

The Book of Matthew Study Guide

Chapters 13-14

Chapter 13 is the turning point in the book of Matthew. Prior to this point Yeshua had focused on offering the kingdom to Israel. But in chapter 12 He received a clear rejection of the kingdom by the leaders of Israel. So now He turns His attention exclusively to His followers.

13:1-3

- v. 1 – Yeshua “went out of the house” parallels Him leaving behind His focus on offering the kingdom to the house of Israel.
- v. 3 – He began speaking in parables, beginning with the parable of the Sower in vv 3-8.

13:9-17

v. 10 – The disciples were confused by this change of communicating and they ask Him why He is speaking in parables. This was a common rabbinical method. *Mashalim* (parables) were a teaching method in which the speaker veiled or concealed the truth from a general audience and revealed its meaning only to a specific limited audience. So He begins speaking in such a way that His message is concealed from the masses but revealed to His kingdom followers.

Very clearly there were people who were hearing the words of Yeshua and seeing His miracles but not getting it and not believing it was of God. And in vv. 14-15 He showed that it was just as Isaiah had foretold in Isa 6:9-10. Especially regarding mysterious teachings like parables, the meaning would be revealed only to those who have “ears to hear and eyes to see” (from Isaiah). Or to put it another way, the meaning will be hidden from the eyes of those who reject Him, but revealed to those who receive Him.

In v. 11 He uses a word that is derived from another part of the body, when He calls this “knowing the mysteries of the kingdom.” Mystery = *musteria*, a derivative of the verb *muo* – “to shut the mouth.” In other words, He is not talking about the meaning to anyone else, and to the scoffers it still remains an unknowable mystery. He is just revealing the meaning to those who believe and follow Him.

The same is true for His followers today. Things are revealed to us that only we will understand. So that is a great privilege and blessing, and Yeshua describes that in v 17. But having eyes that see and ears that hear biblical truth also comes with a responsibility because we have to tell the truth to others. After all, we were unbelievers once too, and the truth had to be explained to us. But it is important to have this understanding, that just because we can see the clarity of biblical truth, others are not able to do so and we have to be patient with them.

For each of these parables about the kingdom of heaven, it is important to remember that the kingdom is both present but yet to come in its fullest sense.

13:3-8, 18-23 – *The Parable of the Sower*

The seed represents the word of the kingdom (gospel). The soil represents the heart of people, which in that culture, was the place of consciousness/thinking (mind). The four soils are four kinds of hearers.

- v. 19 – side of the road – no germination, meaning some hear but do not understand.

- vv. 20-21 – rocky soil – germinates but dies , meaning some hear and initially respond favorably, but then something negative happens and they fall away.
- v. 22 – thorny/weedy soil – germinates but dies because the thorns/weeds are stronger, meaning some hear and initially respond favorably, but then something in the world tempts them and they fall away.
- v. 23 – good soil – goes through the entire life cycle, including bearing fruit.

This parable tells us that the kingdom of heaven will only be comprised of a minority of those who hear its proclamation. In other words, the entire world will not be converted in this age, only a remnant will believe and thus be part of the kingdom of heaven.

13:24-30, 36-43 – *The Parable of the Tares*

An owner sows a field and then an enemy comes along and sows tares in the same field. Tares are weeds (believed to be a ryegrass called darnel) that look like wheat in their early stage of growth until the heads or the fruit appears. Roman law prohibited sabotaging the field of an enemy by sowing darnel among wheat, which makes this a realistic description. The disciples were especially intrigued by this parable, so later on in v. 36 they approach Yeshua for an explanation.

Yeshua is the owner (the proclaimer of the kingdom) who sows good seeds. The evil one (Satan) sows tares (bad or false seeds) that produce no fruit. This parable tells us that within the manifestation of the kingdom (the church) false citizens are present.

In v. 29 the owner tells his servants to leave the tares alone because you don't want to uproot the wheat by incorrectly identifying what is a tare. But when the wheat ripens, they could identify, remove and destroy the tares. This informs us that we will know true and false citizens by their fruits (see also 7:20).

In His explanation of the parable in v. 41, Yeshua says that angels will be His agents of final judgment and that tares or false citizens will be pulled out and condemned in the same way that He earlier taught about the fate of false prophets (7:19).

13:31-32 – *The Parable of the Mustard seed*

The next two parables have similar aspects to the wheat and the tares, so we need to identify those parallels. Mustard seeds are very tiny and probably the smallest seed the disciples had ever seen, so the phrase “smaller than all other seeds” is not a statement of scientific precision but experience and perception. In the parable it grows into a great tree, so again this is not about botany but imagery expressing a concept. And the concept is that the kingdom of heaven or the believing community will grow from a very small group into a large one.

But birds come and next in the branches. Birds in Scripture symbolize many things.

- The dove is symbolic of peace and the presence of the Spirit of God as we saw when Yeshua was baptized in 3:1.
- The eagle is symbolically associated with God's protection and care.
- But you also have birds of prey like vultures that are considered to be ritually unclean and feed on dead animals.
- The rooster is known for being the symbol of denial, as in the case of Peter denying Yeshua 3 times on the eve of His crucifixion.

So this parable teaches, just like wheat and tares, there are people of all kinds present in the believing community – both good and evil.

13:33 – *The Parable of Leaven*

A woman took some leavening and put it in meal (dough) and the leavening spread throughout the whole batch. In Scripture, leavening is symbolic of sin or evil. Thus, in keeping with the two previous parables, evil will be present throughout the kingdom or the believing community.

13:34-35

Yeshua affirms a Messianic credential by citing Ps 78:2 that is generally accepted as being prophetic in nature, and it refers to God's testimony in Jacob (Israel) being taught in parables.

13:44 – *The Parable of the Hidden Treasure*

13:45-46 – *The Parable of the Precious Pearl*

These two parables teach the same concept. A man discovers a treasure in a field and buys the land. And a man finds a pearl of great value and uses all of his resources to buy that pearl. So if the buyers represent Yeshua as the king and the field with the treasure and the pearl represent the people of the kingdom, what does that say about God and humanity? He was willing to pay the ultimate price in order to make us His possession.

13:47-50 – *The Parable of the Dragnet*

Then it's back to the theme of the second-fourth parables. The kingdom of heaven has both good fish and bad fish caught in the same net. And in the end they will be separated and the bad ones will face judgment.

13:52 – *The Parable of the Householder*

Disciples of the kingdom of heaven are like scribes who are called to teach things that are both old and new. Remember, *soferim* (scribes or Torah-teachers) were only able to teach the interpretation of Scripture that they had learned from a rabbi with authority, who were entitled to give their own interpretation of Scripture. So if we are compared to these *soferim*, what does that say about our responsibility today? Our message must be limited to the interpretation of Scripture given by Yeshua, not our own. And we need to include both the old message—meaning that which preceded Yeshua in the Tanakh, and the new message—meaning that which is recorded in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

In summary, these parables teach:

- Not everyone gets into the kingdom of heaven.
- There are false citizens of the kingdom currently among us, but they will be removed from the final realization of the kingdom.
- God values the kingdom of heaven highly.
- It is our responsibility to teach these things accurately to others using the entire Bible.

13:53-58

Yeshua goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and people are amazed by His teachings, but they discount what He has to say because they knew Him as a kid.

14:1-12

Matthew tells the tragic story of what happened to John the Baptist. The Herod mentioned here is Antipas, one of 15 sons of Herod the Great, whose kingdom was divided up into 4 regions and given to 4 of the 15 sons. Herod Antipas reigned over the Galilee region. John got into trouble for calling out the unlawful relationship of Herod and Herodias based on the Torah. She was the daughter of one of the 15 brothers (Aristobulous) and married another brother (Philip), which was her uncle, and she was having an affair with a 3rd brother (Antipas), which was also her uncle. So it was a real mess and John spoke up about it. And Herodias reacted by conspiring with her own daughter (named Salome according to Josephus) to entice Antipas with a dance. It is estimated that Salome would have been 13-15 years old, so you can envision what that scene would be like.

How does this story also speak about human nature that is in contrast to the nature of citizens of the kingdom as Yeshua has been describing? Given the opportunity, people will resort to any method necessary to accomplish what they desire.

Notice also in v. 7 that Herod Antipas binds himself with an oath, which was a dangerous situation because in that culture, when you obligate yourself with an oath, it was irrevocable. It had to be accomplished, regardless of your feelings on the matter or the change of circumstances. We also see that manifested in the Purim story where the Persian king's edict for the destruction of the Jews could not be revoked, even by the king himself. For that reason Yeshua warned earlier in 5:33-37 that people should not make vows or oaths and to just state things plainly ("let your yes be yes"). Nevertheless, the oath was sworn and that sealed the fate of John.

14:13-21

Yeshua is obviously troubled by this news and goes away to be by Himself. But the multitude finds Him out and He resumes ministering to them with healings. And then He feeds them in a miraculous manner by regenerating the pieces from five loaves of bread and two fishes into whole pieces again. That tells us regarding the nature of miracles and the power of Yeshua, that there is no natural explanation for such things, only a supernatural one. But it is within the power of God because it is the same thing as bringing the universe into existence in the first place, something out of nothing because He is omnipotent.

14:22-36

Afterward Yeshua heads off by Himself again and He sends the disciples back across the Sea of Galilee by boat. But a storm comes up and the wind cause their boat to stop making progress somewhere out in the middle of the sea. In the middle of the night (fourth watch = 3:00-6:00am) Yeshua appears to them walking on the water. That should not be surprising since He has been doing all sorts of other things that are miraculous and naturally impossible. But this time He brings Peter into the middle of the miracle by calling him to walk on the water as well. It starts off well, but then Peter notices the wind again that has been defeating them, and being distracted, he starts to sink. And after crying out, Yeshua reaches out and grabs him and they get in the boat.

Just as in the case of John the Baptist when he was in prison, the reaction of Peter when he was sinking in the water was one of fading faith. It indicates that it is easy to forget what God has already done for us and we can get distracted or acquire doubts when the storms of life rise up.

Our faith is only as strong as our trust in the Lord at any given moment, and is a function of our memory. As long as we remember what God has done in the past, it will help us to remain faithful in the present.

Notice also the reaction of the disciples in the boat. Up until this point Yeshua had been calling Himself only the Son of Man. But in v. 33 they call Him God's Son or the Son of God. So this is another turning point in understanding who Yeshua truly is.