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Matthew 13:1 - 13:9



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg delves into the parables of Matthew 13, highlighting the importance of understanding their spiritual implications beyond their superficial meaning. He stresses that parables are not mere allegories but true stories, intentionally designed by Jesus to illustrate important spiritual truths. The first parable discussed is that of the sower, and Gregg emphasizes the significance of interpreting the parable through the lens of Christ's teachings to gain insights into the kingdom of God. Overall, the discourse provides a thoughtful and insightful analysis of the parables in Matthew 13.

Transcript

Today we're going to begin looking at the 13th chapter of Matthew, which is a chapter devoted almost entirely to a lengthy discourse, if it was indeed one discourse, where Jesus gave a series of parables. This could be considered one of the signature chapters of Jesus' teaching, just as chapters 5 through 7 in Matthew, which are the Sermon on the Mount, certainly are among his better-known sayings collected there, and also in this chapter, chapter 13, we have a discourse that we could, for a very good reason, call the parables discourse, because it is simply comprised of a series of parables. At one point, the disciples ask him what his reason is for using parables, and he explains his reasons, but then he goes on and tells some more.

These parables are about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, its other name. We know that the teaching of Jesus, from the very beginning to the end, was about the kingdom, the kingdom of God, alternately called the kingdom of heaven. When he spoke of the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, he spoke quite plainly to his disciples, but when he spoke to the multitudes, which are people who were not quite committed as disciples, but they were curious enough to come and listen in great numbers to what he had to say, the Bible tells us that he always spoke to them using the form of teaching called a parable.

Now, I just referred to a parable as a form of teaching. That may not be quite a correct way to speak of it, because some people think of it that way. Some people feel that a parable, its purpose mainly is to clarify truth, but there is reason to believe that Jesus

used parables for a different reason.

Not so much to clarify truth as to obscure it from the wrong parties that he did not want to understand his message. Actually, I suspect that the parables of Jesus were used both ways, because as we who have the explanations of the parables given to us in the Scriptures, as we read these parables, we can learn a great deal, and they are a teaching device. We can learn about the kingdom of God.

At the same time, the average listener who was not a disciple of Jesus, and who did not ever receive the explanations of the parables, would have been left entirely in the dark, because they would have heard stories about agriculture, and about cooking, and about fishing, and about things like that, and yet they would not have heard any application made. They would have simply heard stories that sound like they are just everyday, true to life kind of stories, of people doing ordinary things, and without the explanation that Jesus gave, they would not make any sense at all to them. They would not mean anything to them.

They would not carry spiritual truth at all. So, in a way, the parables served a function very much like what the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire served. When the children of Israel were leaving Egypt with Moses in the Old Testament, and they had to encamp, and they could not continue all night, or they could not continue for some time when the night fell, and they were pursued by the Egyptians, but they had to camp also.

The Bible tells us that the pillar of cloud, which had led the children of Israel during the daytime, became a pillar of fire at night, and it moved around behind the camp of Israel, and stood between the Egyptians and the Israelites, and to the Egyptians it was an obscuring cloud, it made it dark on their side, whereas on the other side where the Israelites are, it gave light so that they were able, actually when the Red Sea was parted, to pass through all night long. So, this one pillar, this one cloud, provided darkness for the Egyptians to keep them in obscurity and prevent them from pursuing, and at the same moment provided light as a pillar of fire for the Israelites. And perhaps we could see the parables having that kind of an effect also.

To the unbeliever, or to the one who is not simply, simply isn't committed enough to become a disciple, these parables don't communicate information, or at least they didn't to the original listeners. Now, of course, anybody, a Christian or not, could read the New Testament and see the explanations Jesus gives, and then they would understand them, but among Jesus' original audience, the stories that he told here would simply not carry spiritual information unless they received the explanation that the disciples received. And so they obscured his message from one group of people while they illuminated it to the other group, the disciples.

Now, a parable, we need to understand what we're dealing with here when we look at a parable. It is not the same thing necessarily as an allegory. An allegory is a story that is

usually made up to illustrate something, but in an allegory, everything, at least every significant character in every significant event, corresponds to something, corresponds to the thing that it is representing.

A good example of an allegory that most people are familiar with would be Pilgrim's Progress. The story written by John Bunyan some hundreds of years ago is still considered a great classic, and most people are familiar with some of the imagery and the language from Pilgrim's Progress. But if you read the book, you'll find that every person in it represents something, and it's sort of a direct one-to-one correspondence between the details of the story and the details of the spiritual reality that it's illustrating.

Now, parables aren't always that way. A lot of times, a parable may be an elaborate story with a lot of detail, but the purpose is just to make one point, and it can be a mistake at times to try to find detailed correspondences. Now, there are some parables where almost everything does have a corresponding thing.

In Matthew 13, we'll eventually come to the story of the wheat and the tares, and it just seems like everything in the wheat and the tares story has a correspondence to something else. But you will find parables where that's not the case. The parable of the unjust judge, for example.

In Luke chapter 16, there is an unjust judge in chapter 18, but in chapter 16, you have the parable of the unjust steward. And there's a lot of stuff in that parable that confuses people, because we have a man who seems to be dishonest, and yet he gets commended, and somehow he represents the Christian, and it just is really confusing, until we realize that that story, the entire story, is just trying to make one point, and a lot of the things in the story don't correspond to anything in particular. So a parable can be a story that has a lot of detail, but much of the detail doesn't have any direct correspondence to the spiritual reality it's illustrating.

Rather, it's the lesson of the story that matters. It's not every little point in it. A parable also is a true-to-life story.

In other words, it's not a fable. It's not only not an allegory, it's also not the same thing as a fable, because a fable, we know Aesop's fables, for example, where a donkey finds a lion's skin, and it puts on the lion's skin so it can get some respect. And everybody thinks it's a lion for a while, and eventually he decides to let out a roar, and instead, of course, his donkey bray comes out of his mouth, instead of a lion's roar, and suddenly no one respects him anymore.

Everyone knows he's not a lion. Now, donkeys in real life don't put on lion skins. In some of Aesop's fables, the animals talk and so forth.

Well, that doesn't happen in real life. A story which has sensational, fantastic details, like animals or bushes or trees talking and thinking, that is not a parable. That is what's called a fable.

But a parable has details that are true to life. You could never have a story, like a fable, come true, because there are features in a fable that are not true to life. But a parable is a story that could easily come true.

I mean, when Jesus says, you know, the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who put yeast into three measures of meal until the whole thing was leavened, well, that's a very true-to-life situation. That is an action that is repeated in Israel, in Jesus' day, thousands of times over every day. It was a real-life kind of circumstance.

But Jesus was using that to illustrate a likeness between that and the kingdom of heaven. So the parables are true-to-life stories, usually intended to make only one point, although there are some exceptional parables where every detail has some representation in the spiritual realm. And without an explanation from Jesus, none of us could really know for sure what the parables meant.

But Jesus chose to explain these things to his disciples, and those explanations are often given to us. And that gives us some insight into how to understand the kingdom of heaven through the parables as a teaching device. Now, Matthew chapter 13 has several of these, and it begins with these opening words in verses 1 through 3. On the same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea.

And great multitudes were gathered together to him, so that he got into a boat and sat. And the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then he spoke many things to them in parables, saying, and then we have the first parable given there.

Now, we see that this occurred on occasion where there is a large crowd following Jesus, and as he had done on at least one former occasion, and perhaps he did this characteristically, when the crowds were crowding him along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he found it more convenient to just get into a boat and shove off a few yards offshore, and just preach from the boat as his pulpit. It's an ingenious mechanism, really, when you think about it, because as long as he was on the shore, if there were multitudes, and we're talking about thousands of people pushing their way closer to try to hear him, well, everyone in the back would be pushing the people in the front, and the people in the front would eventually be nudged closer and closer to Jesus until he was out waiting in the water. And they'd keep coming, no doubt.

But he got into a boat. If he went out a few yards out, people couldn't get really that close to him. They couldn't interfere with him.

And the water itself would provide something of an acoustic advantage, because sound

can carry over water quite nicely, and Jesus would then have sort of a natural amplification system to reach the crowds. And Jesus employed this more than once. We know that he did that in Luke chapter 5, in the story of the calling of the original four fishermen.

But that was a long time before this, and now we see Jesus doing it again. It must have been perhaps something he did whenever he had large crowds to address on the seashore. Anyway, he begins his first parable.

In verse 3 he says, Behold, a sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on the stony places where they did not have much earth, and they immediately sprang up, because they did not have any depth of earth. But when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop. Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And thus ends the first parable. Now when Jesus said at the end, He that has ears to hear, let him hear, he obviously indicated more than just hearing with the natural ear.

Everybody has ears on their head, and he's indicating that if you have ears, you should be able to hear. But he was not talking about hearing merely the sound of his words. In all likelihood, everyone in the crowd could hear most of what he said.

He means, of course, hear with your heart, or hear with your understanding, or perceive. If you have ears, then you need to hear with perception. Now, this indicates that there was more to his story than meets the eye, or than meets the ear.

Because when he says, He that has ears to hear, let him hear, he means there's something deeper here, that not everybody who has ears necessarily would hear the deeper meaning of what he's talking about. And yet, if you look at the words themselves, I mean, there's a good chance that most of you listening are familiar not only with the parable, but with the explanation of the parable that follows later on. But try to separate yourself from that prior knowledge, and put yourself in the position of a person on the hillside, or on the shore, listening to Jesus preach, and he just tells this story, and see what you would really understand him to mean.

He says a sower, I mean, someone who's planting seeds, this would be a man just taking a big bag of seed on his hip, and putting his hand in and tossing the seeds out into the field at random. Now, this man goes out, and he throws his seeds, and these seeds fall in various kinds of soil. Some of the soil is very non-conducive to growth.

It's what he calls the wayside. Now, the wayside refers to hard-packed soil that perhaps

should have been walked on a great deal, and because the workers of the field had walked on it, it was packed down, the seed would not penetrate. It would perhaps eventually penetrate, given enough time, but it didn't have enough time, because the birds that were following the sower along as he went, they found the seed that fell on this hard pack the easiest to recover, and so they just kind of hung out on the wayside there, and ate the seed that could not penetrate the earth.

So, those seeds, of course, were wasted, we might say. They were sown, but they were not really planted. They didn't produce anything, because they were consumed by the birds.

Now, another category of seeds, or actually same kind of seed, but different kind of soil, fell on what is called stony ground. Now, we might think of stony ground as ground that has a lot of rocks in it, but actually what's referred to here is ground that is perhaps soft soil, but only a few inches deep at the most, and under it is rock, solid rock, so that the seeds were able to penetrate the soil, but not very far, and because the rock was under there, the sun came up and heated the soil rather rapidly, and these sprang up happily, these seeds came up quite immediately, and yet, because the sun was hot, these seeds needed to draw moisture from below with their root system, but the rock below the soil prevented their roots from going down, and so they had no root to gather the moisture from below, and so the sun from above, in the absence of moisture from below, just withered them, and these seeds died, they didn't produce any crop either. Then there was a third kind of soil, which apparently was not a soil that had an inherent defect, except it was polluted.

There were also other kinds of seeds of other organisms there, thorns and thistles, weeds, things that choke out the plants that you're trying to grow for food, and the seed that fell among them, it grew, the soil was conducive, the seeds began to grow, but along with them came up the thorns and the thistles and the weeds, and they choked out the seed, they competed with the seed's root system and so forth for nutrients, and those seeds didn't really produce much, they got choked out. But there is a fourth category of soil that Jesus simply calls good soil, and this soil apparently was good in all the ways the others were deficient, this was not hard soil that the seeds just sat on top of, they penetrated, so the birds didn't find them. It was not stony in the sense of having rock below, it had plenty of good topsoil, so that the roots were able to go down deep and the plant was able to grow and flourish.

Apparently this was soil that was relatively free of weeds and thorns and thistles and those kinds of things, so this was soil that didn't really have any of the disadvantages the others had, and therefore the seed grew, and Jesus said it produced a crop. Now this crop was somewhat diverse, not all of the good soil produced the same amount of crop, some produced 30 fold, some 60 fold, and some 100 fold. Now a 30 fold crop, as I understand it, I've never really been a farmer, but from what I've read a 30 fold crop is a

pretty good crop, a decent crop, 60 fold is obviously twice as good, that's a very good crop, but a 100 fold would in those days at least be exceptional.

For someone to plant a bushel of seed and harvest 100 bushels of wheat would be a 100 fold crop. And so Jesus describes the good soil producing good crop, although even that is not always the same amount. Now having said that, imagine yourself hearing that story and hearing no explanation.

Obviously you've heard a story about farming, you've heard a story about seeds, about soil, about rocks, about birds, about weeds, but what have you learned really? In all likelihood you learned nothing, because without the explanation that Jesus gave, the story doesn't really communicate any new information. Now I don't say it doesn't communicate any information, but everybody in an agrarian society would say, okay, I understand, birds eat seeds, yeah, thorns and thistles, that's bad for the crop, sure. Okay, tell me something I don't know.

Why are you telling me that this somehow tells me something about the kingdom of God? Well, of course it does if you get the interpretation, but the story has to be decoded. Now the Bible says over in Mark chapter 4, which is a parallel passage, that Jesus never spoke to the crowds without a parable, but he expounded all things privately to his disciples. He did want his disciples to get the message, and so when they were alone, he explained the meaning of the parable.

Now he actually explained the meaning of this parable a little further down in the passage. We'll talk about that in a later broadcast, because we really don't have time to get down to those verses yet. There's actually some intervening discussion between Jesus and his disciples before he gets around to explaining it.

But it should be understood that this parable is typical of parables, and it's sort of a good example of what we can expect from parables. It is a story about something. It is true to life.

It's a very homey illustration of something that probably everybody had seen happen before. It was not a sensational story. It wasn't the kind of story you'd walk across the street to hear someone tell, because there's really nothing exceptional about it.

It's just a story about a guy throwing seeds, and what happened to his seeds, and what happened to everyone's seeds. Some of them produce, some of them don't. And this is the kind of stories that the parables were, unexceptional situations.

Now, they were not actually even, so to speak, true stories, in the sense that the parables were not actual cases. When Jesus and a man went out to sow seeds, he didn't really have a particular individual in mind. There were, of course, thousands of farmers probably known to his listeners who did just that.

Maybe some of them were in the audience, farmers who sowed seeds. But he didn't have any particular farmer in mind. He was talking about a generic reality, and it was, as I say, a very unexceptional, unsensational reality.

But what he was pointing out is that the ordinary things of everyday life, once they are interpreted by Christ, can yield tremendous insights into spiritual things. You know, I was raised in the city, and so was my wife. But when we moved out into the country and my wife started gardening, it seems like every day she learned spiritual lessons from her garden.

It was really exciting. I'd come home from teaching, and she'd have something to teach me that she learned from being out in the garden. Just the ordinary things of nature, really.

They're unexceptional. They're ordinary. They're visible for everyone to see.

But when your eyes are opened, you can see them as illustrations of spiritual realities. I think that's a wonderful thing God built into the creation. Many principles which, once our minds are illuminated, those principles can be seen to apply across the board to other situations, especially to spiritual things.

Now, just a little later than this, Jesus gives an explanation of this parable. He tells the disciples that this seed represents the Word of God, and the different kinds of soil represent different kinds of hearts of people who hear the Word of God. Some of them actually benefit from it, some do not, for various reasons.

And he gives examples of these four kinds of soils and tells what they represent. We'll have to save that explanation for a later broadcast, because that's several verses beyond where we have come to. But if you'll tune in again tomorrow, we'll continue and see how this chapter progresses.

But there are several parables in this chapter, quite a few, which each of them tell us something very important about the kingdom of God, which we dare say would be the most important subject in Jesus' teaching, because he taught on it more than any other thing. So I hope you'll be able to tune in as we go through this chapter together. We'll look at the parables and seek to understand what truths Jesus has tried to communicate to us in them.

So, until next time, I hope you'll meditate on these things and join us as we come back to this passage in our next broadcast.