

THE PARABLES PROJECT

The following parables are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. All of them are from Matthew's Gospel. You will find the chapter and verse citation from that Gospel after each parable.

In between some of the parables, you will find commentary about the Gospel story that surrounds them. While the parables could be read as stand-alone sayings, they take on a different sense when we know where they appear in the Gospel narrative.

Note how the parables become more "serious" as Jesus tells of his impending suffering and death, the costs of following him, and the future suffering and judgment of the world. This development is described more fully in the supplemental text, "A Discipleship Roadmap."

A long-running issue throughout Matthew's Gospel is the fact that the disciples of Jesus don't "get him". While the parables are supposedly a teaching device Jesus uses with "the crowds" – so that everyone will "get it" – the disciples themselves do not seem to comprehend the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven or the mission of Jesus. There is irony, frustration and humor in the Gospel text as the disciples – and we along with them – struggle with the Kingdom vision Jesus reveals.

Chapter 13 exposes the hilarious contrast between "the crowds" who get taught only with parables, and the disciples, who supposedly will get the "secrets of the Kingdom" revealed to them by Jesus himself. Yet the disciples are the ones who ask Jesus to explain the meaning

of the parables, in private. After another round of parables, Jesus asks if the disciples have understood everything, and they answer, 'yes.'

Jesus told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! **A sower went out to sow.** And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

'Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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.' (13:3-9, 18-23)

He put before them another parable: **'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;** but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.'" ' (13:24-30)

He put before them another parable: **'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed** that someone took and sowed in his field; 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.' (13:31-32)

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.' (13:33)

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.'** He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;

the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! (13:36-43)

'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. (13:44)

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

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (13:47-51)

Chapter 13 ends with Jesus visiting his hometown – another group of people who supposedly knew him well – and they are

affronted by Jesus' authoritative teaching.

Chapter 14 reveals a drama that has been simmering in the background of Matthew's Gospel for fully half the text – the fate of John the Baptist. John is arrested by King Herod for condemning Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. After John is beheaded and buried, John's followers tell Jesus. He goes by boat to a deserted place, but the crowds search him out. Throughout that day, his compassion moves him to heal the sick people in the crowd. When evening falls, Jesus feeds the crowd of five thousand men (not counting women and children) with five loaves and two fish.

Still needing to be alone, Jesus dismisses the crowd and goes up the mountain to pray, while his disciples sail off that night. The next morning, Jesus walks toward them on the water during a storm, and the winds cease. His disciples worship him as "God's Son."

Chapter 15 reveals tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious establishment, since the disciples don't seem to follow Jewish eating and purity rituals. The following parable about "what goes in and what comes out" is a snarky response to Jesus' frustration with these leaders.

Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: **it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.**' Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' Then he said, 'Are you also still without

understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.' (15:10-20)

Chapter 15 continues with Jesus meeting a Canaanite woman, who is asking him to heal her possessed daughter. At first, Jesus' response to her is abrasive and unwelcoming, in keeping with the attitude of his disciples, who want her to go away. However, her humility, persistence and dire need outlast the unwelcome front that Jesus puts on, and, as an example to his followers, he commends her great faith and heals her daughter.

Jesus once again is surrounded by a great crowd, with countless sick and suffering people coming to be cured. After three days of healing, Jesus' compassion moves him to feed the crowd, this time with seven loaves and a few small fish. This time four thousand men (not counting women and children) are fed.

Chapter 16 starts with Jesus warning his disciples to avoid the skepticism and teaching of the Pharisees. However, his ire is quickly raised against the disciples for being clueless about Jesus' identity and mission. Jesus asks the most pivotal question of Matthew's Gospel: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter proclaims him "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." When Jesus reveals that his messianic mission involves his own suffering and death (with a strange remark about "being raised on the third day"), Peter rebukes him. For that, Jesus gives Peter an earful, calling him "Satan" and "a stumbling block."

Chapter 17 tells of the "transfiguration" of Jesus on a high mountain, witnessed by Peter, James

and John. After this surreal experience, Jesus meets a man whose epileptic boy was unsuccessfully cured by his disciples. Angered by his disciples' lack of faith, he cures the child. Later, Jesus again foretells his impending suffering, death and "rising on the third day".

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, **unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (18:1-5)

What do you think? If **a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray**, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. (18:12-14)

Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason **the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.** When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him,

saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^{*} from your heart.' (18:21-35)

Chapter 19 uses the issue of marriage and divorce as an entry into making sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom. A man with many possessions asked Jesus the way to eternal life, and after telling him to follow the commandments, Jesus urges him to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and follow him. His inability to do so reveals that wealth and power work against the vision of the kingdom of heaven. Peter speaks for the disciples when he notes that they have already left everything to follow Jesus. While Jesus seems to make a grand promise to them – that they will judge the tribes of Israel when he comes into glory – he also notes that "those who are first will be last, and the last will be first." This takes us into the next parable in Chapter 20.

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.* Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* So the last will be first, and the first will be last.' (20:1-16)

Though Jesus made his point clearly enough, the mother of the sons of Zebedee still requests that Jesus allow her two sons to sit with him when the kingdom comes. Her sons express clueless confidence that they are able to endure the sufferings that will befall Jesus' followers.

Still, Jesus says it's not his place to give out power positions in the kingdom – that's God's choice. Jesus states that his work in the world means that he is to be a servant, as should his disciples.

Chapter 21 tells of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding a donkey, surrounded by crowds waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The Jewish religious establishment again questions his authority. The parables that follow are Jesus' response to these leaders.

'What do you think? **A man had two sons;** he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to (the chief priests and elders of the people), 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. (21:28-32)

'Listen to another parable. **There was a landowner who planted a vineyard,** put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my

son.” But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’ (21:33-41)

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: **‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.** He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’ (22:1-14)

Such parables did not go over well with the Jewish religious establishment, and a plot to have Jesus incriminate himself begins. A spiritual sparring match takes place (for the remainder of Chapter 22), with Jesus’ responses silencing the leaders.

Chapter 23 is Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes and the Pharisees. It ends with the following tender yet pathetic parable-like image.

‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as **a hen gathers her brood under her wings**, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” ’ (23:37-39)

Chapter 24 is filled with dread, as Jesus “predicts” the fall of Jerusalem’s temple and the bloodshed that took place after Rome quelled Jewish revolts in 66-73 AD.

The vision of the kingdom of heaven is realistic about the resistance that the world’s nations and powers will put up. Jesus’ followers cannot enter this vision blindly, but must take on a path that ultimately includes readiness to suffer and sacrifice – even to die.

The final parable of Chapter 25 shows the Son of Man judging the world. It tells of a God who will not let even the smallest actions of kindness, love and mercy be forgotten.

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the

sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (Jesus said,) 'For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day* your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for **the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.** (24:3, 21, 40-44)

'Who then is **the faithful and wise slave**, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves* their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (24:45-51)

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. **Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.** When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him."

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (25:1-13)

'For it is as if **a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one**, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying,

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (25:14-30)



'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as **a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats**, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are

members of my family,* you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.' (25:31-46)

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