

Lessons from Matthew 13

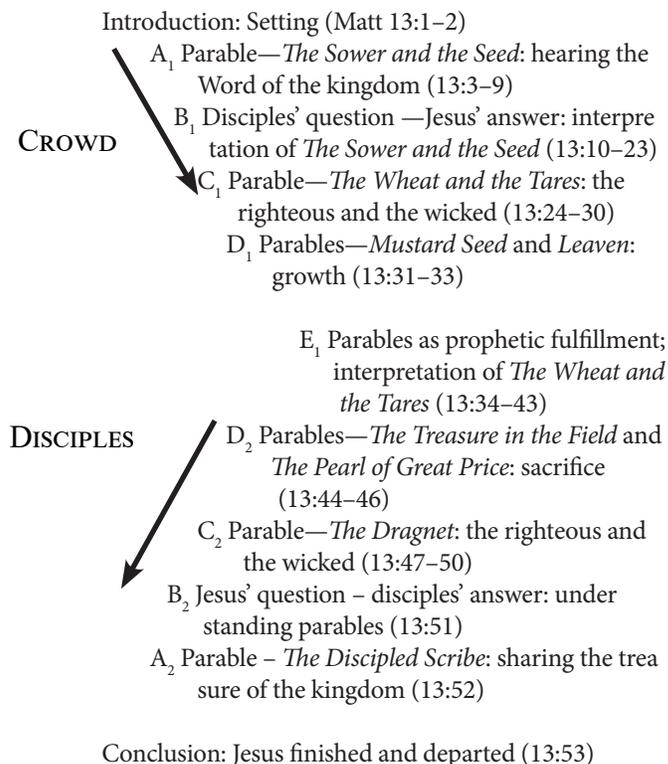
By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 13 constitutes Jesus' third major teaching block in this Gospel and lies at the center of the Gospel's five discourses (the others are Matthew 5–7, 10, 18, and 24–25). Jesus shares the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11)¹ to the multitudes who gather by the sea near Capernaum (Matt 13:1–2; cf. 12:46). The chapter can be divided into three sections (vv. 1–23, 24–43, 44–52). While the eight parables in this chapter vary greatly in length, they all revolve around reception/rejection of the kingdom and its growth. Before looking briefly at each, it will be helpful to look at the overall structure of this discourse and explain some basic rules for the interpretation of parables.

Structure of the Discourse on Kingdom Mysteries

Much of the content of this discourse on kingdom mysteries is also found in Mark and Luke (Mark 4:1–34; Luke 8:4–18), but these share only two of Matthew's eight parables (the sower and the soils; the mustard seed). One other parable is shared only by Luke (the leaven). The parable of the wheat and the tares and the last four parables of the discourse are found only in Matthew.

The discourse is structured chiasmically, with the first four parables directed to the crowds and the last four to the disciples. It opens and closes with parables about hearing and sharing the message of the kingdom, with the focal point being Jesus' teaching in parables as prophetic fulfillment. This structure can be outlined as follows:²



How to Interpret Parables

A parable teaches spiritual truths by way of comparison with earthly things and may be prophetic. In order to understand its meaning, several principles are important to keep in mind:

1. The literal meaning of the story should first be thoroughly understood, taking into consideration biblical and historical information that illuminates the situation being described. The reason for this approach is that, usually, Jesus' parables teach biblical principles, using actual phenomena in the natural world and real-life situations.

2. Avoid the temptation to find significance in every detail. Though details sometimes contribute to the overall meaning of the parable, their import will always be understood within the literal story rather than outside of it. The most important details may be scriptural allusions.

3. Compare and contrast the parable with the same or similar parables in Mark and/or Luke, noticing features that may contribute to the literal meaning of the story. The Gospel of John contains parabolic teaching with some similarity to that of the other Gospels and for the interpretation of which the same principles need to be followed, but nothing exactly the same.

4. Once the story itself is clearly understood, look for an interpretation that may be given in the text. Whether clearly stated or only implied, scriptural clues given as to the intended meaning should be analyzed in connection with the parable and any appeal to the listeners that may be present. Many of Jesus' parables include surprising or unexpected twists, often at the end, leading listeners to decide how they themselves will relate to the kingdom.

5. Keep in mind that the parables of Jesus usually concern one of two main themes corresponding to either Christ's first or second advent:

- first advent—the present growth of the kingdom in the time of Jesus and/or the church
- second advent—events connected with the kingdom's glorious consummation

6. Draw out the spiritual meaning of the parable, interpreting it in harmony with its literary context and main theme, considering also its application to your own life.

7. Compare and enhance your understanding of the parable with the insights found in the writings of Ellen G. White, especially in *Christ's Object Lessons*.

Interpretation of Matthew 13

1. Verses 3–9 (*The Sower and the Seed*)

- The parable describes places where seed is sown: beside the road (an area hardened by trampling), stony places (thin soil atop limestone), among thorns (no care or water), and “good ground.”
- The sower is the same, the seed is the same, and

even the soil itself is the same; only the condition/location of the soil changes, which, as every gardener knows, affects plant growth.

- The good ground is described only in terms of the results it produces; though these results vary from below average to extraordinary, the quantity is not the main concern of the parable.
 - The fact that Jesus calls on those listening to “hear” indicates His desire that they understand the parable and apply it to their lives. However, they must open their eyes and ears in order to “understand with their hearts” (Matt 13:15).
2. Verses 10–17 (Kingdom “Mysteries”)
- Situated between the parable and its interpretation is a very important dialogue between Jesus and His disciples, explaining the reason for teaching in parables: not everyone was willing to listen with an honest heart, and some had already closed their eyes completely, “lest they should understand . . . and turn” and be converted. The Pharisees, for example, after listening to Jesus, said His miracles were of the devil (Matt 10:25; 12:24) and plotted to destroy Him (Matt 12:14). Still more surprising, even Jesus’ own family and hometown were not receptive (Matt 12:46–50; 13:53–58).
 - Jesus teaches that an understanding of the truth is a gift that must be “given,” and it is given to those who, like the disciples, are willing to receive it (Matt 13:11).
 - The kingdom principle follows from this that, to those who receive, more will be given, and “whoever does not have,” that is, whoever refuses to receive Jesus’ teachings and put them into practice, even what he or she has will be taken away because God cannot continue to bless that person (Matt 13:12; cf. 7:21).
 - Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 6:9–10 indicates that Israel’s condition is similar to that in the time of Isaiah. In both cases, the people’s failure to heed God’s Word results in severe threats from external enemies, eventuating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and faith is identified as the essential ingredient in view of the impending judgment (cf. Isa 7:9; 28:16; 43:10; 53:1). It also signals that His work marks the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s (and other) kingdom-related prophecies (cf. Matt 4:17 // Mark 1:15).
3. Verses 18–23 (Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower and the Seed)
- The different responses to “the seed,” identified as “the word of the kingdom,” is the focus—God’s Word as interpreted by Jesus and proclaimed by His followers (cf. Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23).
 - The seed on the beaten-path soil never has a chance to grow. This refers to the heart controlled by selfish desires and hardened by sin (cf. Heb 3:13), resulting in the person being unable to understand the Word. So crucial is understanding that it appears five times in connection with this parable (Matt 13:13–15, 19, 23) and, near the end of the discourse, Jesus asks the disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” to which they answer “Yes” (Matt 13: 51). By understanding Jesus’ teaching, His followers are qualified as scribes of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13: 52) and become sowers themselves.
4. Verses 24–30 (Wheat and Tares)
- A plant growing in thin soil atop limestone may quickly spring up due to the warmer condition of the ground. This refers to receiving the Word “immediately” with joyful enthusiasm. Such an experience may initially appear to flourish, but it does not last because there is no depth of commitment; it is only superficial, since the stony, selfish human heart underneath has not been changed (cf. Ezek 11:19; 36:26). As a result, “when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word,” the person “immediately . . . falls away” (ESV). The religious enthusiasm goes away as quickly as it came. “The effort to serve both self and Christ makes one a stony ground hearer, and he will not endure when the test comes upon him.”³
 - Just as thorny weeds take up moisture and nourishment from the soil, preventing any chance for a healthy plant to grow (cf. Jer 4:3), so worldly worries (cf. Matt 6:31–34) and wealth (cf. Matt 6:24), “desires for other things” (Mark 4:19), and the “pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14) may so absorb a person’s energy and attention that they crowd out any influence the Word might have.
 - By contrast, the “good ground” hearer understands the Word. In Matthew, the word “understand” (Gk. *syniēmi*) consistently refers to one’s grasping the underlying spiritual meaning of Jesus’ sayings (Matt 15:10; 16:12; 17:13). Mark 4:20 adds that such hearers “accept” the word—they receive it “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works” in those who believe (1 Thess 2:13). Producing fruit refers primarily to developing a character reflective of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt 3:8, 10; 7:19–21; 12:33–35; 21:43), though, in view of the disciplined scribe described in the parallel parable of the discourse (Matt 13:52), it may secondarily refer to those who are able to labor effectively as “sowers” themselves, helping to produce additional disciples for the kingdom.

is contrasted with the tares sown among the wheat. This parable focuses not on the process of growth, but the harvest at the end: the tares are bundled to be burned up and the wheat is to be gathered into the barn.

- There is an incredible amount of detail in this parable, with a variety of characters mentioned, all of whom are significant to its interpretation.
5. Verses 31–33 (Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven)
- Although no interpretation of the twin parables of the mustard seed and leaven is given, as was the case with the first two parables, their meaning is fairly clear in referring to the extensive growth and intensive spread of the kingdom of heaven.
 - The mustard seed, though not the smallest seed, was probably smaller than any of the seeds familiar to Jesus’ audience, and the striking contrast of it producing a tree, which could grow up to ten feet or more, highlights, from very small beginnings, the extensive growth of the kingdom.
 - The image of a tree to symbolize a kingdom is a familiar one in the Old Testament—most notably in connection with earthly kingdoms such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon (Ezek 17:24; 31:2–3; Dan 4:23–26), but also in connection with the kingdom of Israel (Ps 80:8–11; Isa 60:21), God’s kingdom, and even the temple as a place for birds to nest (Ezek 17:22–23; Ps 84:3; cf. 104:12, 17).
 - Leaven, though often a symbol of sin, can also refer positively to an ingredient in thanksgiving, peace, and firstfruit offerings (Lev 7:13–14; 23:17), and though it spreads invisibly, it will eventually permeate three measures (about thirty-six quarts) of flour, enough to feed up to 150 people.
6. Verses 34–43 (Parables as Prophetic Fulfillment; interpretation of The Wheat and the Tares)
- This section transitions from Jesus addressing the crowd by the sea to His teaching the disciples privately in a house.
 - Jesus’ teaching in parables fulfills what Matthew understands to be a messianic prophecy of Asaph that culminates in David being chosen by God as His servant shepherd, pointing ultimately to Jesus, who will shepherd God’s people Israel with integrity (Ps 78:2, 70–72; Mic 5:2; Matt 2:6).
 - Significantly, the disciples are eager to understand more. They ask Jesus to explain “the parable of the tares of the field”—indicating, perhaps, what for them was the most concerning (or obscure) part of the parable.
 - The tares, identified as “the sons of the wicked one,” are sown in the field with the “good seed”—“the sons of the kingdom.” This suggests
- that “the world” refers to the present extent of the kingdom’s spread on earth through the church, whose witness (Matt 5:14) is envisioned eventually as extending to “the *whole* world” (Matt 24:14; 26:13) in fulfillment of prophetic hopes (see, e.g., Ps 67:7; 72:8; Isa 45:2; 49:6; cf. 1 Sam 2:10). So the field expands as the church grows. The church is not the kingdom, because it contains tares; but it is the means God uses for its spread.
- Tares (Gk. *zizania*, “darnel”) look like wheat until the heads form (cf. Matt 7:20). Should the servants (Gk. *douloi*) try to uproot them, they would likely also uproot some of the wheat (Matt 13:29). Since these servants are distinguished from the reapers, which are the angels (Matt 13:39, 41), they apparently represent the disciples of Jesus (see Matt 10:24–25; 20:27).
7. Verses 44–46 (The Treasure in the Field and The Pearl of Great Price)
- Whereas the parable pair spoken to the crowd describes the kingdom’s growth, these two brief parables spoken to the disciples accentuate sacrifice in view of the kingdom’s value and affirm the importance of a positive response.
 - It is not mentioned when the treasure in the field was buried for safekeeping (cf. 6:19), nor by whom, but if it had been the owner of the field he would not have sold the land without first claiming the treasure. What is emphasized is the joy of the treasure’s discovery and its value being so great that it is worth selling all to obtain it. Onlookers, including the owner, no doubt considered it foolish to sacrifice so much for vacant land, but to those who understand the value of the kingdom, any sacrifice is insignificant by comparison.
 - The wealthy traveling merchant likewise recognized the supreme value of the pearl of great price and sold all to obtain it. People often fantasize about—and occasionally one hears authentic accounts—of buying something whose worth the seller does not recognize, later to be valued in the millions of dollars (as the worth of such a pearl in ancient times could be). The call to leave or sacrifice all for the kingdom occurs several times in Matthew (4:20, 22; 9:9; 19:21; cf. 19:27).
8. Verses 47–50 (The Dragnet)
- Of the second series of four parables, this is the most extensive. Similar to the wheat and the tares, it depicts a time of separation—here the valued, “good” fish from the “bad.” The word “bad” in Greek (*sapra*) refers to that which is spoiled or rotten (used of trees and fruit in Matthew 7:17–18 and 12:33), perhaps implying that the rejected fish may originally have had good potential.

- The dragnet (Gk. *sagēnē*, “seine,” used only here in the New Testament) was a huge device that could measure up to one thousand feet in length and up to twenty-five feet high, with floats attached to the top and weights strung along the bottom so it would sink rapidly when deployed. It would collect “things of every kind” (Matt 13:47, TLV) that happened to be in its path.
 - Also like the wheat and the tares, this parable focuses on the end-time judgment with mostly identical wording (Matt 49–50; cf. vv. 41–42). Just as fishing only ends when the net is full, the work of the kingdom has a definite endpoint (Matt 24:14; 28:19–20), culminating in the separation of the wicked from the righteous and casting the former “into the furnace of fire” (cf. Mal 4:1).
9. Verses 51–53 (The Discipled Scribe)
- Jesus closes His words to the disciples by asking them whether they have understood—which mirrors the issue dealt with in Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question and the opening parable of the sower and the seed (Matt 13:13–15, 19, 23). Understanding the Word of the kingdom is foundational to discipleship, so the disciples’ affirmative reply to Jesus’ question is reassuring and shows them, in this respect at least, to be paradigmatic examples of what it means to follow Jesus.
 - Here for the first time in Matthew we see Jesus preparing His own “scribes” (experts in the Scriptures) “for the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Matt 23:34). The word “instructed” is a verbal form that literally means “discipled” (*mathēteutheis*), used only twice more in Matthew: to describe Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57) and in the Great Commission to “make disciples” (Matt 28:19).
 - Use of the words “is like” signals the closing parable of the chapter. They describe the “master of a house” (ESV), which Jesus employs of Himself in an earlier simile (Matt 10:25), in the opening parable (Matt 13:27), and in several later parables (Matt 20:1, 11; 21:33, 43). In short, disciples are to faithfully represent their Teacher in instructing church members.
 - The content of this instruction is characterized as “things new and old.” The teachings of the kingdom are the “new” things, emphasized through its being mentioned first, while the Hebrew Scriptures from which Jesus quotes abundantly and expects His disciples to know well are “old” and yet obviously still very vital as heavenly “treasure” (cf. Matt 6:21; 12:35).
1. Understanding the truth (which is deeper than simply “knowing” it theoretically) is a gift of God, but we must first surrender our preconceived ideas; otherwise they will hinder us from being taught by the Holy Spirit (John 14:17; 16:13; cf. 6:45; 1 Cor 2:12–14).
 2. Everyone must hear the gospel of the kingdom, regardless of its prospects, in harmony with Jesus’ example as the preeminent Sower (parable of the sower and the seed).
 3. The work of the kingdom is gradual but also will become widespread (like leaven working its way through the dough). It does not, however, point to an earthly millennium of peace but to the spread of the gospel proclamation “in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” with the second coming of Jesus (Matt 24:14, 30).
 4. The kingdom begins small but eventually becomes great (parable of the mustard seed). So Christians, as members of this kingdom, humbly fulfill God’s purposes now in service and will ultimately be exalted (Matt 23:11–12; 1 Pet 5:6) when it is established in glory.
 5. The kingdom is more valuable than anything else (parable of the hidden treasure; parable of the pearl of great price).
 6. Only in the judgment will the wicked be weeded out (parable of the wheat and tares; parable of the net).
 7. The time of the judgment is left vague: “at the end of the age/world” (Matt 13:39–40, 49).
 8. Faithfulness to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and instructing others in them accurately is stressed by Jesus as foundational to “every scribe”—every church teacher, pastor, leader (the discipled scribe).



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¹ All biblical quotations are from the NJKV, unless otherwise indicated.

² Adapted from David Wenham, “The Structure of Matthew XIII,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1978–1979): 517–518; and David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 332.

³ Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1941), 50.

Application of Matthew 13

Many valuable lessons may be gleaned from this chapter, including: