

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 47, Chapter 13

Matthew chapter 13 begins this way:

^{CJB} **Matthew 13:1** *That same day, Yeshua went out of the house and sat down by the lake; ² but such a large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there while the crowd stood on the shore. ³ He told them many things in parables: ...*

From here forward in Matthew's Gospel we're going to find Jesus employing parables in His teachings. Some Bible academics and commentators will say that He has already used parables when speaking to the crowds that seemed to be following Him everywhere; perhaps making up as much as one third of the recorded words that came from Him. But therein lies the rub: what is a parable, what is not, and what is the difference between a parable and merely an illustration that uses metaphors to make a point? Perhaps even more: does this difference really matter in how we are to interpret those words?

So before we delve into the meat of Matthew chapter 13, it is necessary for us to understand the literary form of parables so that we can learn what to take from them.... and what NOT to take from them. This is a rather complex matter, but I'll do my best to make it not too extensive nor so hard to understand. Even so, hang in there with me because little is more important to Christianity than Jesus's words, and little is more important within Jesus's words than His parables. And the first thing to understand is that Christ was not the inventor of parables, even though if it is not directly taught that way (although it often is), it is heavily implied within Christianity that not only was it He who created them, He was the only one who used them.

Much of what I'm going to discuss with you comes from a seminar I attended a few years ago, as well as information gleaned from the works of various notable scholars such as David Flusser, Brad Young, Steven Notley and Ze'ev Safrai. For those of you who want to go into more depth on the matter of parables, and especially those created by the ancient Rabbis, I recommend you obtain the book titled *Parables of the Sages* published by Carta.

So what is a parable? Ze'ev Safrai says that parables are: "short stories with moral insight and a clear aim". While that abbreviated definition is certainly the case, that just as certainly is far from all we need to know about parables to identify them and to comprehend their essence and meaning. The first thing we need to understand is that parables belong exclusively and uniquely to the realm of the Jewish culture and their Sages. Dr. Flusser would narrow that a bit and argue that they belong exclusively within the realm of rabbinic Judaism. From this basic understanding two critical factors emerge: one is that although the institution of "rabbinic Judaism" did not exist in Yeshua's era, it was not far away from becoming a reality. The concept of the religion of the Jews being led by teachers and leaders that did not hold the official title of Rabbi (because the office of Rabbi, as we think of it today, was not yet formed) were nonetheless at times called rabbi but that designation was from an honorary and not an official sense. As an example: in modern English we can say that our mother or father taught us important things when we were young... so they were important teachers in our lives. And yet, that in no way means that they held the formal paid profession of being an educator... an officially recognized office of Teacher. So for the most part when we think of Jesus and even of Paul, while no doubt they were at times called rabbis in the sense of being teachers and masters over a flock of disciples, historically the term rabbi hadn't yet become elevated into an official office that held actual recognized civil or religious authority, as it would become within only a few decades.

The next point is that parables can only be understood within the context of Jewish society, Jewish religion, Jewish thought, and Jewish language (Hebrew). Parables were necessarily written in Hebrew and no other languages. That Christ's parables (as with all His words) have been handed down to us through the Greek language, later translated to Latin, and later still translated from the Greek or Latin to English, means that the original message and purpose can at times be obscured or even lost. And this is because parables are based 100% on Jewish thought and language that originated within a Jewish cultural setting. To take them outside of that basic context begins the process of degrading them into

something they are not. To try to make sense of them in a Gentile world much allegory was employed starting with some of the Early Church Fathers as early as perhaps the 4th or 5th centuries. What is an allegorical interpretation? It is a means by which the biblical words are assumed to be symbols used to reveal a hidden meaning or a broad and general moral principle. Thus an allegorical interpretation allows for the possibility of multiple meanings, all of which are considered equally valid. By the 7th and 8th centuries allegory was the main teaching and preaching tool used by Christian leaders and academics to interpret not just Jesus's parables, but everything we find in the New Testament. In fact many (perhaps most) modern Bible commentators will say that a parable is itself little more than Jewish allegory.

The proof that parables are a uniquely Jewish form of expression is that they are not to be found in the Greek and Roman world of the 1st century, nor before, nor in the decades following except in the rarest of occasions. Some have said that Aesop's Fables that were written by a Greek man from around 600 B.C. are essentially parables. While they may seem similar to Hebrew parables, and from the far view could perhaps be labeled as such, they are not really the same kind of literature. The main difference is that ancient fables did not contain God. God's will or God's character or God's promises were the framework upon which all Jewish parables were created. But more to the point of what we're studying, Aesop's Fables were not called **paraboles** (in Greek) nor were they classified that way. **Paraboles** eventually became a Greek title used in the Jewish Diaspora and in the early Christian world to refer to these Jewish short stories produced from Jewish culture and literature, including from the New Testament.

So since the English word parable is taken from the Greek word **paraboles**, then what would Jews have called these Jewish short stories that contained a moral or illustrated a truth? It was almost certainly the Hebrew word **mashal**. **Mashal** is found in several places in the Bible as a somewhat general term that could mean a prophecy, a riddle, or perhaps an authoritative statement. It was sometimes used to denote a virtue and at other times an important and instructive saying. Let's pause here for a moment. I don't want to cause confusion by what I'm telling you because when it comes to language there are things that might sound complicated, but we all inherently know how it works although we rarely think about it. It begins with the reality that all languages evolve over time. The Hebrew of Moses was not identical with the Hebrew of Jesus. And the Hebrew of Jesus is not identical with the conversational Hebrew spoken in Israel today. There are Hebrew words that used to exist but are no longer used, and there are new

Hebrew words that didn't exist in ancient times. The English of the 13th or 14th century would not even be understood by modern day English speakers and vice versa. In fact, language can evolve rapidly especially in the age of technical innovation in which we live. Words like astronaut never existed prior to the late 1950's. The term "politically correct" is just 3 decades or so old. And yet as unknown as these words were as recent as WWII, they are part of our everyday English language and no one asks "what does this mean?" So, when we find the word ***mashal*** rendered in the Prophets of the Old Testament, it didn't mean exactly the same thing as it did by Christ's day. By Christ's day ***mashal*** mostly came to mean what we now refer to as parables (even though when used in its technical sense it also continued to mean what it always had meant especially as it was used in the Old Testament). The context of a conversation and who was having it determined exactly how to understand the meaning of the term.

One of the most important aspects of how to identify a parable is that it specifically calls itself a ***mashal***. It is self defining; it says what it is so that no mistake can be made as to its literary genre and purpose. That is, it is important that a ***mashal***, a parable, be identified as such so that we know it is not a poem, and it is not history, and it is not narrative because proper interpretation depends upon recognizing which of each of these categories of literature is being spoken or written. So one is not to take the meaning of a parable as though the characters actually exist (or will exist) or that the events as depicted actually happened or will happen. So in order for one to properly interpret a parable it must first be firmly recognized as being a parable and not something else. This fact appears immediately as chapter 13 opens when the Jewish Matthew makes it so very clear by identifying what kind of speech category Jesus is about to say. He writes: "He (Christ) told them many things in ***mashal***... in parable."

Another important aspect for recognizing a true Jewish parable (as opposed to merely a simple metaphor or illustration) is that there is usually a word formula utilized to introduce it or it is contained within the body of the parable. Parables often begin with the words: "a parable is told". Just as often, especially within the rabbinic parables (of which there are hundreds), we'll find the telling words "to what can the matter be compared?" Dr. Steven Notley says that sometimes this is even abbreviated to: "similar to". The most formal method favored by later Rabbis is: "***mashal lema hadabar domeh***"... "A parable: to what may the matter be compared?"

Another way to recognize a true parable is that there is usually (but not always)

an obvious moral or application that it centers around. The story along with its moral is told in terms of an already commonly understood reality within Jewish culture, even if that reality is highly embellished... or exaggerated... in order to draw the listener's attention and interest. It is something told that is meant to be remembered and re-told. Almost all parables created by the rabbis involved a king, a sick person, or a woman, although none of them were named because that kind of detail was unimportant to the parable's meaning. Rather these were generic and stereotypical kings, sick people, and women and not actual ones. Yeshua on the other hand deviated from this and His parables involved characters from among the common people; so He employed images of maidens, and field workers, and agriculture. And, just as with the rabbis, so were His characters generic people in stereotypical roles.

So the way a parable works is that it draws a comparison between the moral or application intended by the teller, and an invented word-picture that is used to turn the teaching into a memorable, and usually enjoyable, short story. The point of it is to teach something of divine importance by means of making the complex or even spiritual into something an average Jew could comprehend by being given a mental picture of it. Notice I did not say that the average person could comprehend, but rather the average Jew. A Gentile had, and continues to have, difficulty understanding the meaning of a rabbinic parable, or even some of Christ's, because they were told in Jewish cultural terms; something nearly all Gentiles wouldn't be familiar with. Therefore this begs the question: why if the underlying nature of parables was generally only understandable by Jews would Jesus employ parables if He intended that His words were to also reach the ears of Gentiles? As much as this might bother or even rile the typical Gentile Christian community, remember that Yeshua's audience during His lifetime was invariably Jews, and most often the common people of the Galilee. He did not deal with Gentiles nor speak His teachings to Gentiles. This is not my speculation.

^{CJB} **Matthew 15:22-24** ²² *A woman from Kena'an who was living there came to him, pleading, "Sir, have pity on me. Son of David! My daughter is cruelly held under the power of demons!"* ²³ *But Yeshua did not say a word to her. Then his talmidim came to him and urged him, "Send her away, because she is following us and keeps pestering us with her crying."* ²⁴ *He said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Isra'el."*

He indeed did relent and briefly address the Gentile woman, even complimented her, but it was a rare case that was outside the scope of His immediate mission.

So it fell to Paul and later disciples... and still to us... to take Yeshua's message to the Gentile world in a way Gentiles can understand. However changing the meaning of Yeshua's parables by means of allegory was not, and is not, the solution. First, though, the original meaning has to be rediscovered.

When it comes to the parables of Yeshua in the New Testament, they were used especially to reveal the divine spiritual dimension by using elements of the physical world that we can see, hear, and touch. When teaching the Torah I've spoken of what I call the Reality of Duality. The concept is that because the Creator wove the same governing dynamics and principles into all of His Creation, both the unseen spiritual dimension and the tangible physical dimension, then we can observe in the natural things of the world all around us important truths about the operation and realities of the spiritual world that we cannot observe. Thus we could say that the tangible physical things of this world that we can see with our eyes and know by means of our several senses, is a shadow of the spiritual. As we all know through experience, while a shadow reveals only an outline of the object that is casting it, yet the shadow does help us to understand the approximate shape of the object. So a parable can be likened to a visible shadow of an invisible divine object or purpose. A parable can also reveal the shadowy outline of future events that exist only in God's promises until they happen. Yet there is a caution with which we must approach a parable. Should we try to color in further details from our imaginations, the odds that we'll be correct are remote. It's from such folly that bad doctrine can be created. So our faith includes trusting that the shadow (the parable) is real and true even though what it reveals to us is incomplete. Never should we draw too many conclusions from viewing only a shadow. Our earthly experiences ought to be proof enough of this.

So a parable is not to be treated as a Christmas tree upon which any manner of ornament can be hung. Due to the allegorical method of teaching the Bible that has arisen over the centuries within Christianity, the impression is made that there are any number of correct solutions or messages that can be taken from any one of Jesus's parables. This is not so because that is not the nature of a parable. A parable has but one message and moral to which it aims. A parable's final meaning can only be deciphered when taking it as a whole, as opposed to finding several meanings by examining the several elements used to construct the story. By that I mean that within the parable's story there indeed could be a few interesting connections between the moral of the parable and the many characters and details used along the way to bring the listener to the parable's

message. But those connections along the way never affect the outcome that brings us to the single point that the parable teller is making. I want to emphasize this: the point of any parable is but one thing and is not intended to be remolded to suit the interpreter or the circumstance.

Because of this underlying concept and purpose of a parable, in the Jewish world of Christ and later, parables were generally not used to help explain the legal matters of Jewish Law... **Halakah**. Nor were they generally used when the Torah was taught. There were a few exceptions to that rule, but too few to consider them as anything but outliers. Parables are also not to be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls or in the several books of the Apocrypha. We simply don't find parables existing as a typical means of expression and teaching in the Jewish world except in the New Testament and in writings of the Rabbis. So there is little way around concluding that there was an observable teaching-method connection between Jesus and the rabbis (the teachers) of His day, which were certain of the Pharisees. Thus the crowds who heard Yeshua's parables no doubt expected them, and were used to them because the use of parables existed only in the Synagogue culture as led by Pharisees, but parables did not exist within the Temple culture as led by the Priests. Such a thing ought to not surprise us; Jesus, Himself, was a product of the Synagogue culture and not of the Temple culture.

In the end, I think the point I'd like most to make is that a parable is intended to help us understand what God is like. Yeshua of all people could help us understand God, His Father, best. He also knew that parable, **mashal**, was the best way to communicate this kind of understanding to the common folks. At the same time He was a Torah teacher extraordinaire. As was customary of the Judaism of His day, He did not use parables to teach the Torah. He limited His parables to helping His listeners understand God's nature and God's kingdom in a very personal and relational way. So just as Yeshua cannot be understood apart from His Jewishness, neither can we understand His parables apart from their Jewishness.

Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 13.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 13 all

The chapter opens with the words "that same day". Same day as what? Remove the chapter markings and it becomes clear. It is the same day as everything we

read in chapter 12 occurred; and that day is Shabbat. Chapter 12 was the story of the Sabbath controversy when some Pharisees were upset with Christ and some of His followers for plucking grain from a field and eating it. The Pharisees considered this act a violation of Sabbath Day laws. These laws were not so much laws of the Torah, but rather Jewish Law; laws and rules made by the Pharisees over what could and could not happen on the Sabbath.

After having a heated discussion with those Pharisees, and then upon His mother (Miriam, Mary) appearing along with some of His siblings, chapter 13 says that Jesus left the immediate area and went to the Lake... according to Matthew it was still Shabbat. Therefore wherever precisely it was that He was arguing with the Pharisees it could not have been far from the Sea of Galilee (also known as the Lake) because it needed to be within a Sabbath Day's walk. But then Matthew adds that Jesus "went out of the house" and to the Lake, so this is a strong implication that He was back in his current town of residence, Capernaum, and so the location of the Sabbath controversy had to have taken place in a nearby field.

The ever present crowd of people followed Jesus down to the Lake, so He got into a boat. It was not to escape them (as He had done before) but rather it was likely to give Him a better platform from which to speak, without having people crushing in all around Him, and therefore allowing more of the crowd to hear instead of only those closest to Him. He decides to speak to the people concerning the Kingdom of God, which has been His main interest. Remember: to this point in Matthew's Gospel, Yeshua has not revealed Himself as Israel's Messiah. So the Good News He has been preaching, and His 12 Disciples were sent out to preach, was not the Good News of salvation in Christ. Rather until now the Good News was only that the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived.

One must ask: why this parable about a sower and some seeds at this time? I think the reason is that Yeshua has, to this point, had relatively few successes but many failures in getting people to respond to Him. In fact He has was at permanent odds with the Synagogue leadership who always seemed to be present among the crowds. These leaders were there to dispute Him at every turn. They came not to listen, but to indict Him. They had their own agenda, and it was to be sure that all common Jews obeyed the Traditions of the Elders... Jewish Law... that they held so firmly to. They saw their job priority as maintaining the status quo; to defend their manmade doctrines. They were not open to learning. Most of the Pharisees (not all) were closed minded and not

teachable.

Let us also not assess that Jesus felt He had been succeeding in His efforts simply because of the huge crowds He not only gathered but that seemed to follow Him wherever He went. The reality is that instead of Him being happy for it, we have read of His disappointment. So if there were huge crowds so anxious to hear Him and follow Him around, why was He disappointed? Were the crowds not large enough? No. It was because these crowds were not coming to hear, obey, and have their minds changed; they were coming to have their circumstances changed for the better. They were coming to this extra-ordinary **Tzadik**, this Holy Man who could heal any disease, bring hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, and expel demons from people. They wanted to have this miracle healer fix their infirmities of every variety; which He did because He had compassion on these people and also to fulfill the ancient prophecies about Him. Yet clearly Yeshua fully expected that these miracles coupled with His teaching on the Torah and His preaching regarding the arrival of the Kingdom of God would have had a different result: sincere repentance.

What a lesson to us is evident here. First, merely hearing God's message of truth is far from a guarantee that it will be accepted or heeded or lead to repentance. Second, if Yeshua had been anything like the typical Synagogue leaders of His day He would have been ecstatic over all these people showing up and hanging around. How famous that would have made Him; how well known and sought after. Imagine all the ways His social status, influence with the wealthy and the powerful, and probably personal wealth would have greatly increased. What the people learned, and how close to God's intent they conducted their lives as a measure of sincere repentance would have been secondary; drawing sizeable crowds was the issue. While in no way would I indict an entire institution, within Christianity too often the size of the crowd is the primary measure of success to Church leadership. In fairness I doubt there's a Pastor worth his salt that doesn't pray for more people to come to worship God at his Church and who tirelessly works with his staff to facilitate that hope as much as it depends on them. We can't help but question ourselves if no one responds or if few come. But we're not Jesus. Jesus drew increasingly overwhelming crowds that had the result of alarming the competition; yet that wasn't the result He hoped for. Even though disappointed in the response of the people Yeshua didn't question His message, because it's the one His Father gave Him to preach. Even so, He keenly observed the dismal rate of response of the people not in terms of how it affected His status, but rather in terms of how it affected them.

I must continually remind myself (and now I speak to all listening who are leaders of Christian fellowships, and Pastors and Rabbis of congregations): our job is to speak the Gospel truth, to teach the Bible honestly and in context, and to live out God's commands as an example for others to follow. Upon that, we allow the chips to fall as they may. Our job before God is be a servant to Him and a shepherd to His people. If we do that faithfully, then we can rest easy as the response of the people is in God's hands. We are His messengers, but we are not the Holy Spirit. We can diligently and passionately teach God's Word and tell folks of the truth of Salvation in Yeshua. What we cannot do is to bring one soul into God's Kingdom based upon our will and intent. This is not to say that we cannot do a poor job or behave in a way that ruins our witness. Our job requires us to prepare well and serve diligently. But what we read in Matthew 13 reveals that the size of the crowds that come to hear us can be deceiving. The presence of people does not necessarily equal their right motive for being there, and the lack of their presence does not necessarily mean a failure of our leadership.

If only a relatively few people that Yeshua personally healed, or were eyewitnesses to His miracles, or were present to hear His incomparable wisdom, came to trust in what He said or in who He was, why would the rest of us expect to have greater success as measured by counting people?

So now with that in mind, Yeshua presents the pressing crowd with what has become known in Christendom as the Parable of the Sower. In this exceptional instance, we don't have to wonder at what the parable is telling us because after telling it to the crowd He explains it to His disciples (which one can reasonably assume means the same group of disciples that was plucking heads of grain in chapter 12). I suppose if I was giving this parable a name it would be the Parable of the Soil, and not the parable of the Sower because this is more about the soil (the ground) and less about the sower of seeds. In the CJB this sower is called a farmer.

Structurally we find that the parable is based on 4 cases of what happens between the seed and the soil it falls upon. So this is a story of response and reaction as well as interaction. That is the seed is sown, but how the ground reacts to the seed is the point of the parable. So these 4 cases are represented by 4 kinds of soil. The parable is short so let's re-read it.

^{CJB} **Matthew 13:3-9** ³ *"A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he sowed, some seed fell alongside the path; and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other*

seed fell on rocky patches where there was not much soil. It sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow; ⁶ but when the sun had risen, the young plants were scorched; and since their roots were not deep, they dried up. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ But others fell into rich soil and produced grain, a hundred or sixty or thirty times as much as had been sown. ⁹ Those who have ears, let them hear!"

This same parable is found in Mark 4 and Luke 8, and they are nearly identical. In fact, whatever minor differences might be found between them all can surely be accounted for by the editing that naturally happens over time by interpreters and language translators.

We always need to pay attention to the numbers involved in a Bible story. While it is not so in every single case, in the vast majority of cases the numbers used are important to the meaning. Here the number 4 is prominent (4 kinds of soil). Why? Is Jesus trying to say that there are exactly 4 types of soil, ground, that the seed could fall upon? No; it is because the number 4 in Hebrew gematria represents the 4 corners of the earth in the same way there are 4 compass directions. Thus the use of 4 cases indicates that the point of the parable applies universally throughout the earth, no matter where and no matter who.

The other point to notice is that it is the same seed coming from the same sower. This further advances the reality that the differences of reaction and response are the result not of the farmer or the seed, but rather of the soil it falls upon.

After telling the parable, Christ tells His disciples how to understand it. This happens in verses 18 - 23, which we'll get to in the next lesson. However I want to take a moment to speak to you about the last few words of the parable that are: "those who have ears, let them hear." This is a Jewish saying that Yeshua uses several times. The Jewish people He is speaking to know exactly what He means. It is used occasionally as a way to highlight an especially important teaching. We must never, in such context, think of the terms hear and listen as synonymous. Listening is a passive activity. We take in sounds through our ear organs that are converted into electrical impulses that stimulates our brains. But the concept of hearing comes from the Hebrew word **shema**, which means to act upon what is heard. That is, listening that produces an active response. Therefore in Hebrew expression a person who has ears is one who not only listens to instructions, but acts upon them.

Another possible element of this parable ought not to be overlooked. I think it is connected to Isaiah chapter 53; one of the most amazing and dramatic prophecies in the Bible. We'll not read the entire chapter but I do want to quote to you a few verses. The context of this chapter of Isaiah revolves around the Suffering Servant, which has turned out to be Messiah Yeshua. I'm going to quote from the KJV because in this instance it offers a more literal translation of the Hebrew than the CJB; and this literalness is important to understanding its meaning and affect.

^{KJV} **Isaiah 53:7-10** ⁷ *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.* ⁸ *He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.* ⁹ *And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.* ¹⁰ *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.*

In Isaiah 53 verse 10, the Hebrew word **zera** is used. In a literal English translation it is seed. **Zera** is used in a number of ways in the Bible from meaning seeds like are planted in the ground that grows in to plants, or it is meant as one's offspring (children). The term is regularly used metaphorically, and in a spiritual sense. So for instance, in Isaiah 53 we have the Suffering Servant being tortured and killed, placed into a grave, and yet the prophecy is that he will also see his "seed"; his offspring. If this was meant as something that takes place purely in human terms in the physical dimension, then we'd have a conflict at best, or something nonsensical at worst. How can a dead person see his offspring (his children), meaning that he will be with them? But as prophecies often do, the physical realm is mixed with the spiritual realm, and sometimes only the passage of time and the fulfillment of the prophecy reveals which part of the mix was physical and which part was spiritual. So in Isaiah 53 the seed of the Suffering Servant is more spiritual than physical, and yet the spiritual manifests itself among and within physical human beings. Thus it is not that the Suffering Servant was married to a woman in the human manner of marriage and produced physical offspring. Rather his seed that he will "see" represents those humans that are connected to Him, spiritually, because of trust in His act of self

sacrifice as a sin offering. The seed of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 in the Old Testament turns out to be countless members of the Kingdom of Heaven (in the New Testament) that are made members by their trust in Yeshua as their crucified Savior; the One who atones as a sin offering for our sins.

So here is the connection to the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. The Sower (or farmer) is God's agent, Yeshua. The seed is the Word of God, the truth, that falls on all humans alike, but it receives different responses. The soil that reacts to the seed in the proper way becomes members of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus the seed of God (His Word) produces the seed of the Suffering Servant both spiritually and physically.

Next time we'll begin with Christ's disciples' strange question to their Master, and His response to it.