

Learning from the Matthew's Church (4) The Seed Parables

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(1) Matthew 13: Parables

- The layout of Matthew's Gospel
- Kingdom of Heaven
- Layout of the Discourse
- Sources
- Structure
- Brief commentary
- Conversation

Prologue		1-2	Birth	
Book 1	3:1-7:29	3-4	Narrative	Temptation, baptism, call stories
		5-7	Discourse	Sermon on the Mount
Book 2	8:1-11:1	8:1-9:34	Narrative	Authority in deeds
		9:35-11:1	Discourse	Mission Discourse
Book 3	11:2-13:52	11:2-12:50	Narrative	Controversy, woes, rebukes
		13:1-52	Discourse	Parables
Book 4	13:53-18:35	13:53-17:27	Narrative	Disciples, Peter, church
		18:1-35	Discourse	Church Life Discourse
Book 5	19:1-23:46	19-23	Narrative	Discipleship, controversies, woes
		24-25	Discourse	End Time Discourse
Climax		26-28	Death and Resurrection	

Third Discourse

- The core teaching of Jesus
 - ✓ God's Kingdom
 - ✓ End time
 - ✓ Unstoppable growth
 - ✓ Hospitality
- The later community
 - ✓ Moral analysis
 - ✓ "Imperfect" members
 - ✓ Desire for the Kingdom
- We catch a glimpse through three windows
- Teaching going back to Jesus (up to c. ad 29)
- The experience of community of faith (ad 30-90 or so)
- The interpretation of the evangelist (c. ad 85 or 90)
- NB: the post-Easter church often adapted a parable to its new situation, by turning simple parables into elaborate allegories.

Parables

- Can you recall some parables?
- How many are there, would you guess?
- What is a parable?
- “A short story with a double meaning.”
- Parables: used to illustrate the Kingdom and to engage the Jesus’ hearers

	Mark	Matthew	Luke
In each	4	19	26
In all three	3	3	3
In two		6	6
In only one	1	13	20
Total	42	John: no parables	

- Q: which of the parables can be securely traced to the ministry of Jesus?
 1. The Mustard Seed
 2. The Evil Tenants of the Vineyard
 3. The Great Supper/Banquet
 4. The Talents/Pounds
- JP Meier considers these four likely to be authentic due to factors like multiple attestation (found in different sources like Mark, Q, M, or L) and the criterion of embarrassment.
- Meier argues that many other parables, such as the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan, cannot be firmly traced back to Jesus based on strict historical-critical criteria.

Matt 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!”

Matt 13:10 Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 11 He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13 The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ 14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

‘You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

15 For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

Matt 13:18 “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 is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Matt 13:24 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Matt 13:31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Matt 13:33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Matt 13:34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:
 “I will open my mouth to speak in parables;
 I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

Matt 13:36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Matt 13:44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matt 13:45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matt 13:47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and

put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matt 13:51 “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52 And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” 53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

Layout of Matthew 13

Narrative introduction	13:1-3a
The Parable as mystery	13:3a-23
The Parable of the Sower	13:3b-9
Understanding the parables	13:10-17
The Parable explained	13:18-23
The mysteries of the Kingdom	13:24-43
Three parables of the Kingdom	13:24-33
Understanding the Parables	13:34-35
Explanation for the disciples	13:36-43
Understanding the mysteries	13:44-52
Three parables of the Kingdom of Heaven	13:44-50
Understanding the Parables	13:51
Consequences for the disciples	13:51
Narrative conclusion	13:53
A) Parable of The Sower, sowing the word of the kingdom (vv. 1-9)	
B) Understanding parables (vv. 10-17)	
A*) Parable explained (vv. 18-23)	
C) Three parables of cultivating the Kingdom (vv. 24-33)	
D) Understanding parables (vv. 34-35)	
C*) Parables explained (vv. 36-43)	
E) Three parables about harvesting the Kingdom (vv. 44-48)	
F) Parables explained (vv. 49-50)	
E*) Understanding parables (vv. 51-52)	

Sources for Matthew 13

- Material found in Mt, Mk and Lk (triple tradition)
- Material found in Mk and Mt (double tradition)
- Material found in Mt and Lk (Q source)
- Material unique to Matthew (M - found nowhere else)

Matthew	Source	Topic	Mark	Luke
13:1-9	T	Parable of the Sower	4:1-9	8:4-8
13:10-13	T	Reason for the Parables	4:10-12	8:9-10
13:14-15	M	Citation from Isaiah 6:9-10	—	—
13:16-17	Q	Blessedness of the disciples	—	10:23-24
13:18-23	T	Explanation of the Sower	4:13-20	8:11-15
13:24-30	M	Parable of the Weeds	—	—
13:31-32	T	Parable of the Mustard Seed	4:30-32	13:18-19
13:33	Q	Parable of the Leaven	—	13:20-21
13:34-35	D	Use of the Parables	4:33-34	—
13:36-43	M	Explanation of the Weeds	—	—
13:44	M	Parable of the Treasure	—	—
13:45	M	Parable of the Pearl	—	—
13:47-49	M	Parable of the Net	—	—
13:51-52	M	Parable of the Householder	—	—
13:53	M	Conclusion and transition	6:1	—

Commentary

Matt 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!”

- The parable of the sower (I) is found also in Mark 4:1-9 (slightly longer) and Luke 8:4-8 (quite short).
- The surprising increase is given in a different order in Matthew (100-60-30) and Mark (30-60-100).
- If it goes back to Jesus himself (and it might), then:
 - A parable of the kingdom
 - Telling of astonishing, wholly unexpected growth.
 - Context: the ministry of Jesus and its very small, unlikely beginnings. In spite of opposition from the leadership and a poor response from the people.

Matt 13:10 Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 11 He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13 The reason I speak to them in parables is that

‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’

14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

‘You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

15 For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

- The baffling conversation is found in Mark 4:10-12 and Luke 8:9-10.
- The text seems absurd: why speak at all if the purpose is so that people may not understand?
- Matthew—always the rabbi—gives the fullest version of the text and even adds the beatitude in vv. 16-17 (Luke has the same beatitude but locates it elsewhere at 10:23-24).
- This is not Jesus’ own understanding of the purpose of the parables but a later generation’s understanding of God’s mysterious use of the “no” from the people of Israel in order to create a “yes” among the Gentiles.
- We need to pause on this.

Isa 6:6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

9 And he said, “Go and say to this people:
‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’

10 Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”

Isa 29:10 For the Lord has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep;
he has closed your eyes, you prophets,
and covered your heads, you seers.

- Isaiah citation: Romans, Mark, Matthew, John, Luke and Acts
- In the context of Isaiah, the meaning is heavily ironic: “ok, don’t listen to me!!”
- This is what the prophet is to say to the people in the 8th century bc.
- In the context of Isaiah, it seems to be a forced way to making people pay attention: what are we not supposed to pay attention to?
- In the context of New Testament, writers used Isaiah to explain why the Lord had indeed made the mind of his people dull.

Romans (1)	Mark (2)	Matthew (3)
As it is written, “God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” (Romans 11:8)	In order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’ (Mark 4:12)	With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. (Matthew 13:14)
John (4)	Luke (5)	Acts (6)
He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them. (John 12:40)	He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’ (Luke 8:10)	Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. (Acts 28:26)

Isaiah 6:6-10

- Starting with Romans, the issue is always the same: how is it that God’s first chosen people did not recognise the Messiah?
- Their mysterious “no” was part of God’s plan (just as God had hardened the heart of Pharaoh).
- The hidden purpose: the extension of the covenant grace to all humanity.
- Hence, it fits well here with Matthew’s context.

Matt 13:18 “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 is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

- The allegorical explanation of the parable reflects a later “church” context.
- It flattens the original parable to a moral categories of response.
- Matthew’s redaction reflects his interests and typical vocabulary. He takes up the word “hear” to introduce the explanation.
- He moves the idea of understanding from “outside” the parable and makes it part of the interpretation.
- In Mark, the seed is the “word”; in Luke, the “word of God”; in Matthew, the “word of the kingdom.”
- Very importantly, Matthew expresses his interpretation in the singular, challenging the individual hearer to respond.

Matt 13:24 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with

them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

- The parable of the weeds (II) and the wheat and its allegorical explanation are unique to Matthew.
- There are two sowings, in this parable.
- The Greek term *zizanion* refers to an especially undesirable weed that resembles wheat but has poisonous seeds.
- Matthean composition is supported by sampling the typical Matthean vocabulary: (compare 8-1-3-0; weeds 8-0-0-0; bear fruit 23-0-14-2; householder 7-1-4-0; to gather 7-0-1-0).
- As before, a mixed community.

Matt 13:31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Matt 13:33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

- The parable of the mustard seed (III) is found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19.
- Matthew omits the opening question in Mark and Luke, possibly because he has used the word compare at the very start.
- The parable of the leaven (IV) is also found in Luke 13:20-21.
- Matthew’s version is slightly shorter, again omitting the opening rhetorical question.
- Mustard seed: hospitality.
- Leaven: inevitable, automatic growth.

Matt 13:34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

- The passage on the use of the parables is found in Mark 4:33-34.
- In Mark, it functions as a pedagogical observation.
- In Matthew, it is theological, complete with a citation from Psalm 78:2.

Matt 13:36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

- Together the parables of the weeds and the leaven address a “church” question: what do we do with people who are “in” but not “of”?
- The broad response is tolerant: leave them alone and at the time of harvest (= judgement) all will be revealed!
- Nevertheless, it all closes on a brilliantly positive note, not unlike the last parable of the Great Assize in Matthew 25.
- Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:3)

Matt 13:44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matt 13:45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Cf. My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures— then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. (Prov 2:1-5)

- The parables of the treasure (V) and the pearl (VI):
- Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Matt 19:21)
- And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. (Matt 19:29)
- Demands of discipleship.
- Desire of disciples.

Matt 13:47 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- The parable of the net (VII) echoes the fishing metaphor used at the call stories in the Gospels: And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (Matt 4:19)
- The issue is the tendency of religious groups to exclude the imperfect.
- Matthew’s overall teaching on this is both hopeful and theological:
- Hopeful in that now is the time of growth and change and no-one can determine what may happen on the faith journey of another.
- Theological in that he says clearly that we are to leave judgement in the hands of God.

Matt 13:51 “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” 52 And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” 53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

- Matthew, in contrast to Mark, shows the disciples coming to some understanding. Cf. Matt 13:11, 16, 23. Elsewhere, their grasp of things is less apparent: 14:17, 28-31; 15:16, 33; 16:5-8, 22-23 etc.
- Matthew then describes himself, really, as the perfect scribe, combining old and new (see Matt 5:17-20 and 9:16-17). See the portrait of the ideal scribe in Sirach 39.
- He seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients, and is concerned with prophecies; he preserves the sayings of the famous and penetrates the subtleties of parables; he seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs and is at home with the obscurities of parables. (Sir 39:1-3)

Matthew’s Church

- We catch a glimpse through three windows
- Teaching going back to Jesus (up to c. ad 29)
- The experience of community of faith (ad 30-90 or so)
- The interpretation of the evangelist (c. ad 85 or 90)

- The interpretation of the evangelist is evident in
 - ✓ The selection of texts
 - ✓ The catechetical layout of the material
 - ✓ The M material, in which we hear his own voice

Chapter 13 fits into Matthew's story in an interesting way.

In chs. 5-7, Jesus gave powerful teaching to his followers.

In chs. 8-9, we see Jesus powerful in deed.

Following on that, chs. 11-12 show a variety of responses to Jesus.

In ch. 13, Jesus tries to deconstruct an old world and construct a new one. There are three "audiences": (1) the crowds (who do not really understand); (2) the disciples (who begin to understand, albeit falteringly); (3) the church at the time of writing.

That is why, in the middle of ch. 13, Jesus turns to his disciples and instructs them directly.

This division of response will continue in chs. 14-16, where we witness the widening gap between two communities, no doubt reflecting conditions at the time of writing.

Kingdom of God: The constant vision both of Jesus and of Matthew.

Unstoppable growth: in spite of smallness and opposition.

Mixed membership: Moral living and spirituality are "various", as is normal; the tendency to judge and expel is moderated (the weeds and the wheat; the dragnet thrown into the sea).

Spirituality of desire: the parables of the treasure, the pearl of great price.

The evangelist: he portrays himself as the ideal scribe in the "parable" of the householder.

Conversation