

# Introduction to Matthew 13

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(Matthew 13:1-3)

Jesus' parables in Matthew 13 are so much more than mere morality tales. The Lord was teaching important truths about the coming of His kingdom, as well as helping His disciples to understand their responsibilities during the time period between His first coming and His glorious return. As with any study of the Scriptures, one of the most important principles is to determine the context for the passage being examined. This is especially important when studying the parables of Matthew 13.

## **Matt 13:1 - That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea.**

We begin by surveying what has happened so far in Matthew's narrative of the life of Jesus. In the first two chapters of Matthew we see His royal genealogy, remarkable birth, and His early life. In chapter 3 we see John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Messiah, baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, and proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). But there was opposition to John's message and he was put in prison. Jesus then began His public ministry to the nation of Israel in chapter 4, where He taught in their synagogues, called His first disciples, miraculously healed many people, and proclaimed the same message which John the Baptist had declared: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17).

The kingdom being proclaimed was the same one that the Jewish people were familiar with from their Scriptures. They understood that God had brought the theocratic kingdom to an end, that God's *shekinah* glory had departed (Ezek 8:4; 9:3; 10:4; 11:22-23), and that God had judged His people by scattering them among the nations (Deut 28:64). The future restoration of the kingdom and the promised fulfillment of God's covenants with the nation of Israel was proclaimed by nearly every Old Testament prophet.

- **Isaiah** 2:1-4; 4:2-6; 9:6-7; 11:1-13; 24:1-23; 32:1-5, 14-20; 33:17-24; 35:1-10; 40:1-11; 42:1-4; 52:7-10; 60:1-61:6; 65:17-25; 66:15-23
- **Jeremiah** 23:1-8; 31:1-37; 33:14-26
- **Ezekiel** 20:33-42; 34:20-31; 36:22-36; 37:1-28; 39:21-29; 43:1-7
- **Daniel** 2:31-45; 7:1-28; 9:1-3, 20-27; 12:1-4
- **Hosea** 3:4-5
- **Joel** 2:28-3:2, 9-21
- **Amos** 9:9-15
- **Obadiah** 1:15-21
- **Micah** 4:1-5:5
- **Zephaniah** 3:8-20
- **Haggai** 2:1-9
- **Zechariah** 2:1-13; 6:11-13; 8:1-8, 20-23; 9:9-10; 12:1-10; 14:1-21
- **Malachi** 3:1-5; 4:1-6
- **Psalms** 2:1-12; 22:1-21, 27-31; 24:1-10; 45:1-17; 46:1-11; 48:1-14; 67:1-7; 72:1-17; 89:1-50; 96:1-13; 98:1-9; 110:1-7

This kingdom is the one that the Jews were anticipating and which Jesus declared was at hand. Notice that Jesus did not say, "The kingdom of heaven has been established." In essence His message was: "The King is here and it would be possible for Him to establish the kingdom if the nation of Israel would meet the condition for its inauguration." That condition was given in the announcement by both John and Jesus when they said, "Repent!" Not only must Israel recognize Jesus as the King chosen by God (Deut 17:15), they must also meet the spiritual requirements for national repentance and personal holiness that were clearly stated in their Scriptures (e.g., Lev 11:45; 1 Kings 8:47; Ezek 18:29-32).

In Matt 5 - 7 Jesus taught many principles of kingdom ethics in what is commonly called the *Sermon on the Mount*. In Matt 8 & 9 Jesus then authenticated His Messiahship by performing miracles of healing, casting out demons, calming the storm, restoring a dead girl to life, and giving sight to the blind. It was at this time that Matthew started reporting direct opposition to Jesus from the Pharisees and religious rulers of Israel. In Matt 10 Jesus commissioned His twelve disciples to travel throughout the nation, preaching the nearness of the kingdom, but only to the lost sheep of Israel. Matt 11 recorded that messengers from John the Baptist arrived with a question, and after answering them, Jesus gave an eloquent affirmation of John and his ministry. He also referred to His own rejection by the leaders of Israel (vv. 16-19), and He condemned the unrepentant cities of Israel in which He had ministered.

This brings us up to "**that day**" which is mentioned in the first verse of Matt 13. In Matt 12:1-8 Jesus and His disciples were walking through a wheat field on the Sabbath, where the disciples picked some heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees immediately accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, but Jesus skillfully defended their actions and ended by proclaiming Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath. In Matt 12:9-14 Jesus taught in their synagogue, where the Pharisees set up a situation to accuse Him. After establishing that it was perfectly lawful to do good on the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. But the Pharisees immediately began plotting how they would destroy Jesus. At this point, the nation's religious leaders had completely rejected Him and His well-attested claims to be their Messiah and King.

In Matt 12:15-21 Jesus withdrew from the synagogue because He knew their thoughts, but many people followed Him and He healed those who were sick. His withdrawal from the developing conflict was in fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 42:1-4 which confirmed Jesus as the One chosen by God. His fulfillment of this prophecy also hints at the coming time when the Gentile nations will put their hope in Him.

In Matt 12:22-32 a demon possessed man was brought to Jesus, and the Pharisees watched for Jesus to violate their Sabbath rules again by healing him. Jesus had proven that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, so He immediately healed the man. The crowds were amazed, but the Pharisees accused Him of being in league with Satan. Jesus soundly refuted that charge, but it was clear that the religious leaders of Israel were guilty of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. There was no going back – the nation's leaders had completely rejected Jesus, and in Matt 12:33-37 Jesus condemned their hardened unbelief and depravity.

In Matt 12:38-42 Jesus refused to give the Pharisees anything further except the sign of Jonah. Not only did this prefigure the rejected King's death, burial, and resurrection, but Jesus declared

that *that* generation of unbelieving Israelites would be condemned by Gentiles at the future judgment. The repentant people of both Nineveh and Sheba will rise up and condemn the unrepentant Israelites of that generation. The sign of Jonah also includes the concept of postponement. In the case of Nineveh, their repentance led God to postpone His judgment on Assyria for 150 years. In the case of the nation of Israel, their rejection of their King led to the postponement of His kingdom, which is still awaiting realization.

In Matt 12:43-45 Jesus illustrated the condition of those Jews when He spoke of His purifying presence, warning them that unless Israel would fill the clean space with belief in their Messiah, their condition will end up worse than before. Around this time Jesus and His disciples entered a nearby house. In Matt 12:46-50 Jesus' mother and brothers arrived, but He aligned Himself with the family of faith rather than with earthly family ties.

Earlier in Matthew's account, the nearness of the kingdom had been proclaimed to the nation of Israel, first by John the Baptist (3:2), then by Jesus (4:17), and then by the twelve apostles (10:7). But from this point forward, the nearness of the kingdom is never mentioned again in the Gospels. Israel had rejected the King and His kingdom. The consequence of their rejection is that the prophesied kingdom would be postponed. As Jesus would later declare on His final journey to the Cross, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'" (Matt 23:37-39) Because of their rejection, the kingdom would not be instituted until a future time when the nation of Israel *would* recognize its Messiah and willingly meet the spiritual condition for the establishment of the kingdom.

The significant events which happened on "**that day**" will impact everything Jesus will say in the verses which follow. Jesus **left the house** and walked to the seaside where **He sat down**. Matt 13:53 says that all of this teaching took place on that same day.

**Matt 13:2 - And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.**

With so many people jostling to get close to Him, Jesus stepped into a boat, leaving the whole crowd standing along the shoreline. It is likely that some of Jesus' disciples were with Him in the boat, which was probably one of the larger fishing vessels belonging to Peter & Andrew or to the sons of Zebedee. Since Jesus sat down in the boat to teach, He likely would have needed help to keep the boat from drifting so that He could concentrate on addressing the people on shore.

**Matt 13:3a - And He spoke many things to them in parables,**

This is the first time in the Gospel of Matthew that we see the word **parable**. It is the Greek word *parabolē* which means "the placing of one thing beside another for the purpose of comparison to illustrate a spiritual or moral truth." One Jewish-Christian scholar has said, "Perhaps no other mode of teaching was so common among the Jews as that of parables. Only in their case, they were almost entirely illustrations of what had been clearly said or taught; while, in the case of

Christ, they served as the foundation for His teaching.” So, the way Jesus used parables was quite different from the traditional way that the Jewish rabbis taught. A parable does not carry its meaning on the surface. Far from *giving* explanations, parables themselves need to *be explained*. This is important to keep in mind when studying the parables of Jesus.

Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had shared several illustrations from nature and common life experience. These illustrations mainly occur in the *Sermon on the Mount* and they include the salt and the light (Matt 5:13-16), the birds and the lilies (Matt 6:26-30), the splinter and the beam in the eye (Matt 7:3-5), the two gates (Matt 7:13.), the wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt 7:15), the good and bad trees (Matt 7:17-19), and the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27). These illustrations are important, but Jesus delivered His central message by direct spiritual instruction. Here in Matthew 13, though, there is no direct spiritual teaching to the crowds. It is all indirect, which was a distinct change in the way Jesus typically taught the multitudes.

In Matthew 13 Jesus will tell four parables to the mixed multitude, but He will not interpret the meaning of *any* of them for the crowd. Then privately Jesus will tell His disciples the interpretation for two of the parables that He gave the multitude, and He will tell four additional parables only to His disciples. As was mentioned previously, all of this teaching took place on that same day, so all of these parables should be viewed together as a consistent unit.

In essence, Jesus’ parables will reveal some of the important characteristics of the intervening time period between Israel’s rejection of her King and their future acceptance of Him. These prophetic glimpses into the future are conveyed in pictures, and we will see how this new teaching method puzzled Jesus’ disciples. In the next session we will look at Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about this change in teaching style, and He will explain why He began to use parables when talking to the people of Israel.