹ A. S. Herbert. “The ‘Parable’ (*משל*) In the Old Testament,” *SJT* 7 (1954), 196.

¹¹² Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 42–46.

abstract spiritual truth in such a way that it can easily be comprehended and remembered and robes it with flesh so His hearers can see God's truth. "It was the greatness of Shakespeare that from the stuff of Holinshed he made the immortal texture of his plays; it is of the greatness of Jesus that He took a common form of Jewish teaching and filled it with new meaning and beauty."¹¹³

The parables are a unique teaching tool that Jesus utilized very effectively. Though they had been used in the OT and often by the rabbis, never had they been employed in such a brilliant manner as when used by Jesus, the Master-Teacher. He took a normal manner of teaching and turned it into an extraordinary vehicle for carrying forth His life-transforming truth.

As stated in one of the standard works on the parables by Trench, "Each one of the parables is like a casket, itself of exquisite workmanship, but in which jewels richer than itself are laid up; or like fruit, which, however lovely to look upon, is yet more delectable in its inner sweetness. To find, then, the golden key at the touch of which the casket shall reveal its treasures, to open this fruit so that nothing of its hidden kernel shall be lost, has ever been regarded as matter of high concern."¹¹⁴ That key to unlock the beauty of parables is found in the principles of interpretation that usher forth the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.

Most people have a hard time comprehending abstract ideas, yet they say: "A picture is worth a thousand words." A person might spend several minutes trying to explain beauty, but if he had a picture, he could point to it and say "that's a beautiful

¹¹³ Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (1861; rev., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 15.

person” and no more describing would be necessary. Every great word must become flesh, and every great idea needs a form. Once people hear a parable or read it, it is permanently entrenched in the memory. Warren Wiersbe points out:

I like to think of a parable as a *picture* that becomes a *mirror* and then a *window*...The longer we look at the ‘parable picture,’ the more it becomes a mirror *and we start to see* ourselves. When the chief priests and Pharisees heard our Lord’s parable of the tenants, they saw themselves in it and wanted to arrest Him (Matt 21:33–36). Jesus didn’t simply use parables as ‘illustrations,’ the way preachers tell stories to explain their points, but as *illumination*, the kind of light that pierced the very hearts and minds of the listeners and made them aware of their own needs. Parables are not entertainment; they’re powerful shock therapy.¹¹⁵

These word-pictures Jesus used became forever memorable, as even those who know nothing of Jesus Christ of Nazareth understand popular expressions like “prodigal” or “good Samaritan.” Snodgrass speaks of how attractive and compelling these stories with intent became. They are one of the few places that allow us to see reality:

Stories are inherently interesting. Discourse we tolerate; to story we attend. Story entertains, informs, involves, motivates, authenticates, and mirrors existence. By creating a narrative world, stories establish an unreal, controlled universe. The author abducts us and—almost god-like—tells us what reality exists in this narrative world, what happens, and why...life on the outside virtually stops; we are taken up in the story. The storyteller is in control so that we are forced to see from new angles and so that the message cannot be easily evaded. Hearers become willing accomplices, even if the message is hostile...Apart from personal experience, stories are the quickest way to learning.¹¹⁶

The parables became, in the lips of Jesus, a powerful way to move His hearers to pass judgment. In the case of Nathan’s parable, David was brought right to the precipice of the decision needing to be made regarding his own sin. As Jesus told His kingdom parables, He used them to urge people to respond to His gospel of the kingdom with true

¹¹⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching With Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 164–65.

¹¹⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 1.

saving faith. Even to the questioning crowd, Jesus urges them to come all the way in their commitment to Him. These parables, like much of His teachings, are aimed straight at the heart, demanding a verdict. “Jesus demanded that they take that judgment and pass it on to something to which they had been blind...if we apply that principle to almost any of the parables, we will see that they are sudden vivid flashes meant to make men see things which they were well able to see, but which either through deliberate blindness or through dullness of spirit they had never seen.”¹¹⁷

A final way of looking at Jesus’ purpose for parables is prophetic. Matthew states that Jesus was speaking to the crowd in parables “to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet”¹¹⁸ (Matt 13:35). He spoke in parables to fulfill prophesy. Lenski suggests “Matthew adds the detail that this mode of utterance was in accord with prophecy. The aorist ἐλάλησεν states the fact as such; the imperfect ἐλάλει lets it unroll before our eyes like a moving picture.”¹¹⁹ In Matthew’s fulfillment language, he presents Jesus as the Son of David and Israel’s Great Shepherd (Matt 1:1; 9:36). Christ’s parables, “like those of Asaph, portray Israel’s unbelief and God’s discipline, but more important, they stress God’s ongoing faithfulness to Israel through Jesus’ kingdom mission.”¹²⁰

Another prophesy, besides Psalm 78:2 cited in the text, is the prophesy of Isaiah. The prophet gave a pronouncement not only about the people he would go to, but also

¹¹⁷ Barclay, *Parables of Jesus*, 13–14.

¹¹⁸ Matthew does not do injustice in calling Asaph a prophet, since 2 Chr 29:30 designates him a “seer” or prophet. John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical*, trans. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 8:246.

¹¹⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 533.

¹²⁰ Turner, *Matthew*, 346.

their descendants who would also be insensitive, whose ears would be dull and their eyes would be dim (Isa 6:9–10). Those hearing the kingdom parables should not have looked upon these sayings as something novel, as if they had not been known before. They should have seen themselves in:

...what Jesus is now revealing—the righteous acts of God in redemption taking place in His teaching, miracles, death, and resurrection. Matthew insists that the OT Scriptures prophesied these things...If in one sense they have not been known before, it is because they have not all been brought together in the same pattern before. Jesus' kingdom parables to the crowds declare new things, secrets (v11), hidden things (v35).¹²¹

Instead of being obstinate and slow to believe, they should have seen in Jesus' life and ministry the fulfillment of OT promises anticipated in parabolic teaching, since He is the One "to whom all Scripture points and in whom all Scripture is fulfilled...[as] the message and mission of Jesus were nothing other than the working out of God's plan of salvation from the beginning...That is what Jesus' words were revealing was the design of God for the final and perfect redemption of His people...It is as though He himself were the speaker of Psalm 78:2."¹²²

¹²¹ Carson, *Matthew*, 322.

¹²² Hagner, *Matthew*, 390–91.

CHAPTER FOUR
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PREACHING PROJECT

Sermon Scheduling

The purpose of this project was to shepherd the congregation of Newtown Bible Church, Newtown, Connecticut, toward a deeper understanding of Scripture which would lead them to a holier life of worship and service. This series on the kingdom parables consisted of eleven sermons. It began on April 29, 2011 with the intent to finish by the middle of July, 2011. The first sermon was given with the purpose of introducing how broad and important a study of the kingdom parables is to one's understanding of Scripture and Jesus' kingdom. It included a survey of what could be expected in the series awaiting us, as well as hermeneutical principles that would aid them in studying the Scriptures on their own.¹²³ A great deal of thought went into the timing of this series, considering the onset of the summer months and people being gone for vacations. Yet, my co-pastor and I determined that this was a good time in the life of the church for this particular study, as well as the interaction that this home-fellowship group would provide.

Test Group Selection

Survey Group Formulation

The invitation for participating in this project was open to anyone in the congregation and was announced as such from the pulpit for two consecutive weeks.

¹²³ The sermon series was completed and it is posted on the web at www.biblicalexpositor.org.

Everyone was informed that they could pick a pin number and perform the survey totally anonymously so they could be honest with each of the questions. They were also encouraged to obtain a CD or listen from my website to any of sermons that they would be absent from, or at least to notate their absence on the post-survey. Notation of such sort would help explain why some teachings from the series were not as effective as anticipated.

Focus Group Formulation

In addition to those who were kind enough to participate in the survey, another seven church members were part of an interactive dialogue over a number of questions pertaining to the topic at hand. This group helped show where weaknesses in biblical understanding existed, in order to guide the learning process during the series.

Pre-Project Testing

Pre-Test Questionnaire

The tool used to gauge any growth in knowledge was a questionnaire to be filled out before the series and re-administered afterwards. This simple questionnaire, which can be found as an appendix at the end of this project, consists of 29 questions. The first section had questions that pertain to generic background issues, any kind of Bible education and understanding. The second section had questions pertaining particularly to kingdom parables, Bible study, and sermon interaction.

Responses in the second section were based on a six-point Likert scale. The six-point scale was chosen as the preferred method to help eliminate any kind of neutrality in answers given. It took between 15 and 20 minutes to complete this brief survey and the completed surveys were requested to be turned in before attending the series.

Focus Group Pre-Test Session

The pre-series time with the focus group met in my living room on Friday, April 22. As a group we discussed the set of questions that were prepared in advance. There was not much advance notice about the focus group, which may have had a bearing on those who otherwise could have planned on being present. A variety of questions were discussed ranging from the kingdom concept to expository preaching. Also discussed, were how the focus-group individuals interact with sermons, what they understand about hermeneutics, and what they hoped to learn. A list of these questions is appended to this project.

Project Sermon-Series Preached

On April 27, 2011, the Kingdom Parable series on Matthew 13 was begun. The series continued consecutively each week thereafter. By God's grace, the series was finished on July 8, 2011.

Sermon outlines are appended to this project. The series of eleven sermons consists of verse-by-verse, consecutive expositions of Matthew 13 outlined according to the exegesis provided in chapter two. The theme was: kingdom parables, teaching disciples about aspects of His kingdom while confronting opponents for their unbelief and disobedience.

Sermon One

“Word-Pictures of the Kingdom: Introduction to the Kingdom Parables” was the title of the first sermon. This particular sermon sought to do more than elucidate the text, by setting forth the platform for the preaching series. This sermon explained the significance of such a study to what we know and how we behave. The commitment to

biblical exposition necessitated that it too be taken from and supported by the Bible.

Therefore, this introductory sermon was driven by Matthew 13:1–3a and gave the context for why Jesus changed His whole teaching dynamic. While He had already taught in a few parabolic ways, Jesus now would only teach the public in parables (more of this Messianic purpose is explained in the third sermon). We see this concentration of kingdom parables as the response to the hard-hearted rebellion as displayed in blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, as shown in the immediate previous context of Matthew's thematic presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Matt 12:22–29).

The purpose for this initial sermon was three-fold. First, it sought to induce the congregation to excitement over the value of discovering more of the unfathomable treasures of God's Word. This series was the culmination of several months of personal study, so it would hopefully stimulate folks to worship and service through this in-depth study of the Word of God. Second, it could in a short timeframe introduce the hearers to the basic rationale for this new, concentrated teaching dynamic in the public ministry of Jesus that confronts the reader of Matthew 13. Finally, it sought to present in a clear, convincing way how personal Bible study should take place, as demonstrated in the way this parabolic literature is dealt with each week from the pulpit in the unfolding drama of instruction at the feet of Jesus.

This sermon served as a foundational basis to establish where we as a congregation were headed for the next several weeks. This message charted our course of study through the parabolic sermons of Jesus, which, in fact, showed the significance of staying with Matthew for so many weeks and allowing this beloved apostle to show forth the riches of Jesus' teaching verse-by-verse. The sermon ended with an overview of each

parable and how they each are connected to the same theme of the kingdom, showing various aspects of the Savior's revelation of it.

Sermon Two

The second sermon was titled "A Story about Dirt and Decisions." This exposition was taken from Matthew 13:3b–9; 18–23. This text stands out as one of the most compelling texts of the entire Bible that confronts the contemporary church's decisionistic approach to evangelism. The current trend is to manipulate man into making some sort of decision for Jesus, which is impossible without the Holy Spirit's drawing, and then to confirm him in his profession with assurance, though neither at that point know if the divine transaction of regeneration has taken place or not. It is not until the Spirit bears witness to his conformity to the Word that assurance begins to take root (Rom 8:16). In a way, this text is a further amplification of what Jesus had already spoken of in regard to false professions of faith in Matthew 7:15–23. Jesus clearly teaches that many responses are made to the gospel of the kingdom, but only one is salvific—only one merits entrance into the kingdom. The genuineness of the response is validated in fruit-bearing. In the Matthew 7 passage, the good fruit borne is that of doing the will of the Father. In Paul's theology man is saved unto/for the purpose of good works (Eph 2:10).

In God's providence, this first parable brought about some great discussion during the fellowship after the sermon was finished. Many folks in attendance had been exposed to decision-oriented evangelism in churches they had previously attended. Some people even voiced how this text addressed the situation of their adult children who were raised in this church; they claim salvation, yet their lives manifest no fruit of regeneration.

Sermon Three

“Spiritual Cardiology: Jesus’ Rationale for Parables” taken from Matthew 13:10–17 was the third sermon. After teaching on the responses that are given to the gospel of the kingdom, the disciples asked Jesus why He was speaking in parables. So, right after admonishing those who have ears to hear, He goes on to explain the reason people do not have ears to hear. In contrast to the open heart, there are those with the hard heart, the shallow heart, or the strangled heart. Jesus diagnoses the heart condition of those who would not submit to His word. There can be only two responses to Jesus’ claims: either reception or rejection, and the people of the day for the most part had chosen the latter. Jesus’ answer magnifies His grace and the humility of those who seek Him, yet judges the rebellious. He graciously gives understanding to those who are humble and obedient. He also takes away further revelation from those who will not respond in a teachable way; those who will not submit to His lordship. Jesus responds to people like this, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). The issue was not a matter of intellectual capacity, but a moral disposition towards God. They would not believe and understand, so God hardened their wicked hearts so that they could not believe and understand. While magnifying His sovereign grace, He in no way mitigated the responsibility of human actions. Though He would be gracious to give further understanding to those committed to Him, He would not cast pearls before swine by giving further revelation to the stiff-necked. In the curious, but rebellious, crowd that day, the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9–10 was brought to fulfillment. Israel, especially in the form of her religious leaders, had closed their opportunity of grace and was culpable for hardening their hearts to their Messiah, closing their eyes to His miracles, and scarcely

hearing His messages of authority in His claims of kingship. Since Israel abused her privileges, she was confirmed in her disobedience so there was no righteous purpose served by heedlessly exposing divine truth to further mockery.

Therefore, what would become *educational* to the disciples in the form of parables, would also serve in a *disciplinary* fashion to those who refused to become Jesus' disciples as these same parables would be nothing more than puzzles.

Sermon Four

The fourth sermon was “Wheat, Weeds, and Delayed Judgment: The Conflict of the Kingdom, Pt. 1” from Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. Though the first parable, consisting of the story and explanation, was dealt with in one sermon, this parable took two sermons to share the riches contained within.

There was probably no greater question in the minds of contemporary Jews of the day, while listening to the claims of Jesus, than “If you are really the Messiah, where is the judgment?” They had come to expect a political kingdom. Salvation, to them, was equated with national-political deliverance. They looked about, much like people do today, seeing the continued presence of evil in the world and wondered where God was. This question has often plagued people, whether the people of God or not. The Psalmist constantly asked about the prosperity of his enemies and the wicked surrounding him, for example Psalm 56. Saints of today still ask, “How long, O Lord?” This parable gives clarity surrounding the mystery (unrevealed in the OT) of the presently dawning kingdom of God. God does indeed rule and is in absolute control of His universal kingdom, but He has not set up His perfect, physical reign in righteousness on earth yet. It is delayed. During this age of grace, when He works through His Church, His hand of judgment is

stayed; but it is certain. The Master-Teacher shows that believer (wheat) and unbeliever (weed) will both remain together during this age in the present aspect of God's kingdom while the prince of the power of the air works out his wicked course through his children (Eph 2:2).

Extended time was intentionally taken on this parable. People in the congregation had been involved in ministries where they had not been clearly taught to apply diligence in their faith; to make certain of their calling and choosing (2 Pet 1:5, 10), and to examine themselves to see if they be in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). Since there is such a thing as abundant false professions, I felt it needful to spend time to clarify several biblical passages that validate ones profession of faith with the principles contained therein. After all, how does someone know which kingdom he is a part of? Fruit of a redeemed life is evident as a person expresses love for God (Ps 42:1; 73:25; Luke 10:27; Rom 8:7), repentance from sin (Ps 32:5; Prov 28:13; Rom 7:14; 2 Cor 7:10; 1 John 1:8–10), genuine humility (Ps 51:17; Matt 5:1–12; Jas 4:6, 9), continual prayer (Luke 18:1; Eph 6:18; Phil 4:6; 1 Tim 2:1–4; Jas 5:16–18), selfless love/love of the brethren (1 John 2:9; 3:14; 4:7), obedient living (Matt 7:21; John 15:14; Rom 16:26; 1 Pet 1:2, 22; 1 John 2:3–5), and several other virtues.

Sermon Five

The fifth sermon, a continuation of the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43), was titled, “Conflict of the Kingdom, Pt 2.” This sermon began with a review of the parable and then moved right into the interpretation of it. The best way to look at the story was to divide it into the actors and the actions. This was because there is a clear contrast in the story; the sons of the kingdom versus the sons of the evil one. On

the one hand, the harvesters will gather out all stumbling blocks, those guilty of lawlessness, and cast them into the furnace of fire (hell), where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yet, on the other hand, the righteous will shine forth, experiencing nothing but the glory of God.

Jesus shows clearly that those who often experienced the same things in life and at times were indistinguishable will be separated. It pushed individuals to ask if they were sons of the kingdom or not and how they will fare in the final harvest.

Sermon Six

This sermon, “The Greatness of the Kingdom, Pt 1: Parable of the Mustard Seed,” taken from Matthew 13:31–32 was straightforward and brief. The Jews and even the disciples clung to the idea that Messiah’s kingdom would be glorious and victorious. So how were they to understand the increasing opposition to the kingdom message? What kind of hope could they have in the face of satanic opposition, especially as they were sent forth by their Master as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt 10:16)? What would come to the kingdom when the enemy disseminates evil?

Lest they be tempted to despair, the Lord graciously encourages His disciples with how great His kingdom will be in spite of its weak and despised beginnings. Though it would begin quietly and on a small scale, it would grow into a full-grown tree with a mature end. What started on a small scale with just a few people would triumphantly move forward. What had been dismissed as unimpressive could not be overlooked for long. What seemed unimportant and insignificant, especially in Galilee at that time, consisting of a few uneducated fishermen and others is chronicled in the book of Acts.

This small group would grow into a massive crowd of thousands which would have to be reckoned with.

Jesus uses parables to explain different aspects of His kingdom program that were mysteries—truths that were unknown and unrevealed in the OT. These word-pictures deal with the form that the kingdom would take between Jesus' first coming and His second advent; between His rejection by men and His coming again in majesty. The brevity of this parable allowed time to further explain that the kingdom which Jesus spoke of is the same one taught about in the OT. Despite the fact that the OT gives only limited and incomplete glimpses, it none the less points to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the earthly, millennial kingdom.

The OT teaches nothing of the present aspect of the kingdom in the hearts of God's people, the Church, while the King is physically absent. This group of people, though they would not replace Israel who rejected Jesus, would experience some of the blessings given to Israel, like the New Covenant. These truths of the Church in this present age are taught in the NT's progress of revelation, revealing more facts.

Though there is discontinuity in that the Church and Israel are separate entities in the outworking of God's plan, there is continuity between the testaments as the Father's eternal purpose in the incarnation will be completely fulfilled. The testaments do not stand in opposition to each other but in harmony as they both present the same story of redemption.

We see many aspects of this grand kingdom concept in Scripture so it can only properly be defined when based on an inductive study on all the Bible texts out of which it comes.

Sermon Seven

The seventh sermon, “The Greatness of the Kingdom, Pt 2: Parable of the Leaven” was taken from Matthew 13:33–35. This parable, and thus this sermon, builds upon the concept introduced in the previous one. The parable of the mustard seed emphasized more of the external aspect of the kingdom’s growth and culmination in spite of evil opposition. This parable, however, deals more with the internal, irresistible power that is, largely, a secret one. Though the kingdom is active here and now in the world (as Jesus said that it is *near* and even *in* you) it is active largely in a *hidden* manner. It is something that man must believe in rather than behold at this present time. The kingdom of heaven has a permeating and transforming influence much like leaven of the day.

Again, with the shortness and simplicity of this parable, time remained to continue an explanation of the kingdom concept as presented in Scripture. As the previous sermon developed towards its latter half the universal aspect of the kingdom, the latter half of this sermon clarified ever so briefly the mediatorial aspect of the kingdom also referred to as the Messianic or visible kingdom. Jesus the Messiah came to usher in a mediated kingdom that all previous mediators had not kept perfectly. These human mediators would represent God to the people (Exod 20:14–21) and the people to God (Exod 32:9–14; Deut 9:24–29) beginning with Abraham. The majority of people were not qualified, as biblical history bears testimony, and each of the kings proved to be less than enthusiastic about God. Yet, a *real* king on a *literal* throne was prophesied throughout the OT (Zech 14:9). Actual locations are named (Obad 10–21) with actual nations over the world who are familiar with God’s kingdom (Isa 2:1–4). Prophets promised that there would be a revival of the Davidic kingdom (Amos 9:11) where Israel will be strong

(Micah 4:7–8), God’s covenant with him will be fulfilled (Ps 89:3–4, 34–37), and Jerusalem will be the capital city (Isa 24:23; 2:2–4). As the OT ends, people were *still* looking forward to the Messianic kingdom and the NT opens with Jesus’ arrival. Matthew presents Jesus Christ as the fulfillment to many OT prophecies, though Israel for the most part rejected Him. Though they observed Him with their eyes, their hearts were closed to His rulership. After unbelieving Jews formally rejected their Messiah, Jesus announced a new program, the Church (Matt 16:13–20). As the kingdom came near, Gentiles were afforded the gracious opportunity to participate in a limited way in these kingdom promises. This concept would be further explained in the progress of revelation as Jesus would “rescue us from the domain of darkness and transfer us into the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col 1:13). This kingdom is such as people could enter through the new birth (John 3:5). So, there is the present reality of the kingdom “already” being active, as well as the future reality of the full, literal fulfillment of all the promises “not yet” coming to completion in the Messianic kingdom. This is the already/not yet tension that is the current reality of God’s kingdom.

In essence, the sovereign God, who rules over all, used these two parables to assure the apostles, the early church, and every believer in Christ in every age that His kingdom would not fail, but would prosper and grow. Christianity will win, evil will eventually be abolished, and Jesus Christ will reign forever and ever. Eventually the universal kingdom will merge with the perfect Mediator’s reign in righteousness and will continue for eternity as His glorious, everlasting kingdom.

Sermon Eight

The eighth sermon, taken from Matthew 13:44–46, was “The Kingdom of Heaven...Priceless: The Parables of Hidden Treasure and the Priceless Pearl.” Like the previous two parables that coupled together for a similar teaching, this parable and the next one teach the *value* of the kingdom. This pair of parables fleshes out the truth that people are always willing to sacrifice for value. This is the picture of true discipleship as presented throughout Matthew’s Gospel record.

Jesus’ first disciples are willing to leave their families and fishing gear in order to follow Him (Matt 4:20, 22; cf. Matt 9:9). Jesus made it clear that to be counted among His followers meant denial of self and cross-bearing, which, in that day, meant to lose your life in exchange for your soul (Matt 16:24–26).

Throughout many chapters and verses in Matthew’s record, Jesus has declared His demands for discipleship. It is a price that many have been unwillingness to pay. Such was the rich young ruler who would not sell all that he had to follow Jesus (Matt 19:21–22), but Jesus assured that those who were willing to make such a sacrifice would be richly rewarded (Matt 19:27–29). Those people who had stated their unwilling to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ in the present congregation were privileged to be shown one more glimpse of the priceless value of the Lord’s saving gospel and its resulting joy.

Sermon Nine

The ninth sermon was “The Ultimate Separation: Parable of the Dragnet” from Matthew 13:47–50. Having just spoken of the surpassing worth of His kingdom, Jesus now gives a frightening warning about the judgment connected with refusal to enter His

kingdom. This parable is similar to the wheat and weed parable with the biggest difference being this one's self-contained interpretation.

The truth taught herein, though ignored by many churches, is a crucial understanding for biblical ministry. As the earlier parable illustrated the coexistence of believers and unbelievers in the present manifestation of the kingdom, so this parable emphasizes the separation that will come about in the change of the future form of the kingdom. Although initially there are righteous and wicked, a thorough sorting out will certainly take place. It is during this era of the church that God allows unbelief and unrighteousness, but the time will come that His patience will end and His judgment will begin. There will be a sorting out, an utter separation of the hypocrites, sham Christians, and mere adherents of the church from the righteous.

Sermon Ten

This sermon, "Teachers of the Kingdom: Parable of the Householder" was from Matthew 13:51–52. This was a fascinating parable to preach since when I initially approached it for study, I had no idea what this text meant to teach. It was so exciting to come to an unfamiliar passage of Scripture and be forced to wrestle through it for understanding. Acknowledging my own ignorance brought into full focus the significance of always studying the Bible through the eyes and ears of its original audience.

Jesus underscores the importance of the duty and privilege of following Him. His disciples claim to understand what He has taught, so He concludes this session of parabolic instruction by focusing on the responsibility of learners of His truth to become teachers of that same truth. These same disciples would prove to be the important ones in

the transition between the OT and the NT. They must have a firm grasp of the foundational truth provided in the OT as well as be able to bring clarity and understanding to the message of the kingdom. Both old and new were indispensable to the gospel. The gospel scribe must bring forth the wealth of his rich understanding of the kingdom as it pertains to the OT promises as well as its culmination in the eternal state, even the temporary time between both.

Sermon Eleven

The final sermon in this series was “Unbelief on the Homefront: Jesus’ Visit to Nazareth” from Matthew 13:53–58. Here Matthew picks up on the theme of unbelief that he so thoroughly described in Matthew 13:13–15. Many people might be tempted to wonder why he would place this account at the end of chapter thirteen, at the end of the exposition of kingdom parables. Nevertheless, this account of unbelief and rejection in Jesus’ hometown rounds out the opposition that had already been experienced in chapters eleven and twelve and prepared the way for His kingdom parables.

This incredible experience of unbelief forms a fitting illustration of the same kind of opposition and rejection of the King and His kingdom that had already been promoted by Israel’s religious leaders and curious crowd. The unbelief to the Gospel that Jesus experienced climaxes in blatant unbelief by Jesus’ own people in His country. These people could not remove their own perceptions of Jesus and the familiarity of the One whom they had known all His life, especially His early growing-up years. They rejected Him in much the same way as they had done a year earlier, though short of trying to throw Him over the cliff like they had sought on His earlier visit (Luke 4:16–29). Sadly they were offended that this mere man, part of the family that still lived in the area,

would make such claims and assert His own self-importance, especially that He would dare assert He had “come down out of heaven” (John 6:42).

Post-Project Testing

Survey Group Post-Test

The post-test survey was handed out the day of our last study, July 8. Some people filled it out immediately and others brought it with them a week later during a fellowship supper for a time of question-answer to discuss the Gospel of Matthew and the Kingdom Parable series. The survey was identical to the one handed out before the expositional series began. There could have been several more people to participate in the project, but due to a large number of people travelling for vacations and other obligations, they were unable to be involved in the process. Therefore, many of those who had kindly filled out a pre-survey had to be eliminated from the results since there was no post-survey to gauge any growth in knowledge from the Matthew 13 series.

Data Collection and Evaluation

The data was not evaluated until the month of August, giving people plenty of time to listen to sermons that they had missed. Knowing that there could be great peaks and lows if the data were looked at individually, it was decided to average the various numbers representing the responses and look for variation from the average so that the listening group could be looked at as a cohesive whole.

The survey questions were categorized according to the changes that were desired to be measured. The two categories of interest were *changes in understanding* of Scripture and *changes in attitude* towards preaching/worship/life-change. A six-point

Likert scale¹²⁴ was used to assess any kind of change in attitudes and understanding. The reason for six as opposed to the typical five was to weed out any kind of neutral answers of “don’t know” or “neither agree nor disagree.”

¹²⁴ Named after its inventor, Rensis Likert, the Likert Scale is “a psychometric scale commonly used in questionnaires, and is the most widely used scale in research, such that the term is often used interchangeably with *rating scale* even though the two are not synonymous. When responding to a questionnaire item, respondents specify their level of agreement to a statement.” (*Wikipedia*, “Likert Scale,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Likert_scale (accessed January 27, 2011)).

CHAPTER FIVE
EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

Analysis of Project Data

Survey Data

As mentioned previously in chapter four, pre- and post-test questionnaires were given to the Survey Group in order to compare and evaluate how effective the project had been to the church at large. It would have been personally fulfilling to have more people involved in the project, not just because of having more data to correlate, but to have more of the saints involved in life-changing study of the Word of God. Possibly a personal letter sent to each member of the congregation explaining the importance of the series (to both them and me) would have increased the involvement. The summer months, that tend to be busy and a time for vacations, probably affected those who otherwise would have liked to have been involved in the surveys, but could not.

Though the initial questions on the survey have nothing to do with assessing Scriptural understanding or proper attitudes/actions (henceforth only referred to attitudes from here on out), they help show the demographics of those who were kind enough to participate in the project by way of pre- and post-test contribution. The last string of four questions in section one helps to give insight into the people's basic understanding of concepts, which is key to comprehending the kingdom parables. They are questions that

ask about their perception of the NT, parables, Bible interpretation, and the kingdom of God.

Apart from the initial questions dealing with the demographic data and basic understanding of key concepts, the remaining answers were separated according to a six-point Likert scale, according to the changes that were desired to be measured. The two areas to be assessed were: changes in biblical *knowledge* and changes in *attitude*. The results of the survey were standardized by computing the average of answers given by respondents, in order to deal with the group as a whole, rather than individually. This allowed the results to be tabulated based on where respondents, as a whole, were in their knowledge of Scripture and their responses in appropriate godly attitudes.

The participants were asked to rate their responses to each question with a 1 if they completely agree or a 6 if they completely disagree, or any variation in agreement or disagreement by a numbered increment (2—mostly agree, 3—slightly agree, 4—slightly disagree, 5—mostly disagree). Notice that the six-point scale was used in order to rule out any neutral responses. Based on the variety of statements, in some cases, a 1 is the preferred answer, whereas with other statements, a 6 is the desired response. To help quantify the responses, the preferred number is shown in each chart. The improvement in knowledge and attitudes is shown by an increase in point value towards the favorable answer.

The pre-test was intended to provide a standard of where people were at in their understanding of and attitudes towards Biblical truth, especially as the kingdom parables were proclaimed consecutively for eleven weeks. The post-test survey is identical, so the results could be measured according to the changes indicated.

Demographic Data Chart

Survey Questions 1–8

| | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Age | 30 & under 6 | 31–50 4 | 51–70 7 | 71+ 2 |
| 2 | Education | High School 1 | Some College 5 | College Grad 9 | Post-Grad 4 |
| 3 | Marital Status | Married 17 | Single 2 | | |
| 4 | Gender | Male 8 | Female 11 | | |
| 5 | Years in Bible-Teaching Church | 1–5 5 | 10+ 14 | | |
| 6 | Years Attending NBC | 1–5 14 | 10+ 2 | N/A 3 | |
| 7 | Ever Attended Bible College/Seminary | 4 | | | |
| 8 | Bible Reading | Occasionally 1 | Regularly 18 | | |

TABLE 4.1 Demographic Data of Congregation

The data collected in this section shows that there was a good cross-section of the congregation represented ranging in age, education, marital status, gender, and Bible-education. This congregation is reasonably young and quite educated, with over half of the respondents receiving college and post-grad schooling. The results show that apart from being in a Bible-teaching church, there are only a few (four) who received formal Bible-training. All but one person responded that they read their Bibles regularly. This factor has great significance in how a person understands the Bible and its teaching. If little or no time is spent in Bible reading and study, it not only limits the amount that a person understands, but it also indicates a serious heart problem; that there is no love for God’s Word (Ps 119:97), and they will not grow in respect to salvation (1 Pet 2:1–3).

Most of the people at Newtown Bible Church are new to the church (within two years), so this series came at a crucial time in the development of body life and discipleship. Three of those who participated are not part of the church, but appreciate the

teaching that they receive on the internet. They are established in local biblical churches, but due to the electronic age, they take advantage of the tools that the Lord has graciously provided, even online resources. The online listeners' results were not significantly different from those who attended the series so there was no need to keep their results separate from the others' results.

Understanding of Key Concepts—NT, Bible Study, Parables and Kingdom
Survey Questions 9–12

| | | Limited | | Moderate | | Extensive | |
|----|---|---------|------|----------|------|-----------|------|
| | | Pre | Post | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| 9 | Understanding of NT Scripture | 2 | 3 | 14 | 13 | 3 | 3 |
| 10 | Understanding of Parables | 2 | 1 | 14 | 11 | 3 | 7 |
| 11 | Understanding of Literal, Grammatical, Historical Approach to Studying Scripture* | 4 | 3 | 14 | 15 | 1 | 1 |
| 12 | Understanding of Kingdom of God/Heaven | 3 | 3 | 13 | 13 | 3 | 3 |

TABLE 4.2 Understanding of Key Concepts

The data in this section is quite significant. From a pastoral perspective, this is a church that is biblically literate, but they come from various churches where the Scriptures were not expositionally and systematically taught through as the authority for faith and practice. Though folks say that they have a good understanding of the NT, when probing further, conversation reveals how subjective some of these answers truly are. A person can say he understands the NT, but after going through a book-study he can recognize how shallow his previous understanding was and how much his understanding has been deepened. Another facet of the subjectivity of some of the questions is how some of the respondents wanted to be accurate in their statements, yet humble in not exalting themselves in their own opinion. For instance, one person who evaluated his

understanding of the NT as “extensive” made sure to qualify his answer by writing, “compared to an average person, because I’m not a scholar.” One of the “extensive” responses was my co-pastor whom I would expect to give such an answer. Furthermore, one person who was surveyed is part of the well-known expositional ministry of Dr. John MacArthur. So, though there is room for growth in people like this, they have a good grasp of God’s Holy Word.

Question number 11 shows an expected response in this particular church context. At Newtown Bible Church (NBC) there has been Bible exposition consistently practiced for at least 15 years. Even though very few people have been here for that period of time, most of the attendees have come here because of the clear, unashamed proclamation of the truth. If preaching is public hermeneutics (which it is), then people have been shown in public how they should study their Bibles in private. They have had a consistent, literal, historical-grammatical hermeneutic demonstrated for them.

It is extremely important to grasp the significance for this type of hermeneutic when approaching Scripture. Not only does it minimize the amount of reading into the text what is *not* there, but it allows Scripture to speak for itself—to express what God means by what He has said. A proper understanding of hermeneutics will structure personal Bible study, and it will also set apart an important element of what constitutes a biblical ministry. It will also shepherd people in what kind of preachers to listen to, what kinds of books to read, and what kind of church to go to, because a person who does not deal faithfully with Scripture is not to be trusted.

Though there was minimal change on individuals’ understanding of hermeneutics, it began at a decent level. Furthermore this is something to be grasped over a period of

time, not within an eleven-week frame of reference. Howbeit, there was no obvious change in understanding of the kingdom, they understood it well at the outset. In addition, when comparing the results individually, one pre-survey “limited” answer went up to “moderate” and two people went from “moderate” to “extensive”.

Questions Pertaining to Changes in Biblical Knowledge

| | | Pre | Post | Preferred | Points of Improvement |
|----|--|-----|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 13 | Best way to understand parables is to spiritualize | 69 | 96 | 114 | 27 |
| 14 | Every detail has a spiritual point to convey | 57 | 72 | 114 | 15 |
| 15 | Never interpret figurative language in a literal way | 58 | 61 | 114 | 3 |
| 18 | I understand why Jesus used parables | 28 | 27 | 19 | 1 |
| 22 | I understand where Matt 13 fits into Matthew's account | 50 | 35 | 19 | 15 |
| 23 | Kingdom is just a reference to Heaven | 90 | 99 | 114 | 9 |
| 24 | Kingdom includes more than the church | 34 | 24 | 19 | 10 |
| 26 | Profession of faith is sufficient to get into Heaven | 100 | 100 | 114 | Same |
| 27 | Can comprehend a parable's meaning without its historical setting | 54 | 74 | 114 | 20 |
| 29 | Must follow writer's flow in order to understand the scripture's meaning | 43 | 33 | 19 | 10 |

TABLE 4.3 Changes in Biblical Knowledge

There are a couple of items to note in these next two charts. For one, there probably was a better way to word the statements to add clarity than what I had done, but this realization came too late in the process. Depending on the way that each of the questions was worded, sometime a “1” was the preferred answer, whereas, in other questions a “6” was desired. Therefore, the “Points of Improvement” column shows how many points the congregation moved towards the preferred answer. One particular positive feature is that knowledge on any particular item increased overall. Question #26 stayed the same, but that was from a high number to begin with. Furthermore, interaction with one particular person who gave a “wrong” answer revealed that he understood the

subject, but read the question wrong. There was marked improvement validated by one to twenty-seven points.

These folks showed by their responses that they now understand how people tend to spiritualize the Bible and they see the need to interpret it literally, recognizing that even figurative language is used to convey a literal truth. They also showed remarkable growth in understanding of where chapter thirteen fits in the flow of Matthew's gospel. They even learned how much bigger God's kingdom concept is than those who typically limit it to the church or heaven.

Questions Pertaining to Changes in Attitude Toward Preaching of, Worship through, and Application of the Scriptures

| | | Pre | Post | Preferred | Points of Improvement |
|----|--|-----|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 16 | God gives scriptural facts for knowledge sake | 90 | 87 | 19 | 3 |
| 17 | I make preparation for worship | 49 | 35 | 19 | 14 |
| 19 | I take notes during sermon | 57 | 48 | 19 | 9 |
| 20 | Every passage has significance to daily life | 31 | 27 | 19 | 4 |
| 21 | I discuss the sermon afterwards | 42 | 32 | 19 | 10 |
| 25 | Scripture can only be applied when something can be obeyed | 97 | 99 | 114 | 2 |
| 28 | An unbeliever can understand/obey teachings of parables | 80 | 103 | 114 | 23 |

TABLE 4.4 Changes in Attitude

Here again it appears, with at least questions 16 and 25, that the wording could have been clearer. But overall, it appears there was positive change in attitude toward preaching, worship, and obedience to the Word. Yet, the improvements were not as extensive in this section as the previous one. That is to be expected. It takes time for biblical knowledge to establish itself in a person's heart to change their affections and increase their attitudes and actions progressively.

There was a substantial amount of improvement in preparation for Sunday worship. Though there were several times in the sermons to point people towards worship, it probably was not just the teaching on worship, but also the natural overflow and sanctifying effect of the Word of God. This is a group of people that showed even in the pre-survey that the intent of teaching Scripture is not just to bolster new facts, but to change lives in worship, service, and loving obedience. Biblical preaching should not simply change the minds of the congregation, but assault the heart. It should help people rehearse the truth (even that which they know but just need to be reminded of) and infuse their worship and service with truth.

Though the statements used in the survey tend toward being subjective and there could be some explainable variations in the data collected, overall the survey reveals marked change in both biblical knowledge and proper attitudes. Even still, there is also the feature of my weakness as a teacher. I often listen to teachers who are far more effective teachers of God's truth, but they have not been called by God to shepherd these precious people. My task as a Bible expositor is simply to be faithful in feeding the flock of God with the talent that has been entrusted to me for the glory of God alone. Yet it gives great satisfaction to see growth in a quantifiable means such as this evaluation provided.

Summary of the Study

This project investigated the impact of the exposition of Christ's kingdom parables in Matthew 13 as a means of teaching about mysteries of His kingdom. These expositions were given that believers would grow in their obedient worship of the King

and understand more of His kingdom, and that unbelievers would surrender to His lordship. The series was preached at Newtown Bible Church in the summer of 2011.

Chapter One developed the purpose, goals, context, rationale, definitions of key terms, and limitations employed in the project. The major goals of the project were to have the congregation apply the kingdom parables to their lives, to present to them the sovereign God who reveals and withholds knowledge for His own glory, to bolster their confidences in consecutive biblical exposition, to undergird the importance of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, and to lift high the Lord Jesus Christ as the Master-Teacher, that they might worship Him better.

Chapter Two provided the theological and exegetical foundations for Jesus' usage of kingdom parables. The first part of the chapter surveyed the unfolding of the King and His kingdom, as revealed in the Gospels, in Matthew's record, and by the Lord Jesus Himself. This chapter continued by giving definitions for "parable" and "kingdom," as they provide significant insight for the study at hand. The chapter ended with textual research that contributed to the sermons.

Chapter Three set forth the history of parabolic interpretation, as well as the principles that should guide our interpretation of Jesus' parables. It also gave some rationale for His teaching in parables.

Chapter Four presented an analysis of the methods used to gather supporting data. Sermon scheduling, test group selection, focus group interaction, test surveys, and sermon summaries were the collection strategies.

Chapter Five assessed the goals and pointed to the effectiveness of the project in light of the analyzed data outcomes. It also identified theological reflections and pinpointed areas for further study.

Assessment of Ministry Project Goals

The title of this preaching project is: An Exposition of the Kingdom Parables of Jesus Christ in Matthew 13. It was presented to Newtown Bible Church with gratitude for God providentially planning this particular series at this particular time in my ministry and the life of the church. I had only been here for a few months before beginning the preaching series. It had a way of endearing our hearts together, as the first extended series that we went through as this was the first extended series of our home-fellowship group.

The project was started with 5 goals.

Goal One

The first goal of the project called the members of Newtown Bible Church (NBC) to evaluate their lives in regard to the kingdom parables. Before starting this series I knew that the church greatly needed this particular teaching at this time. The focus of the evangelistic ministry here for several years, as well as at the churches several people had come from, had been decision-oriented. Decision-oriented ministry bases a person's assurance of salvation on the moment of decision for Christ, rather than on a sanctified walk in holiness after the "decision." Often that approach to evangelism is modeled on a weekly basis of altar-calls.

After teaching the second sermon of the series, the parable of the sower/soils, great discussion ensued as people identified with the poor methodology of the invitation system, since the text dictated that momentary professions that eventually fall away are

not genuine. My shepherding responsibility was to clarify the dangers of the invitation system and why I do not utilize it, though I do invite people on a weekly basis to respond to Christ. The responsibility of the church is to recognize that *both* in our doctrine and in our methodology, we teach and proclaim the gospel faithfully. We must sort through the biblical teaching about *false professions* of faith and having *assurance* of salvation. We should carefully study the biblical teaching to see how professions can be false (Matt 7:21–3; Jas 2:14–26), and how assurance must be measured by our nature as new creations (2 Cor 5:17), our fruit of good works (Eph 2:10; Jas 2), and the evidence of the Spirit’s presence in our lives (Rom 8:12–14). Paul did not say to remember your decision; he said “test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5). And Peter said to “apply all diligence to your faith” (2 Pet 1:5). Though only eternity will reveal how much people evaluated their lives in light of the kingdom parables, the data shows the positive response to the teaching of God’s Word, not only in what they learned, but also in how that knowledge has been influencing their attitudes and behavior.

Goal Two

The second goal of the project was to provide rationale for the members of NBC as to why Jesus reveals certain truth only to believers, but withholds it from unbelievers.

The church has a fair amount of people that, due to a minimalistic presentation of the gospel, were Arminian in their theology, thinking that salvation is enacted by the sinner’s initiation, rather than by the sovereign working of God. They are still working through a biblical understanding of the doctrines of grace.

The passages studied in Matthew 13 have a clear overtone of God’s sovereignty, exercised generally in His universe, and particularly in the redeemed. Any biblical

ministry, to be faithful to Scripture, must present a high view of God. Though God's elective purposes in salvation had been taught by me in other settings, often times in smaller groups, this afforded another opportunity to instruct the congregation of God's sovereign grace in salvation and sanctification.

Probably no doctrine of Scripture is more vilified than the doctrine of election. It was especially the third sermon in the series on Jesus' rationale for parables that this doctrine was greatly fleshed out. While upholding God's grace of election, Christ establishes human culpability in one's rejection of His kingdom message. The Lord would no longer cast pearls before swine by teaching more truth to those who were hardened in their sin and unbelief. Parables became a means of blessing to those who believe, while punishing unbelievers and judicially hardening their already wicked hearts. There was a greater understanding, through this series, of the depth of man's depravity and the need for God's sovereign grace to enact belief, understanding, and gospel obedience.

Goal Three

The third goal of the project was to bolster understanding of and confidence in verse-by-verse, consecutive biblical exposition as the correct and preferred means of instructing the local church in God's truth. There may be times to step outside consecutive exposition, knowing that an expository sermon can take on a much larger text or entire book at once. Yet, the general teaching in corporate worship should concern itself with taking the congregation through books of the Bible, unpacking the author's flow of thought verse-by-verse, as he lays forth his argument. Several people have grown to appreciate this mode of teaching and have even developed convictions based upon

expository preaching. The survey revealed that people have come to understand where Matthew 13 fits into the scope of Matthew's account, which could only be arrived at from a thorough study built upon verse-by-verse exposition. They also grew in their understanding of Matthew's flow of thought, which again could only have been arrived at through verse-by-verse, consecutive exposition.

Goal Four

The fourth goal of the project was to instruct and reinforce their understanding of the grammatical-historical approach of hermeneutics. Any type of preaching that does not flow from a grammatical-historical hermeneutic greatly hampers the spiritual growth of the congregation. It also teaches them that the meaning of Scripture is fluid in the hands of the interpreter rather than being unalterable truth whose meaning has remained unchanged since it was originally written. Certainly when there is no submission to the authority of Scripture, people exalt their own reasoning capabilities and seek to rationalize how to do ministry rather than submitting to God's revealed truth on how He has designed ministry. Preaching that comes forth from the Scriptures is authoritative and grants confidence to the hearers that they indeed know what God means by what He has said.

One of the greatest points of improvement among the group was in coming to the conviction that it is impossible to comprehend meaning apart from the historical setting, that what it *meant* to the original audience is what it *means* to us today.

Goal Five

The fifth goal was to reveal Jesus as the Master-Teacher. I sought, at every turn to put Jesus Christ on display for the brilliance He demonstrated in the parabolic method

of teaching. It was sheer logic on fire. There could be no denying what He taught, as those whose hearts were inclined to Him could not help but understand these grand truths about His kingdom. He used everyday items and events that were so common to the people and illustrated kingdom truths with them. When Jesus came to the end of the kingdom parables of Matthew 13, He asked His disciples if they understood all these things and they said, “Yes” (Matt 13:51). The parables were effective in explaining divine truth.

So the logical question might come, “If Jesus told stories, can we?” Why have some ministry of proclamation from an authoritarian who speaks to people like they should actually listen to what he is saying? Yet, the question really is not about style, it is about substance. If the Bible is indeed the Word of God—inspired, inerrant, infallible—then this divine revelation must be proclaimed as the only source of what to believe and how to behave. Since there is only one truth—God’s—then by its very character, it must be heralded as God’s disclosure of His person and purpose. It is not something to be deliberated, something to be thought of as a good story that you can draw your own conclusion from, nor can it be something that can be treated passively to just give more intellectual facts. It must be believed and obeyed. Jesus spoke as one with authority, not because of the rabbis He quoted, but as One with inherent authority.

One of the greatest joys in preaching this series was the privilege of proclaiming this life-changing truth to those who came and were so eager to sit at the feet of Jesus Christ in order to have their lives transformed by the truths found in Matthew 13. The great joy was being surrounded by folks who submitted to the authority of Scripture and were enamored by the Christ who had redeemed their souls and still gave them life-

changing truth through these word-pictures. It was a joy to see them captivated by His truth as it unfolded in the kingdom parables. They were amazed, as I was, at the Master-Teacher who would condescend to make His truth so clear that we could understand it, obey it, worship through it, and teach it to others. What a wonderful Savior and Teacher, this Jesus of Nazareth!

Evaluation of Process

It was my great desire, in embarking on this study, to see God's hand mightily work through His Word to produce change in the lives of individuals who heard the sermons and even to deepen the commitment to biblical ministry at NBC. Out of all the questions posed in the survey, only one question remained the same. Otherwise there was a range in improvement of knowledge and obedience from one to twenty-seven points gained throughout the survey. This is not due to the eloquence of this preacher. I am not a perfect teacher, so I could not have expected even close to the improvement that the data from the surveys suggest. The response of the church was one of great joy, appreciation, and loving obedience to what the Lord taught them in His living and active Word that worked mightily. The one defining attribute manifest in the hearers was teachability; hearts inclined to their Master...to render Him loving obedience to His revelation.

Solomon had much to say about the humble heart that responds to the reproofs of Scripture. Those who fear the LORD will listen to Him (Prov 15:31–33). It is only those who heed His instruction that are wise (Prov 8:33) and who will increase their learning of His Word (Prov 1:2–7). They will incline their hearts to understanding and treasure His commandments (Prov 2:1–2). This has been my joyful experience here at Newtown Bible Church.

Theological Reflections

This project was so helpful, especially in my own understanding of the kingdom. I previously knew a lot about the kingdom and that it had a vital role in the interpretation of Scripture, but I had not seen it as the key to unlocking the theme of Scripture. These parables were given for the purpose of revealing mysteries that were not revealed in OT Scripture. They explain aspects of the kingdom that are crucial to our understanding of this current age of grace known as the Church Age. It aids in understanding both the continuity and discontinuity of OT and NT.

Though my understanding has been greatly increased, I look forward to finding ways to communicate the kingdom to others in a clear and concise way. I also seek to have an eye toward the aspect of the kingdom that is emphasized in various parts of Scripture; the universal kingdom or mediatorial, or even the culmination in the eternal Messianic kingdom.

I also gained greater insight into the custom of the day which assigned the household to a steward. Quite possibly a reason that many commentators do not see the parable of the householder as a parable is because they did not delve into this arena of Jewish culture. The householder is only referenced seven times in Matthew and five other times in the entire NT. It was fascinating to see how the Savior used this figure of the day to wrap up His teachings of the kingdom and entrust this message to the new disciples.

Conclusion

I think the most profound effect of the project was that which it had on my own life. I had never had the opportunity afforded to spend so much time in preparation for a

series than what this project required. Usually in the week-to-week sermon preparation there is never enough time to go into the depth of study that is desired of any given section of Scripture. The sanctifying effect of the Word on my own heart and thought process was nothing short of staggering. I was so amazed by the privilege of sitting at the feet of the Master-Teacher, feeling so inadequate to impart these precious truths to others.

Implications for Further Study

One of the most incredible characteristics of the Word of God is that it is inexhaustible. The longer it is studied, the wider and deeper it gets. It is such a wealth of infinite wisdom, so to try to use one's finite mind to comprehend its truths would be foolish. An entire lifetime could be spent in just one biblical book and still the riches could not be unpacked. The more time I spent studying the kingdom parables, the more keenly aware of my own ignorance I became aware. I spent the most concentrated time on Matthew 13 as I have ever spent in the study of Scripture and I still have not gotten beyond the surface.

After preaching the series, I have had the privilege to re-preach several of the sermons and expand beyond what I had learned and taught initially. Therefore, I desire to keep adding to my understanding of this special part of holy writ with every detail that its Tutor graciously imparts. I desire to re-preach this series after putting so many more details together in my mind, as I have become even more convinced of its truth than I was initially. Perhaps the Lord would present Bible-conference, seminar, or camp opportunities so that I can spend yet more time plowing through the truths herein.

APPENDIX A

Survey for Parable Study

Intent of this survey: The goal is to get an understanding of how you personally relate to the subjects, habits, thoughts, etc below. Please keep in mind there is NO right or wrong answer but rather this is a reflection of your thoughts and position. Therefore, this survey will remain anonymous. However, in order to match your answers in this pre-test to your answers on the post-test after the series, we will need to identify you by a number.

Please create a four-digit PIN that you will be able to remember and write it here:_____

Section One

INSTRUCTIONS: Circle the answer that best reflects you.

1. Your age group:

30 and under 31–50 51–70 71 and up

2. Your highest level of education:

High School Some College College Graduate Post Graduate

3. Marital status:

Married Single Widowed

4. Gender:

Male Female

5. Number of years attending a Bible-teaching church:

1–5 years 6–10 years 10+ years

6. Number of years attending Newtown Bible Church:

1–5 years 6–10 years 10+ years

7. Have you ever attended a Bible College or a Seminary?

Yes No

8. How often do you read your Bible?

Seldom Occasionally Regularly

9. How would you evaluate your understanding of the New Testament Scripture?

Limited Moderate Extensive

10. How would you evaluate your understanding of the parables?

Limited Moderate Extensive

11. What is your understanding of the literal, grammatical-historical approach to studying Scripture?

Limited Moderate Extensive

12. What is your understanding of the Kingdom of God/Heaven?

Limited Moderate Extensive

Section Two

INSTRUCTIONS: Please read each question thoroughly and write the number that most truly reflects your way of thinking or your approach to the subject matter.

1=Completely Agree, 2=Mostly Agree, 3=Slightly Agree, 4=Slightly Disagree, 5=Mostly Disagree, 6=Completely Disagree

13. ___ I believe the best way to understand parables is to spiritualize.
14. ___ I believe every detail of parables has a spiritual point to convey.
15. ___ You should never interpret figurative language in a literal way.
16. ___ God gives factual data just to increase our knowledge.
17. ___ I make intentional preparation for worship.
18. ___ I can understand why Jesus used parables in His teaching ministry.
19. ___ I take notes during the sermon.
20. ___ I believe every passage has significance to present, daily life.
21. ___ I discuss the sermon afterwards.
22. ___ I understand where Matthew 13 fits in the ongoing development of the Gospel of Matthew.
23. ___ The kingdom is just a reference to Heaven.
24. ___ The Kingdom includes more than the Church.

25. ___Application of Scripture can only be rendered when there is something to be obeyed.
26. ___A profession of faith is sufficient to grant entrance into Heaven.
27. ___It is possible to comprehend the meaning of a parable without knowing its historical setting.
28. ___An unbeliever can understand and obey the teaching of a parable.
29. ___It is essential to follow a biblical author's flow of thought in order to unpack the meaning of Scripture.

Thank you so very much for your participation in this survey. Please commit to attending the next three months as we grow together in our understanding of and obedience to Scripture.

If it is absolutely essential for you to miss a message, due to ministry restraints, please obtain a CD of the message.

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions

1. What is your understanding of the kingdom of God?
2. Who is there?
3. What is expository preaching?
4. Are we allowed to interpret Scripture allegorically?
5. How many points does each parable try to get across like, for instance, the parable of the sower?
6. Do you see significance in a study of the kingdom parables?
7. What kind of questions do you have about such a series?
8. When you listen to a sermon, what makes it good?
9. What makes it effective?
10. What makes it convicting?
11. What makes it memorable?
12. What are the most important lessons learned from Matthew thus far?
13. Has the method of studying the Bible changed?
14. What do you hope to glean from this series?

APPENDIX C

Sermon Outlines

Sermon 1

Title: “Word-Pictures of the Kingdom: Intro to the Kingdom Parables”

Text: Matthew 13:1–3a

Matt 13:1–3a 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.

Introduction:

2 Sam 12:1–15, a powerful story that produces conviction in them we learn about God’s one kingdom plan that was spoken of often in the OT will learn about the two groups that fill every church, the only attitude that merits entrance into God’s kingdom, the eschatological culmination of the eternal state of man will hear and learn things taught by Jesus that were never unfolded in the OT and pertaining to the Church Age, between Jesus’ first and second comings this chapter chronicles the definitive turning-point in the ministry of Jesus where He turns to parabolic teaching.

I. Benefits and rationale of Jesus’ use of parables in His teaching

The Pedagogical:

- A. Makes truth concrete
- B. Uses known to teach unknown
- C. Compels interest
- D. Enables and compels the hearers to discover truth for themselves; forces them to think

The Historical:

- E. Conceals truth from those who are either too lazy or too blind, with no heart of obedience to follow

II. Definition of a parable

III. Interpretation of kingdom parables

- A. History
- B. Principles
 - 1. Context
 - 2. Read in natural sense
 - 3. Maintaining one main point w/o spiritualizing
 - 4. How to interpret figurative language
 - 5. Cross-reference cautiously
 - 6. Christological
 - 7. Kingdom concept

Conclusion:

We need to elucidate the meaning of parables for they are life-transforming teachings.

Their meaning is not just on the surface; we have to mine the gold through cautious study, including the grammar and historical context that engulfs them.

They were meant to conceal God's truth from the belligerent and hardened, for an unexplained parable became nothing but an impossible riddle, whose meaning could only be guessed at.

Sermon 2

Title: "A Story about Dirt and Decisions"

Text: Matthew 13:3b–9, 18–23

Matt 13:3b–9, 18–23 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." 18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. 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. 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. 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."

Introduction:

Here we have four results, heart-responses to the presentation of the gospel of the kingdom it is the same message of the prophets, the apostles, John, and Jesus the same soils/responses exist today the difference is found not in the seed, but in the soils; the message remains the same the parable was beautifully shaped with a parallel structure that made it striking and easy to memorize four soils: road, rocky, thorny, good the farmer had four results: eaten, withered, choked, bore fruit four responses to the gospel today, but only one that is good, appropriate, saving and merits entrance into God's kingdom.

I. The Story—v3b–9

- A. Road...birds ate up
- B. Rocky...not much soil and immediately sprang up; sun rose...scorched and withered
- C. Thorns...rose up and choked
- D. Good...yielded crop of various amounts

II. The Interpretation—v18–23

- A. Road represents the careless hearer; one who's unresponsive or calloused
- B. Rocky represents the superficial hearer; one who's impulsive

- C. Thorny represents the worldly or preoccupied
- D. Good represents the responsive or well-prepared heart

Conclusion:

Why had the Pharisees and the religious crowd not responded favorably to the message of Christ? It was because their hearts were not prepared with humble repentance (Matt 5). They did not respond in obedience to John by repenting (Matt 3:2). So Jesus taught on the non-negotiable essential of breaking up their fallow ground (Hosea 10:12), but they were uncultivated, unplanted, fruitless ground for the Messiah. They were not prepared ground, are you?

The Word of the kingdom when received fully and without reservation results in an unqualified, constant, and abundantly fruitful discipleship (cf. John 15:8, 16; Gal 5:22). It's not that they are perfect practitioners, but have biblical fruit of a transformed life that hungers for God's Word, is obedient, growing, separated from the world's system, are devoted to God's glory, and are constantly repenting from their sin.

For the faithful evangelist, some will reject your message outright, others will seem to accept it gladly but soon fall away (who live by flesh and are controlled by emotion, feeling, and sentiment), others seem to accept it but hold onto the old life and its ways, but others will truly believe...the few who enter by the narrow way.

Sermon Three

Title: “Spiritual Cardiology: Jesus’ Rationale for Parables”

Text: Matthew 13:10–17, 34–35

Matt 13:10–17, 34–35 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” 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. 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. 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. 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.’ 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*.

Introduction:

This diagnosis comes right on the heels of the blasphemy by the Pharisees and immediately after the first parable that speaks of only one heart condition meriting entrance into the Messianic kingdom; not the hard, the shallow, or the strangled heart Jesus’ admonition after the first parable is to “hear.” However, Jesus’ diagnosis of the crowd, in fulfillment to Isaiah’s prophecy, is that Israel’s heart is dull, they do not hear the message, neither do they open their eyes to what they see in the miracles performed before them.

We see at the beginning of the chapter with the first parable that as the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom goes forth there are various responses, but only one which merits entrance into God’s kingdom: the open heart; the fertile soil that responds in submission, obedience, and following Christ wholeheartedly. Not the hard heart, the shallow heart, or the strangled heart. The only heart that ever receives the truth of the gospel and is saved is the heart that has been cultivated and opens itself to Jesus and His teachings. A disciple surrenders absolutely to the Lordship of Christ. He had ended the first parable with, “let the person who has ears hear!” People are to respond to Jesus Christ and His truth with obedience from the heart. Hearing is submission and obedience, but they dull and could scarcely hear, for their eyes were closed to the Messiah. They had seen the mighty works of God and heard His life-saving message, but would not accept Him. So do you have an open heart? Are you receptive to His truth?

- I. The Question (v 10)
- II. Jesus' Answer (vv 11–17)
 - A. Sovereign grace gift to fertile of illumination because of election
 - B. Sovereign judgment to others of concealing; judicial/divine hardening

Conclusion:

Jesus rationale for using parable was educational for the disciples (those with hearts to believe and obey) and disciplinary to those who refused to become disciples. It was both prophetic and historical; Isaiah in a sense prophesied how Israel leaders would respond and when Christ cited Isaiah, He was in essence showing that Isaiah's prophecy had literally come to pass.

Maybe you would admit your heart condition; that it is hard or shallow or strangled by all that this world has to offer. Why not beg the Divine Gardener to break up the fallow ground? Minds that are hardened can only have their blindness removed in Christ alone (2 Cor 3:12–15). Just think of Israel who was given divine opportunity to believe in her Messiah but when He arrived they rejected Him due to their hearts not being prepared. Obey Jeremiah's injunction to break up your fallow ground (Jer 4:3) and come to Christ.

Sermon Four

Title: “Wheat, Weeds, and Delay of Judgment” Conflict of the Kingdom,” Part 1

Text: Matthew 13:24–30

Matt 13:24–30 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.” ‘ “

Introduction:

Jesus answers an important question that would clearly have been on the minds of any who had read the OT statements on the Messiah bringing in justice and judgment unfortunately the Jews of the day had come to expect a political kingdom with a national-political deliverance so “why?” they’d wonder, “does evil continue its presence in the world?”

This story would answer the question of why there’s a delay in judgment. Just like the Psalmist who would wonder, “how long, O LORD?” Why do Your enemies, the wicked, continue to prosper (Psalm 56)? Yes, the Lord rules and is in absolute control, but He also has not set up His perfect reign in righteousness on earth yet.

- I. The Parable/Story (vv 24–30)
 - A. Theme—man sowed good seed in field
 - B. Work of the enemy
 1. Sowing weeds
 2. Growth of wheat & weeds
 3. Dialogue: question of origin of weeds
 4. More dialogue: question of gathering weeds
 5. Teaching that both must grow together during delay
- II. Interpretation of the Story
(to be covered next week)

Conclusion:

The Savior’s plea in this parable would be very similar to the first parable: make every diligent effort to belong to the good soil, the only one which merits entrance into God’s kingdom (Luke 13:23–24).

As you look at your life, do you see production of some biblical fruit? Is their proof? Is there validity to your profession? It is not something that can be worked up from within

to appease God, but what can ONLY be produced by God in your life. It is your business to strive to enter the kingdom and to help others do the same.

What if you are 30-fold? Why not be 60 or 100? What stands in the way of more eternal produce for the glory of Christ? Excel still more!

Some of my greatest joy as a shepherd is when you come with questions showing you have thought deeply about eternal matters and exhibit a teachable spirit of “how can I increase my holiness, commitment to Jesus Christ, or know/do the Word of God better?”

Sermon Five

Title: "Conflict of the Kingdom," Part 2

Text: Matthew 13:36–43

Matt 13:36–43 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."

Introduction:

Jesus unpacks the meaning of His story about the delay of judgment NOW, allowing time for turning to Him and the judgment THEN for those who do not turn to Him, which is SURE. In the meantime, the enemy is allowed to work in the garden of the King. This parable shows the Messianic operation to be gradual, patient, and upon individuals. So the main point is the DELAY, w/ a judgment coming from the only One who can righteously distinguish the good from the evil; those in His kingdom and those who are not. This parable vividly stresses the destinies of two groups with their contrasting ethical qualities: the lawless versus the righteous.

- I. Review of Story (vv 24–30)
- II. Interpretation (vv 36–43)
 - A. The Actors of the Story
 - B. The Actions of the Story
- III. Brief Concluding Exhortation

Conclusion:

The lawless continue to coexist with the righteous. This present age is one in which human society (thus, even the Church) is a mixture of those of the evil one and those in the kingdom. This can result in a confusing situation, especially while the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous end up suffering. Yet, the tide will change!

Whereas the first parable caused listeners to ask, "What kind of soil am I?" This parable leads you to ask, "How will I fare at the final harvest?" especially as I contemplate that Judas was one of the twelve. Of utmost importance is to examine my life to see if I am saved (2 Cor 13:5). You are to be diligent to make your calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10).

Have you made your reservation in Heaven? If not, your reservation in hell is waiting. God has provided everything needed in His Son, so won't you repent and turn to the Son in faith? After all He's done, you have to go around the cross to go to hell! And believer, on the cross Jesus experienced the hell we deserve so that for all eternity we can experience the Heaven we DO NOT deserve. For that we worship, witness, and work until He comes!

Sermon Six

Title: “The Greatness of the Kingdom: Mustard Seed”

Text: Matthew 13:31–32

Matt 13:31–32 31 He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 and this is smaller than all *other* seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES.”

Introduction:

Up to this point the disciples heard in the first parable that only one quarter of the seed sown actually prospers. Then, in the second parable, they heard of the hindrances which beset even the part that remained, with satan and all of his minions. With all the satanic opposition to the kingdom that the disciples had already heard about—his opposition to the sowing of the Gospel and his activity of disseminating evil—the question had to be asked: “What would come of the kingdom?” Lest they be tempted to despair, our Lord speaks these next two parables for their encouragement—that His kingdom will be glorious despite its weak and despised beginning. No doubt that they would be despondent. They had hoped for so much but such little actually happened. During the months of Christ’s popularity, it must have appeared like His kingdom would easily be ushered in, but the opposition began and continued to mount. What once was hope was in danger of turning to disappointment.

So Jesus told this parable about a small, seemingly insignificant beginning that no man knew what it would grow into. Though we live in an age that worships size and numbers, God is assured to make His mark in advancing His kingdom, for His own eternal glory.

- I. Story of the Kingdom’s growth from seemingly nothing
- II. Kingdom Concept: Universal Kingdom of God
 - A. Ruler
 - B. Realm
 - C. Rulership

Conclusion:

This text provides great encouragement in contexts where the work of Christ is still small (like many of our churches and missionaries) as a mustard seed and even when relatively few people come all the way to salvation. Whatever God is doing is significant in light of His ultimate plans.

Look at the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. He grew up in a despised province, He did not appear in public until He was thirty years old, He then taught for two to three years in neighboring villages and occasionally in Jerusalem, He made a few converts (mostly among the poor, unlearned, and despised) and then once He fell into the hands of His enemies (by His Father’s sovereign design), He died the shameful death of the cross.

This was the small, seemingly insignificant commencement of the kingdom of God on earth.

The promises of the kingdom were first promised to Israel (a different people in a different part of the globe). Yet, through the New Covenant, we get to participate in some of the kingdom blessings. We've been grafted in. We are birds nesting in the branches, benefiting, being provided for, protected and being blessed from the same Messiah. By bowing down in allegiance to the King we have His favor, protection, and blessing. Knowing you are part of this eternal kingdom gives reason to get out of bed in the morning and fuels hearts to witness, serve, and worship.

Sermon Seven

Title: “The Greatness of the Kingdom: Leaven,” Part 2

Text: Matthew 13:33–35

Matt 13:33–35 33 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.” 34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. 35 *This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.*”

Introduction:

Jesus has already taught us that wherever His gospel of the kingdom is sown and wholeheartedly received in faith, there the kingdom of God grows and spreads with spontaneous and irresistible power. He teaches about greatness from smallness. The kingdom, though present and active here and now in the world, it is active in a hidden manner it is more or less, something we believe rather than behold. It has a permeating and transforming influence. The influence of the leaven penetrates every particle, leaving nothing unchanged.

- I. The Parable (v 33)
- II. The Prophecy (vv 34–35)
- III. Kingdom Concept: Mediatorial Kingdom of God

Conclusion:

In this parabolic pair that we have looked at over the past two weeks, Jesus has shown characteristics of the kingdom: its small beginning, its gradual increase, and its immense development. It is a kingdom that will embrace all types of people and nations and will penetrate and transform their entire lives. The grandest application of this perspective is not just a simple formula to make your marriage, job or life better and more fulfilling but to lead you in reverent awe and worship of the Coming One who has come once and will come again. So be waiting in anticipation, through worship, evangelism, and service. The Messiah who came in humility will one day reign in sovereignty with His absolute eternal reign.

Sermon Eight

Title: "Kingdom of Heaven: Priceless"

Text: Matthew 13:44–46

Matt 13:44–46 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.

Introduction:

As the previous parables dealt with various responses to God's kingdom, its present coexistence with Satan's kingdom, and its power and influence in the world, these next two parables focus on the glorious character of the Messiah's kingdom and its surpassing value.

I. Treasure Hid in a Field (v 44)

II. Pearl of Great Price (v 45)

Conclusion:

You **MUST** determine to make this kingdom (and its King) truly your own by faith. Are you ready to pay the cost of attaining it? Though this kingdom is only present in a veiled form it can be possessed and through it experience the joy that it alone can provide. Do you treasure Christ and His kingdom above all else? Is He the priceless pearl that you will give up all else to pursue?

Sermon Nine

Title: "The Ultimate Separation: Parable of the Dragnet"

Text: Matthew 13:47–50

Matt 13:47–50 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.

Introduction:

This seventh parable on the kingdom returns to an emphasis on eschatological/future aspect of the kingdom, in particular, the separation of the evil from the righteous for judgment. It has great similarities to the wheat and weed parable with the biggest difference being that this parable has a self-contained interpretation.

Whereas the parable about wheat and weeds emphasizes the long delay in which the tares coexist with the wheat, this parable simply describes the situation that exists when the last judgment takes place.

I. Jesus' Instruction (vv 47–48)

II. Jesus' Exposition (vv 49–50)

Conclusion:

Romans 6:23 asserts that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. On THAT DAY, only the righteous (those who have received the kingdom, manifesting the appropriate response in the form of discipleship) will survive. Every proclamation of the kingdom of heaven is a call to repent (Matt 3:2; 4:17) and to accept the righteousness by faith in Christ (Matt 5:20) and thus become righteous. See, the wickedness of the wicked lies in this: outwardly they accept the gospel but inwardly they refuse to repent and to rest their faith on Christ. They are like the hard path, the rocky soil, or the briar patch mentioned in the first parable. The Savior is impressing on His disciples, for their own good as well as the good of those they bring the message, the absolute certainty and the irrevocable decisiveness of the coming judgment so that they would prevent everlasting despair; to warn men everywhere to repent.

His judgment is thorough, determined, permanent, and dreadful. This should bolster our responsibility to evangelize at all times. It should fuel our worshipful service and gratefulness for being delivered from the wrath to come.

Sermon Ten

Title: “Teachers of the Kingdom: Parable of the Householder”

Text: Matthew 13:51–52

Matt 13:51–52 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.”

Introduction:

Jesus gives time for questions in regards to His teaching and the disciples think their insights have been deepened immensely. Yet, He teaches that it is not enough to receive this truth, but it must be given to others. This is the duty and privilege of the true scribe. Their response shows that though they would understand more as time goes on, they believed what they did understand and were prepared to act...contrary to the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees of the day.

I. Discourse Conclusion (v 51)

II. Concluding Comment/parable (v 52)

Conclusion:

The gospel of the kingdom that was announced by Jesus, believed in by the disciples, and established as the foundation of the church is, by its very nature, a blend of continuity and discontinuity with the old. At its heart the gospel consists of “new things” but for Matthew, these “new things” are consistent with the old (Matt 5:17–19). Jesus taught on the same kingdom that the Jews had learned about from the prophets, but much more than what they were aware of.

Every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ must bring forth both the old and the new, being loyal to both testaments. He must diligently study and proclaim the truths found in the gospels, epistles, and revelation, but also the law and the prophets. You need to ask yourself if you have understood these things. No surface understanding is sufficient. You cannot move on without asking questions and finding answers, for we are culpable for the revelation of God’s truth in Scripture. It is not sufficient to just “put in” your time for devotions, but you must study, meditate, and render to the Lord applicational obedience in changed attitudes and actions, for the glory of God.

Sermon Eleven

Title: “Unbelief on the Home Front: Jesus’ Visit to Nazareth”

Text: Matthew 13:53–58

Matt 13:53–58 53 When Jesus had finished these parables, He departed from there. 54 He came to His hometown and *began* teaching them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where *did* this man *get* this wisdom and *these* miraculous powers? 55 ”Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 ”And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then *did* this man *get* all these things?” 57 And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his *own* household.” 58 And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.

Introduction:

Matthew picks up the theme of unbelief that was especially expounded in v13–15 but had already been shown in chapters 11–12 in his account. This rejection completes the account of opposition encountered by Jesus and illustrates perfectly that this rejection (which had now become open resistance to Him) not only applied to the religious crowd, but to the common lay-people. The theme of unbelief not only continues to grow, but climaxes at the end of Matthew 13 in unbelief by Jesus’ own people in His home country. When He returned home He was resented rather than honored (Matt 13:57).

- I. Ending of Discourse/Results of the Parabolic Teaching (v. 53)
- II. Crisis of Faith vs. “Reality of Experience” (v. 54–56)
- III. Sad Results of Unbelief (v. 57–58)
 - A. The Response of the people (v. 57)
 - B. The Response of Jesus (v. 58)

Conclusion:

The big mistake of the people of Nazareth was their limitation of Jesus to the childhood boy that they thought they knew. Since they placed Him in their preconceived limited framework, they were unable to give an honest evaluation of His deeds and message. For them, familiarity had become a liability.

Tragically the central mysteries of the gospel, the Messiah who suffers death on the cross and the centrality of that death to the realization of the kingdom, violated the preconceived ideas of the Jews and thus prohibited their reception of the gospel (Rom 9:30–33).

This incident closes the chapter on kingdom parables, revealing in a glaring way the opposition that had developed, which is what initially have prompted Christ to resort to parables (Matt 13:10). They could not recognize the works of God because they would not receive the truth of God!

Have you been willing to humbly admit you have been too familiar with Jesus Christ and not seen how horrible your sin is and how holy and marvelous He is and the need to bow in repentant faith?

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