

# The Private Parables

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(Matthew 13:44-52)

Jesus had been teaching while sitting in a boat as the multitude was standing along the shoreline. After He finished sharing four parables publicly with the crowd, he returned to the shore, dismissed the crowd, and went with His disciples back to the house.

**Matt 13:36 - Then He left the crowds and went into the house.**

His disciples started the conversation by asking Jesus for an explanation of the *Parable of the Wheat & Tares*, which He immediately gave to them (Matt 13:36-43). Jesus then shared three more “kingdom parables” with His disciples, and finally He concluded by telling them what would be expected of them now that they understood these truths. One Bible commentator introduced this section this way:

We now turn to the second section of the parables, that is, to those which the King uttered to His disciples alone. Having left the multitudes, His disciples gathered about Him in the quietness of the house. There, first in answer to the request they proffered, He explained to them the parable of the darnel, and then proceeded to give them further instruction. As we turn to the consideration of these parables we must still bear in mind that our Lord is dealing with the subject of the Kingdom in the age between His advents.<sup>1</sup>

**Matt 13:44 - "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**

Since Jesus did not explain the meaning of this parable, we should be cautious as we seek to interpret it. We must look at the biblical context for clues to the meaning of this parable. Since Jesus gave all of these parables in one sitting, we can be confident that the elements of His overall message were consistent rather than contradictory. As one commentator expressed it, “The figurative terms of these parables are used consistently within the system. That is to say that Jesus was true to His own figures, and used them in one sense only.”<sup>2</sup>

There are two familiar elements in this *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* which Jesus already identified. The **man** is the “Son of Man” who is Jesus Himself (v. 37) – and the **field** is “the world” (v. 38). One unexplained element is the **treasure**. This is the Greek word *thēsauros* which means “a place in which valuables are kept.” It could be thought of as a storehouse or a repository where precious things are stored. The word “treasure” is used dozens of times to

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<sup>1</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Fleming H. Revell Company (1907): 131.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 34.

indicate literal, physical treasure or treasured possessions. However, there are a few instances where God speaks of something as being His treasure.

For example, Exodus 19:5 says, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my **treasured possession** among all peoples, for all the earth is mine" (ESV). This uses the Hebrew word *segûllâh* which means "special possession, jewel, or treasure." This word is used again in Deut 26:18 which says, "The LORD has today declared you to be His people, a **treasured possession**, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments" (NAS95). The same Hebrew word is used in these six verses where God was speaking of Israel as His treasured possession: Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4; and Mal 3:17.

This identification of Israel as the **treasure** seems to be the most plausible explanation for the subject of this parable. But if the treasure is God's people Israel, then why would they be described as hidden? And why, once the man found them, would they be hidden again? One commentator explained it this way:

When God chose Israel to become His treasure, it was not because they were better than other nations. God wanted a people to represent Him, to be a repository for His Word, and to be an example of what a nation ought to be. God intended Israel to show to the rest of the world how any nation can be blessed with peace and prosperity through a right relationship to Himself. ... In this parable Israel is His treasure. However, when Christ came, Israel was no longer a shining example of what a people in fellowship with God should be. For more than seven hundred years Israel had been the military target of other nations. The people had violated God's laws and become involved in various forms of idolatry. As a result of their backsliding, God allowed them to suffer defeat at the hands of their enemies. When the Lord Jesus Christ appeared in His first advent, His treasure was hidden, that is, the people were scattered without a king. A remnant that returned from their latest captivity was then chafing under the bitter yoke of Rome. God's treasure had failed to fulfill her role. ... He uncovered His treasure, but only for a brief period of time. When they said they would not have Him and openly rejected Him, He hid the treasure again.<sup>3</sup>

The word **hidden** is the Greek word *kruptō* which can mean "kept secret or concealed." The text says that the treasure was **found**, which is the Greek word *heuriskō*. This can describe something that a person comes across unintentionally, but it can also mean "finding by deliberate enquiry, thought, examination, observation, or detection." Since the Lord Jesus identified Himself as the man in this story, He would have had complete knowledge of all the details concerning the treasure. It might have been hidden from the world's perspective, but nothing can be hidden from God.

This verse says that not only did the man uncover the hidden treasure, but then he hid the treasure again in the field. This is one aspect of the story that seems somewhat surprising. One writer has expressed it this way:

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<sup>3</sup> Lehman Strauss, *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed*, Loizeaux Brothers (1980): 92, 93, 94.

Here perhaps is the touch of greatest mystery in our parable. It affirms the hiding of the treasure discovered. What have we that is parallel to this in the case of Christ? If we think of His ministry and interpret our parable in the light of it, we shall find that this is exactly what He did. He Who called people to the Kingdom of God, because of their refusal, because of their rejection of Him as King, shut the door of the Kingdom and postponed its full realization. By solemn act He rejected the nation, pronounced eight woes over against His eight beatitudes, announced the doom of Jerusalem, flung out the city from the place of government, and postponed for the world the coming of His Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

This might explain why He again **hid** the treasure in the world. Jesus had come to His people, but Israel had rejected the King and His kingdom. They were unwilling to meet the spiritual requirements for the kingdom's inauguration. Instead they preferred to sink back into their former condition, being scattered and hidden throughout the world, just as they had been for the previous seven hundred years leading up to the birth of their Messiah.

But the story does not end there in this parable. The final phrase says, "**from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**" Jesus did not give up on the unrepentant nation of Israel. They would not accept Him, but He would now do something to prepare the way so He could accept them in the future kingdom.

As for the Lord's **joy** expressed in this verse, the Greek word *chara* means "delight, joy, or rejoicing." There are several biblical examples of God rejoicing over Israel when she is redeemed and restored (Deut 30:9; Isa 62:4-5; 65:19). Isaiah 65:19 says, "I will also **rejoice** in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; And there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying." In that verse the Lord is rejoicing over His people, not as they are in their present condition, but as He knows they will be after He has opened a way for them to enter His future kingdom. In Heb 12:2 Jesus was looking forward with joy to the ultimate result of His atoning death on the cross: "Who for the **joy** (*chara*) set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

In this parable, the man's joy over the treasure led him to immediately **sell all that he had** in order to buy the field. The main emphasis in this parable is the man's extreme act of self-sacrifice in order to obtain the field. The man purchased the field at the cost of everything he had.

When this verse said that the man "**buys** that field" it used the Greek word *agorazō* which is the common word for purchasing something from the marketplace. The people of that day routinely used this term in its straightforward meaning for buying goods or property. This is the sense in which Jesus used the term in this verse – a man bought a field – which pictures a normal transaction after which the man became the sole owner of that property. But as with several other common terms, the writers of the New Testament sometimes invested these words with a special meaning, and *agorazō* is one of those terms. This word was used in specific contexts to describe the redemption of believers which Christ provided through His death on the cross

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<sup>4</sup> Morgan: 143.

(1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; 2 Pet 2:1; Rev 5:9, 14:3-4). For example, 1 Cor 6:20 says, “For you have been **bought** with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” And Rev 5:9 says, “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and **purchased** for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.’”

The purchase price for the **field** was the very life of Christ. And notice that Jesus bought, not only the treasure, but the entire field which represents the whole world. Jesus died to redeem all of the people in all of the world. This seems to be a reference to what theologians call “Unlimited Atonement” (John 1:29; 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Tim 4:10; 1 John 2:2). For example, when writing to a group of believers the apostle John said, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). And the apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy, “We have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (1 Tim 4:10).

The picture in this parable includes one of Jesus’ first hints predicting His eventual death. His first explicit statement will soon be given to His disciples in Matt 16:21 which says, “From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.” That statement was later repeated in Matt 17:22-23, then Matt 20:17-19, and finally Matt 26:1-2. But here Jesus pictured His death – giving everything in order to purchase the field.

The message of the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* springs from Israel’s rejection of her King. Even after their rejection of Him, Jesus still treasures them and is willing to sacrifice everything in order to redeem them. As one commentator has said, “The mystery revealed in this parable is the putting aside of Israel’s kingdom program for a time. The redemption of the treasure has been accomplished, but the unveiling of it has not.”<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the age while the kingdom is postponed, Jesus will purchase His treasured people, but the treasure will remain hidden in the field until the end of the age. One commentator summarized this parable:

The Lord died for that nation, and still the results of that death are not yet manifested. Israel is hid in the field, in the world. The Lord will come again and return to the field, the world, once more. He comes to claim His inheritance. Then He will lift the treasure, then He will claim His people Israel and they will rejoice in His salvation. During this age, the age of an absent Lord, Israel is kept hid in the field. This is one of the mysteries in the kingdom of the heavens.<sup>6</sup>

**Matt 13:45-46 - "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, <sup>46</sup> and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.**

There are several familiar elements in this second parable which Jesus shared privately with His disciples. Again, there is a **man**, which Jesus already identified as the “**Son of Man**” – that is, Jesus Himself. In this parable the man is a **merchant**. This is the Greek word *emporos* which

<sup>5</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King*, Multnomah Press (1980): 184.

<sup>6</sup> A.C. Gaebelain, *The Seven Parables*, Bible House of Los Angeles (1906): 50-51.

carries the idea of a traveling wholesale dealer, in this case dealing in fine pearls. He is not a common tradesman or a retail shop owner. He is more important than a simple salesman. His wide experience means that he has seen a lot of different kinds of pearls, so he would be a man who definitely knows quality when he sees it.

At the end of this parable the man is **selling all that he has** in order to buy something precious. This is another similarity to the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure*. As one commentator expressed it, “The parables are alike in this, that they both present to us the action of a man who purchases what has value in his eyes at the cost of all he has.”<sup>7</sup> In the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* Jesus gave His very life – everything He had – in order to purchase the entire field which represents the whole world. Since these parables communicate a consistent message, we can be confident that here in the *Parable of the Pearl* again we have a picture of Jesus’ act of redemption. We know from the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* that in the process of purchasing His people Israel, Jesus also paid the purchase price to redeem the entire world. That parable implied that redemption was available both for believing Jews as well as for believing Gentiles.

The unexplained element in this parable is the “**pearl of great value**,” which is the object that the man purchased or redeemed at the greatest cost. Since the previous parable focused on the redemption of Israel, it seems likely that this parable completed the picture by focusing on the redemption of Gentiles using the metaphor of a pearl. This is a logical deduction, but because Jesus did not explain the parable, we cannot be dogmatic about this conclusion. Earlier in the Gospels, Jesus did give several hints concerning the salvation of Gentiles (Matt 12:15-21, 38-42; Luke 2:30-32). But this parable would be the only biblical example where the metaphor of a costly pearl was used to represent Gentiles.

While it is true that pearls are not listed as being precious to the Jews, nevertheless the Jews would have understood that pearls were valuable. In Matt 7:6, Jesus warned, “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your **pearls** before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” The disciples would have understood the value of pearls. As one commentator explained it,

These men were, of course, quite conversant with the fact that the pearl was held as a precious stone among the Gentiles. The study of the place of the pearl in Gentile usage is most interesting. From recent investigations made in Egypt, it has been discovered that the decoration of ancient kings consisted largely of gold, inset with jewels, and occasionally with pearls. When we come to Nineveh, we find that the pearl was in greater use. An increasing value was gradually set upon it, until in our day it is accounted as the most precious thing in the East. It is, however, of Gentile value.<sup>8</sup>

Here Jesus used a costly pearl, which was more prized by the Gentiles, as a symbol of something precious for which He would also sacrifice everything. After Israel’s rejection of Christ and the postponement of the kingdom, Jesus would do something that the Jews may not have

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick W. Grant, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven*, [https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/FW\\_Grant/FWG\\_Kingdom\\_Heaven.html](https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/FW_Grant/FWG_Kingdom_Heaven.html) (accessed Jan 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Morgan: 159.

foreseen. Out of joy over His treasure (Israel), He would pay the purchase price, not only for Israel, but also for the Gentiles. As one scholar has said,

One of the transitions taking place in the text is that Israel, due to its rejection of Christ through its leaders, is being rejected for a time, while Christ does some work that is unexpected, namely the calling out of many unanticipated sons of the kingdom throughout the world. It is not a stretch to see the language of “hiding” to refer to this temporary rejection by Christ. However, the focus of joy by the man in the parable (Christ) shows that He has a heart for the world (the field) in light of the treasure itself. This is in keeping with the theological understanding of the mission of Israel as a light to the world (e.g., Isaiah 49:6) and the Pauline portrait of Israel’s judicial blindness as a boon to the Gentile mission (Rom 11). If this way of taking the passage is valid, it would harmonize well with Matthew’s own comprehension of the shift from the focus on Israel to the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup>

The message of the *Parable of the Pearl* is that the redemption which Jesus provided was sufficient, not only for His people Israel, but also for believing Gentiles. At the beginning of the age during which the kingdom is postponed, Jesus will give the ultimate sacrifice to purchase both His treasured people as well as “taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name” (Acts 15:14-18).

**Matt 13:47-48 - "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away.**

This parable involves gathering a large number of fish using a dragnet. The Greek word for **dragnet** (*sagēnē*) described a large net that fishermen would drag through the water between two boats, or they would anchor one end of the net at the shoreline and then drag the net through the water using a single boat. The area of the lake they could cover might be as much as a half mile wide, and it would often take a group of men several hours to drag the net onto the beach. A large quantity of fish of all kinds could be gathered using this method. Then the task of sorting the good fish from the bad could begin. The Greek word used here for **bad** (*sapros*) means “of poor quality, unfit for use, or worthless” but it can also mean “rotten or putrefied.” This verse concludes the story, but Jesus continued by sharing the interpretation in the next two verses.

**Matt 13:49-50 - "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous,<sup>50</sup> and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

This explanation sounds similar to that of the *Parable of the Wheat & Tares*, so it might be helpful to compare these two parables.

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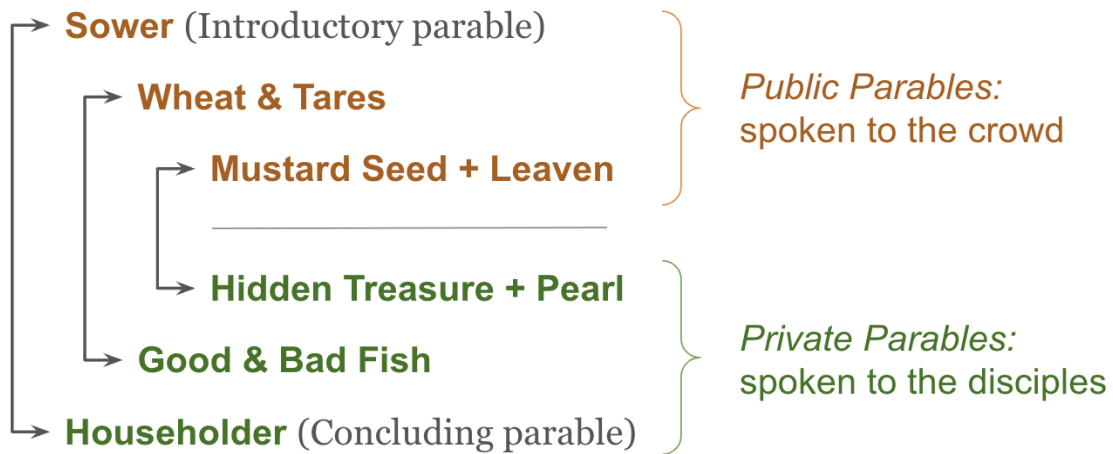
<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Stallard, “Hermeneutics and Matthew 13: Part 2”, *Conservative Theological Journal*, vol 5 (Dec 2001): 355.

| Events  | Wheat & Tares  | the Dragnet  |
|---|--|--|
| Good and evil grow side-by-side                 | v38 - the <b>good seed</b> , these are the sons of the kingdom; and the <b>tares</b> are the sons of the evil one; ( <i>good &amp; bad</i> )   | v47 - a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of <b>every kind</b> ( <i>good &amp; bad</i> )   |
| Separation of good from evil at the culmination | v30 - in <b>the time of the harvest</b> I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."                                      | v48 - and <b>when it was filled</b> , they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. |
| End of the Age:<br>Gathering of the wicked      | v40 - <b>So shall it be at the end of the age.</b><br>v41 - Son of Man will send forth His <b>angels</b> , and they will <b>gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness</b> | v49 - <b>So it will be at the end of the age;</b><br>the <b>angels</b> will come forth and take out <b>the wicked from among the righteous</b>                 |
| Judgment of the wicked                          | v42 - <b>and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</b>  | v50 - <b>and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.</b>  |
| Righteous enter the kingdom                     | v43 - Then THE <b>RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN</b> in the kingdom of their Father.  | <i>(not mentioned)</i>   |

The message of the *Parable of the Dragnet* is very similar to the *Parable of the Wheat & Tares*. The *Parable of the Wheat & Tares* provided more background about how the good and bad seed came to be growing together, while here in the *Parable of the Dragnet* the emphasis is on the ultimate judgment event that separates the good from the bad. The good and bad will exist side-by-side throughout the age, but at the time of the gathering, the bad will be cast into the fiery furnace.

This judgment is reminiscent of the "Judgment of the Sheep & Goats" (Matt 25:31-46). The sheep, the wheat, and the good fish will inherit the kingdom, while the goats, the tares, and the bad fish will be judged. This will occur after the future seven-year Tribulation, and it is a judgment of its living survivors. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (Matt 25:31-32)

This might be a good place to look at the relationship between the parables in this chapter.



The *Parable of the Sower* introduced the six “kingdom parables” which follow, and then the *Parable of the Householder* concluded the series with additional admonitions from Jesus. The first three “kingdom parables” were given publically to the multitude, and Jesus did not explain any of those parables for the crowd. The *Parable of the Wheat & Tares* is a fairly long story, and Jesus explained that parable later only for His disciples. The next two public parables, the *Parable of the Mustard Seed* and the *Parable of the Leaven*, were quite short, and Jesus did not give an explanation for either of them. After entering the house with His disciples, Jesus gave another pair of very brief parables, again without explanation. The last “kingdom parable”, the *Parable of the Dragnet*, was a story with clear parallels to the *Parable of the Wheat & Tares*. One commentator described the structure of these parables:

The kingdom parables can be divided into three couplets. ... These six parables are all introduced with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like.” The whole picture presented relates some truth connected with the kingdom of heaven. The two parables not yet discussed (the parable of the sower and the parable of things old and new) omit this introductory phrase. These form the introduction and conclusion to these three couplets of kingdom parables.<sup>10</sup>

**Matt 13:51-52 - "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." <sup>52</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old."**

Jesus asked, “Have you understood all these things?” The word **understood** is the Greek word *suniēmi* which has been used several times in this chapter (Matt 13:13-15, 19, 23). It means “to put together mentally or to comprehend,” and it involves assembling the facts into an organized whole, like collecting all of the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and putting them together. Matt 13:12

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey R. Benson, “The Kingdom Parables Of Matthew Thirteen,” *Central Bible Quarterly*, vol 22 (Spring 1979): 6.



said that to the one who understands “more shall be given,” but to the one who refuses to understand “even what he has shall be taken away from him.” The disciples respond by saying that they did understand, so Jesus said, “**Therefore**” – because they understood – He is able to share this final parable which emphasizes their new responsibilities in light of their understanding of these kingdom truths.

In this final parable Jesus used the word **scribe**, which is the Greek word *grammateus*. This word had a rather negative connotation because of the evil behavior of the scribes and Pharisees who opposed Jesus. But the word itself simply means someone who is familiar with the Word of God and is able to correctly interpret it while teaching others. We can be confident that this original meaning is the one intended here because of how this person is described in the following phrase. Jesus said this is a scribe who has become a “disciple of the kingdom of heaven.” The word **disciple** is the Greek word *mathēteuō* which means “to become a learner, student, or dedicated follower of one’s teacher.” So here the phrase “become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven” indicates someone who has been taught the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” which Jesus has shared throughout this chapter.

Why didn’t Jesus leave out the word **scribe** and simply say that a “disciple of the kingdom of heaven” is like a householder? It may be because the responsibility of a disciple is to **learn**, but the responsibility of a scribe is to **teach** the truths they have learned.

Jesus says that this learner/teacher “is like a head of a household.” The phrase **head of a household** is the single Greek word *oikodespotēs* which means the leader, master, or final authority in the household. This is a person in a position of responsibility over everything within his domain. By using this term, Jesus is conferring on the disciples some new responsibilities. Not only are they to learn and understand, but they are also to write, to teach, and to oversee the correct interpretation of these kingdom truths.

The householder is responsible for administering the “treasure” or resources of his house. Jesus said that he “**brings out of his treasure things new and old.**” So, in the same way that a householder carries out his responsibilities, Jesus’ disciples now have the task of putting together and teaching the old as well as the new truths that they have been given. One scholar expressed it this way:

This parable teaches that these new kingdom mysteries as disclosed in the parables found in Matthew 13 must be considered alongside Old Testament kingdom truth if one is to understand the totality of God’s kingdom agenda. ... Only by augmenting these new inter-advent teachings found in Matthew 13 alongside what they already knew about the kingdom from the Old Testament would they be able to understand all that God is doing and will do.<sup>11</sup>

As we end this series on the parables of Matthew 13, we should remember that we are living during that inter-advent age today, and since we have been taught the truths of the kingdom, then we also have a responsibility to share these truths with others.

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom*, Grace Gospel Press (2016): 134.