

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 50, Chapter 13 Conclusion

"Communion with God by means of prayer, through the removal of all intruding elements between man and his Maker, and through the implicit acceptance of God's unity, as well as an unconditional surrender of mind and heart to His holy will, which the love of God expressed in the Shema implies.... this is what is understood by the receiving of the Kingdom of God".

These insightful words were penned in an essay by Kurt Hruby and recorded in the book *Standing Before God*. The final few words explain the focus of his essay: what is the Kingdom of God (the Kingdom of Heaven) and how are we to understand it? Curiously this is by no means a settled matter in Christianity and if one looks around a bit they'll find any number of definitions for the Kingdom of Heaven.

At our congregation meeting here at Seed of Abraham each week, prior to beginning our Bible lesson, we sing the ***Shema***, which is something between a Jewish prayer and a declaration of allegiance to the God of Israel. Those sitting before me probably know it by heart. But for the others who don't attend, let me quote it for you.

Sh'ma Yis-ra-el, A-do-nai E-lo-hei-nu, A-do-nai E-chad. Ba-ruch shem k'vod mal-chu-to l'o-lam va-ed.

Translated to English it means: ***Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One. Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.*** Notice the important position that the Kingdom of God holds in

the **Shema** (in the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is also called the Kingdom of Heaven). The first part of the **Shema** is a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:4. The second part is the added Jewish understanding of what the Kingdom of God is and what it means in the life of Jew.

So the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven was hardly a new one within the Hebrew faith that began with Yeshua. However, the actualization, or the arrival, of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth was inaugurated with His advent. Until that time, the Kingdom of Heaven existed only in Heaven. Interestingly it cannot be said that we have a record of Yeshua ever truly defining the Kingdom of Heaven; rather He goes about telling the Jewish people what it is like. He does so using parables because the structure of a parable in Jewish society was designed to create a simple word picture using every day objects and people in order to make a single impactful point. Thus we find Yeshua using a rapid-fire series of parables to help His disciples learn about the Kingdom of Heaven because each individual parable only described one very specific aspect of the Kingdom. Sometimes He would use two connecting parables that made essentially the same point, but with minor differences in nuance. For example the twin connecting parables of the Mustard Seed and the Woman adding leaven to bread that we discussed last time. Now, beginning in verse 44, we get the twin connecting parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the man finding the pearl.

I want to say it one more time before we study those two parables: if you want to understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, you must learn Christ's parables about the Kingdom because that's where this knowledge is contained. Even so, we must do it without the oddly confusing allegorical method of interpretation that has been championed by the Church since perhaps as early as the 3rd century. As we study these two parables I'll give you an example of what I mean by that. First, let's read a short section of Matthew 13.

RE-READ MATTHEW 13:44 - 46

Although not universal within the Church, the most predominant interpretation of the treasure that was found, and the pearl that the merchant discovered, is that they both represent the person of Christ. Thus we have Yeshua telling 2 parables about Himself and describing Himself as a treasure and as a pearl. I will say upfront that to present it this way would be completely out of character for Him. Yeshua never glorifies Himself; He only glorifies two things... the Father and the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is no better way to explain the source of this particular Christian dogma that Christ is the treasure and the pearl than to read it to you. The Early Church Father Origen, who wrote in the opening years of the 3rd century, says this in his Commentary on Matthew.

"And, having hidden it, he goes away, working and devising how he shall buy the field, or the Scriptures, that he may make them his own possession, receiving from the people of God the oracles of God with which the Jews were first entrusted. And when the man taught by Christ has bought the field, the kind of God which, according to another parable, is a vineyard, 'is taken from them and is given to a nation bringing for fruits thereof'... and to him who in faith has bought the field, as the fruit of his having sold all that he had, and no longer keeping him anything that was formerly his; for they were a source of evil for him.

And you will give the same application, if the field containing the hidden treasure be Christ, for those who give up all things and follow Him, have, as it were in another way, sold their possessions, in order that, by having sold and surrendered them, and having received in their place from God their helper, a noble resolution, they may purchase at great cost worthy of the field, the field containing the treasure hidden in itself."

There are two important take-aways from Origen's thoughts on the matter: First, what the Jews formerly had (the field) was taken away from them and given to gentiles. And second, that the hidden treasure and the field (and in a later excerpt the pearl), all represent Christ. So Origen says that since Christ is the field and the treasure and the pearl, Christ was taken away from the Jews and given to a "nation"... given to gentiles. The first of his precepts displays the "gentiles only" mindset of the institutional Christian Church that began so early in Christianity and remains embedded within it to this very day. The second of Origen's precepts we can rather easily dismiss as bogus because the first words of the parable of the hidden treasure are: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like", and the first words of the parable of the pearl are: "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like". So these parables are in no way drawing out who Christ is or what He is like, but rather it is Christ expressing what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Let me say it simply: Christ is not the field, the treasure, or the pearl in these 2 parables.

This is a good time to remind you that to this point in Christ's ministry, the message of the Good News was **only** and exclusively that the Kingdom of

Heaven is near; and nothing else. This is what Yeshua has been preaching and teaching about in His parables, and it also what He sent His disciples out to preach. But this information messes with the mind of the average Christian because when we think of the "Good News" we only think of it in terms of the message of salvation in Jesus. That, too, will soon become part of the "Good News" message; but it is not yet as we study the life of Christ in Matthew's Gospel account. It also means that in the revelation of the Good News in the New Testament, salvation in Christ didn't eventually replace the message that the Kingdom of Heaven is near; it was not a matter of one or the other. Therefore it behooves me to say something else that I hope is not misconstrued or taken out of context. It is that another Christian mantra (especially among Evangelicals) is that "it is all about Jesus". End of story. No use looking further because we don't need to know anymore than that.

While this statement is indeed meant in a lovely way, it also is not at all a true reading of the New Testament. Yeshua never says this is all about Him, nor does any writer of the New Testament documents insinuate such a thing. The Good News indeed includes Yeshua as Our Divine Messiah; but it equally includes the arrival and central importance of the Kingdom of Heaven. This message of the Kingdom is something that gets pushed to the side rather easily in Christianity and so when a typical Believer is asked about the Kingdom of Heaven one often receives a rather blank stare in return. It's not that I blame them; it's because it is a subject not generally investigated by ministers nor taught to Believers. Here in Origen's early work (which I just quoted to you) we already find this gentile Believer discarding the Kingdom of Heaven and replacing it with salvation in Christ. I suspect this happened because the Kingdom of Heaven was so central in early Hebrew thought (as I showed you in the **Shema**) and early gentile Christians wanted to separate themselves from the Jewish world and the Jewish religion. So it is easier to make a sophomoric saying that can fit on a bumper sticker and never deviate from it: "It's all about Jesus". Rather the reality is that Jesus Himself constantly tells us that it's all about His Father and The Kingdom of Heaven. Let those with ears, hear.

Now for the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. First, I want to quickly do away with Origen's contention that this parable speaks of the Jewish people having been disinherited. Yeshua of course never meant such a thing as He (a Jew) talked to His fellow Jewish people, and His Jewish disciples, about their membership in the Kingdom of Heaven and the importance of its presence to them. Let us begin by remembering the paramount rule for deciphering a parable: don't get

distracted by the details. What kind of a field or the size of it doesn't matter. Exactly what the treasure box looked like doesn't matter. Who this man was or why he would have been digging in someone else's field doesn't matter. All we need to do is to take this short story at the face value any common Jewish person would have in the 1st century. It was this: should one have the good fortune to be digging around in a random field and stumble across an immensely valuable treasure in it, what would most anyone do next? The answer begins with a given: since the man didn't own the field he found the treasure in, then he would rebury it and then go find the owner and do whatever is necessary to buy the field from him. Here's another detail that doesn't matter: the reburial of the treasure. It has no bearing on the meaning of the parable. However is there any significance to not just secretly taking the treasure rather than going and paying the owner for the field? Yes, but only because otherwise it would go against all Jewish cultural norms to find something valuable in your neighbor's field and simply take it from him. In other words, it would have been a dishonest act. It would have been theft. The significance of the story is that the treasure the man found was so valuable that it was worth the man taking immediate action by sinking every last shekel he had into obtaining the field it was in, so that the treasure would become his. He was willing to trade away all he held dear in order to own the treasure.

Let's move on to the parable of the merchant who finds a valuable pearl (this the companion, or twin, parable of the previous one). The difference between the first parable and the second is that in the first, finding the treasure was an act of serendipity. But in the second parable, the merchant was on the hunt for pearls. He finds an exceptional one and, like the first man, let go of everything he owned in order to acquire this pearl of great value.

There are really no details to deal with in this parable. The issue of the very valuable thing being a pearl must be understood from a 1st century viewpoint. Pearls were among the most valuable of all items a person could own; more valuable than silver or gold. So any pearl was highly valued; but an especially good pearl was massively expensive.

The point or aim of both of these stories is the same: the Kingdom of Heaven is the most valuable thing a person could possess. It is worth every material thing a person owned or could acquire.

So in the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, we have learned 4 things about what

the Kingdom of God is like. First, there are several types of hearers (people) that will hear about the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven; each will respond differently to the message depending on the type of mind and openness of spirit that they have. Some will hear the message but give it no heed. Others will apprehend the greatness of it, embrace it with joy and never let it go. And there are other responses in between those two extremes. But the point is that the entrance into the Kingdom depends solely on the response of the hearer because the message is free and available to all the same.

The second thing we have learned is that the Kingdom began concealed. It was very small and largely invisible. However, even though the arrival of the Kingdom is small and hard to see like the tiny seed of a mustard plant in a field, or just like a pinch of leaven in a large batch of bread dough, the Kingdom of Heaven will expand; it will grow very large as an unstoppable process. And this is so even though the Kingdom of Heaven has been planted within an evil kingdom (planet Earth) that currently is ruled over by Satan. So a heavenly invasion is taking place right under Satan's nose; it began early in the 1st century and Satan can't stop it.

The third thing is that just like with any field and its crop, it doesn't matter how good the seed is (that is, how good and perfect the Kingdom of Heaven is), there will be weeds (opponents) that will grow up with it. The question is that since Tares (weeds) look so similar to wheat or barley to the untrained eye, should the bearers of the good seed (the messengers of the Kingdom) go out and try to identify those opponents amongst the good and true Believers and uproot them? The answer is a general "no". Rather, pulling up a weed (an opponent) could accidentally also harm a good plant. So it is better to wait until the harvest, which takes place on Judgment Day, and then let God do the separation. Therefore, assemblies of God worshipers shouldn't be too impulsive in our judgment on those trouble makers and problem children in our midst, or act too quickly to weed them out, because harm to the good people could potentially happen as collateral damage.

And finally, as with the treasure and the pearl, Christ teaches us that the value of the Kingdom of Heaven is so immense that people should do anything, even give up everything, to be part of it. There is nothing on earth that compares in worth to the Kingdom and so there is no price too high to pay to become a member. Let's move on to the next parable in Matthew 13.

RE-READ MATTHEW 13:47 - 50

This parable, for me, is the most challenging so far. It is in many ways similar to the Parable of the Tares that has to do with separating the good plants from the weeds. And yet there may be something inherently different. In the short story of the Tares, clearly it is that although the good seed is randomly thrown onto the fields and some weeds voluntarily sprout along with them (as a natural thing that happens in every field), comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a fishing net that is thrown into water is a little different. The net captures both good fish and bad fish against their will. Therefore, I am not entirely sure as to whether the use of a fishing net is an unimportant detail or it has everything to do with the point of the story. That is, the good and the bad fish are, in a sense, involuntarily caught up in the same net. What is a bad fish? For a Jew a bad fish is something that is not kosher; it can't be eaten. It is unclean. The Sea of Galilee has always had a pretty good amount of catfish in it, and those are not permissible to eat. So the net pulls up the clean and the unclean fish together rather indiscriminately in one big catch, and then later the fisherman sorts through them and throws the bad fish away.

Even so, I'm inclined to not pay too much attention to how, exactly, a fishing net works to capture fish anymore than to the details of how, exactly, a sower sows seed. That is, it is not the net that is the point of the story any more than the sower was the point of the earlier parable. It's only that we now have an agricultural parable to go along with a fishing parable using scenarios of the two most dominant industries in the Galilee to help demonstrate to the common people the same important point. And the point is that it is only at the end of history that a separation of people into clean and unclean, good and bad, will finally occur. The separation happens only at the end of a centuries-long process. And, as with the Tares, what is caught in the net that is bad will be destroyed. Nothing is said about what happens to the good (the righteous) other than they are gathered and set aside.

Perhaps in this parable Jesus is directing His listeners' attention to the basic matter of **when** the separation of good and evil occurs (an expected separation that was already understood by the Jews as foretold). He explains that the separation of the good from the evil is not going to be immediate but rather it will occur at the End Times Day of Judgment when the Kingdom of Heaven has reached its maturity. Thus one thing we can take from all that Christ has said so far is that even though we can know the process of redemption, the definitions of

what is good and what is evil in God's eyes, and even the final outcome for humanity, we (as His followers) need to remain patient. We are not tasked as the ones to take the matter of the final separation into our own hands; so we should be careful not to pre-judge or assume or act in haste. This certainly doesn't mean that we aren't to be observant and aware and make choices because we've already been taught by Yeshua to look for certain things during our earthly lives to help us along the way and to protect us. Things like not expecting a bad fruit tree to put out good fruit; Yeshua says that is impossible. The issue for us, then, is not as much the identification of what is bad, but rather what to do about it.

Let me make an application as far as followers of Christ are concerned. Believers don't have to look very far to find popular TV religious personalities, or pastors of very large and prominent churches, who have been exposed as dishonest or have committed blatant immoral actions and yet with the proper outward show of contrition and at the demand of their followers, they are right back in the pulpit or on TV. While as Believers we are not in God's position of judging their eternal fate, at the same time Yeshua tells us that we can determine a bad tree from a good tree by means of the fruit it bears. Dishonest fruit, or immoral fruit, means this person is a bad tree. Why does Jesus think we need to know how to tell a good tree from bad one if we are only meant to look the other way or do nothing about it? We can and should identify and stay far from the influence of dishonest or immoral persons of every walk and occupation, but especially from those that want to teach us on spiritual matters that may have eternal consequences, even though that permanent separation of people into the good and the bad as an eternal matter is reserved for God Himself at the final judgment.

Verse 49 reinforces that it will be Heaven's Angels that go out and do the actual separating of the evil and the righteous. That is, God will authorize His Heavenly army as the ones who do the separating. Exactly how that occurs and what that looks like we don't really know. But that it will happen is a 100% certainty. Let's read some more of Matthew chapter 13.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 13:51 - end

Yeshua asks His disciples if they have understood what He is telling them about the Kingdom of Heaven; they respond that they do. So He then goes on to tell another parable.

The form of this parable is a bit different than the earlier ones in that while the

setting is the Kingdom of Heaven, the comparison being made is not between the Kingdom of Heaven and something else, but rather between the person who teaches the Scriptures and something else. Although the subject of the parable is called a Torah teacher in the CJB, in nearly all other English translations the word used is Scribe. I have no quarrel with either, however in the 1st century Jewish context Torah teacher is probably the better choice for us to understand it. So taken literally this parable focuses on the official chief teachers within the synagogue system, but only those who have also been made into disciples for the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, this may imply that there were indeed chief teachers (Scribes) in the synagogue system that have accepted Christ's message of Good News that the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived. Therefore those that accept this message are called disciples. Yet there is another possibility that must be considered.

Some Bible scholars claim that Yeshua is calling His disciples "Scribes". Davies and Allison in their commentary on this matter put it this way:

"The major point is that the disciples have indeed understood Jesus' discourse and therefore qualify as skilled scribes".

That is, Yeshua is using the term Scribes (Torah teachers) metaphorically and is not speaking of them in any official synagogue capacity. It is not unlike Peter who in 1Peter 2:9 says that Believers form a royal priesthood. That is, the terms priest and priesthood as applied to Believers are not meant as physical replacements for the official God-ordained priests and priesthood of Levites. Rather Peter used the term priest metaphorically saying that Believers are a group of individuals who have dedicated themselves to the Lord, and in that sense they are priests.

The problem I have with this interpretation is that therefore all who accept Christ and understand His parables become Scribes for the Kingdom. Even more, the wording of the parable is NOT that a disciple is made into a Scribe, it is that a Scribe is made into a disciple. So I strongly favor this statement as referring to the (likely) handful of synagogue Scribes who have accepted the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven.

As we continue with the parable, Yeshua says that these Scribes who have become disciples for the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to the owner of a home who brings out of his storage room both new things and old. As one can imagine, especially due to the rampant use of allegory used to decipher His

parables, there are a number of interpretations regarding what is meant by the old, and what is meant by the new, that comes out of the homeowner's storehouse. The list is too long to go through; but generally speaking the Christian concept is that the old is the revelation of the Torah, and new is the revelation of Jesus.

Remembering that there is only one point, or one aim of any parable, and that the characters in a parable are nearly universally fictional, then putting on our 1st century Jewish minds the storehouse can only be representative of the sum total knowledge of God that has thus far been revealed to humans (in the context of the times, Jewish humans). Therefore within that storehouse of knowledge are new things and old things; things that are being revealed by Yeshua, and things that have already been revealed in times past (the Torah and the Tanach). Thus the Torah teachers (Scribes) that have heard, accepted, and understood the message Christ brings about the new earthly presence of the Kingdom of Heaven now have new things (new revelations) to add to their storehouse of previously revealed knowledge of God. Please note that unlike the implication within Christianity that the new always **replaces** the old in the Bible, just as with the parable of the new and old wineskins, there is no implication that the homeowner of this current parable is disposing of the old and replacing it with the new. Rather both the old and the new reside together as fully compatible, each having a continuing purpose.

So the one point of the parable is this: Torah teachers who accept Yeshua's revelation about the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven and all its implications have something new to add to what they had been teaching. But the reverse is also true; those Scribes who do NOT accept the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven have only the old things to teach. Thus what they teach is not necessarily obsolete or wrong; it is just incomplete. And what they are missing in their personal storehouses of knowledge is of the greatest importance and value.

Verse 53 says that when He finished teaching His disciples (and probably others) He left for His hometown. Since Yeshua was currently in Capernaum, this can only mean that He left for Nazareth, which was about a 20 mile journey southwest. If He went without stopping to do other things, it would have taken one long day, possibly two. We're told that "there" (Nazareth) He taught in the local synagogue. Notice how even the modest sized town of Nazareth had a synagogue. However do not picture a nicely built and dedicated building. Rather we need to understand the term more in the sense of an assembly of God

worshippers. No synagogue building has been unearthed in Nazareth. Nonetheless the point is that in Nazareth, where His family lived, and where He grew up as a child, He was given the opportunity to speak, which He did. The people of the congregation in Nazareth were dumbfounded at the authority, truth, and wisdom from which He taught. They knew Him and His family well. So much so that they asked, rhetorically, isn't His mother Miryam, and His brothers Ya'akov, Yosef, Shim'on and Y'hudah? They also say that they know His sisters (but don't name any). My point is that Yeshua had several biological brothers and sisters, all from the womb of His mother Mary. Since there is no mention of His father, Joseph, then we can reasonably assume that by now he was deceased.

Setting aside the astounding teaching Yeshua gave them, the people were actually offended by Him. The Gospel of Mark records this same event in nearly identical words to begin his chapter 6. We should not imagine that Yeshua's topic deviated from the Kingdom of Heaven. But I think what we must consider is the reaction of the people; it is more than mere rejection, rather it is open hostility. Clearly these folks didn't understand what Christ was teaching them, which in turn teaches us something. Those who are indifferent to the message of the Kingdom of Heaven automatically find Christ as an irritation to them.

Part of what seems to bother the townsfolk of Nazareth so much is that Jesus is merely the son of a carpenter (or in Mark's Gospel Jesus is called a carpenter). Yet they don't seem to question His wisdom or the miracles He is known for. That is, He is already well known as a miracle working Holy Man. Yet they also know full well that He has had no formal religious education or some kind of recognition or ordination from the synagogue system authorities to validate Him as a teacher. Thus the content and truth of His message are dismissed because Yeshua doesn't have the proper credentials. And, like the Pharisees who confronted Him from time to time, the synagogue members of Nazareth question where He attained His wisdom and the ability to do miracles thus implying they didn't believe it was from God.

This scenario is a microcosm of the kind of rejection from His own people that Yeshua constantly faced in His ministry. He responds to the congregation with a Jewish proverb: the only place people don't respect a prophet is in his hometown and even in his own house. This implies that Yeshua's brothers and sisters were skeptical of Him as well.

We must understand that in His day and culture, what a person was born as and

where they came from determined who that person was and what their destiny would be. Jesus was, to the members of His hometown and to his own family, a lowly blue-collar craftsman and little else. He was reaching far beyond the accepted boundaries of His social status and this was troubling to those who knew Him best. So when He tried to teach His hometown people something new... the arrival of God's Kingdom on earth... they took a deep religious offense because they felt Yeshua had no grounds or status upon which to make such pronouncements. They simply could not square His known humble beginnings with the man that stood before them that day, and so they rejected Him and His message.

The final words of chapter 13 are that Christ did only a few miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of trust. We can take this as meaning one of two things: either Yeshua's ability to do miracles was dependent upon the faith of the people He was dealing with, or He determined to only do miracles for people who displayed a sufficient level of trust in Him. No doubt we find in these words a connection between faith and healing. But faith in what? Trusting Jesus for...what? It was certainly NOT that He was the divine Messiah. Rather it was that Yeshua was God-sent and God-empowered to speak as He spoke, teach as He taught, and to heal as He healed.

Few in Nazareth... including among His own family... trusted the connection between God and Yeshua. But, for those few in Nazareth who did trust, Yeshua healed them. This had been His method of operating for some time. The myriads of people He had healed up to now had not seen Him as their Messiah, but rather as a God-sent **Tzadik**, a Jewish Holy Man. That is what they trusted in, and for now that was sufficient because that was as far as the divine revelation given to them could take them.

We'll begin Matthew chapter 14 next time.