

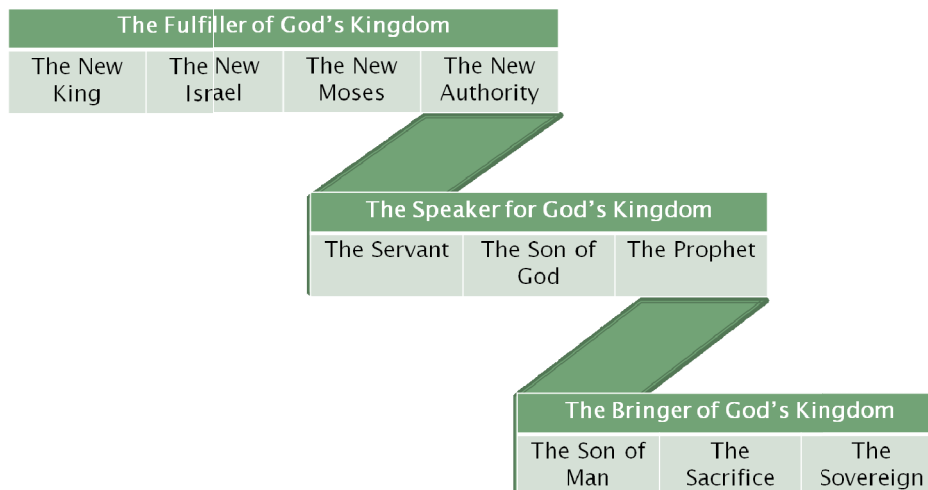
The Change in the Kingdom

Matthew 12:47-13:23

We have been promised “Change you can believe in...”

The book of Matthew and our present chapter really are “Change you must believe in...”

Locating ourselves in the book of Matthew:



- Jesus, the New King
born to be Ruler of the Kingdom Matthew 1:1-2:12
- Jesus, the New Israel
as the People of the Kingdom Matthew 2:13-4:22
- Jesus, the New Moses
as the Lawgiver of the Kingdom Matthew 4:23-7:29
- Jesus, the Authority
as the Power of the Kingdom Matthew 7:28-12:14
- Jesus, the Spirit-filled Servant
as the Messenger of the Kingdom Matthew 12:15-13:58
- Jesus, the Divine Son of God as the One to be Worshipped Matthew 13:53-16:20
- Jesus, the Prophet,
as the One Foretelling His Death Matthew 16:21-23:39
- Jesus, the Son of Man,
as the One Coming in Glorious Might Matthew 24:1-25:46
- Jesus, the Sacrifice,
as the One Giving His Life for His People Matthew 26:1-27:66
- Jesus, the Sovereign,
as the One Sending His Servants Matthew 28:1-20

We are at the center of the section where Matthew shows us that Jesus, the Spirit-filled servant, serves as the messenger of the Kingdom. We are taking up this section because of the parables of the Kingdom. In these wonderful, enigmatic stories, Jesus unfolds the change in the kingdom he is instituting. We will be looking at this cluster of parables in this talk and then on next Sunday.

This section is carefully structured. It opens with the introductory parable of the sower (3–9). Next is instruction focusing on the purpose of parables (10–17) and an interpretation of the parable of the sower (18–23). Then there are three parables of growth: the weeds (24–30); the mustard seed (31–32); and the yeast in the dough (33). This is followed by another instruction, which deals with the purpose of parables (34–35) and an interpretation of the parable of the weeds (36–43). This is then followed by three more parables: the treasure (44); the pearl (45–46); and the net (47–50). Finally, there is the climatic and concluding parable of the householder (51–52). The section combines eight actual parables with explanations both of the purpose of parables in general and of two key parables in particular. [Adapted from the New Bible Commentary]

Each of the parables is explicitly about the kingdom of heaven. They set out the demands and paradoxes of the new kingdom Jesus is establishing. They explain why people were reacting so differently to Jesus and this great change He is bringing about.

It was helpful to me to observe how Matthew put this together as a means of conveying his message. Three groups and three locations make up the structure of this section (or a pericope: a selection from a book or larger writing.)

The family in the house and an introduced relationship

The crowds at the seashore and an illustrative parable

The disciples in private and an important explanation

A great change, a new order, a new kind of kingdom is in the process of beginning. Let's pray we have ears to hear and eyes to see what the Spirit through Matthew is saying.

An Introduced Relationship (12:46-50)

⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. (⁴⁷Someone told him, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak to you”) ⁴⁸ But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

A Family Interruption (v.46-47)

Can you see the scene? Imagine a large living room or open inside court yard. Jesus has thoroughly trounced the Pharisees. He is intent and intense in his preaching. But, while he is speaking, someone slips over and tugs at his sleeve. He is being interrupted.

His earthly family are standing outside the room. Now Matthew does not directly tell us why they are out there. Is it the crowd and no room? Is it thunderous condemnation of religious leaders, nervousness and some distancing of themselves from their controversial family member? Maybe, but one thing is for sure – they are not getting it. Why would anyone think that this was a really good time to interrupt such a teaching because they would like to speak to Him?

Imagine this on a Sunday morning – Tadd comes up in the middle of the sermon just at a high point of passion and power. “Uhm, Russ, uhm, Esther and your kids would like to speak to you out in the lobby.” What?

A Family Definition (v.48-50)

Not the response they were expecting! “Who is my mother and brothers?” Not those who are outside the house not understanding the importance of the moment and the message. Not those who are concerned that he is condemning the religious leaders, portraying himself as the expected Messiah and canceling the Law and redefining the charter of the Kingdom.

No, Jesus’ true family, His real mother and brothers are, well there they are. Those men standing over there. Disciples. Followers. Believers. The true family is made up of those who believe in an obeying way – who hear, heed and do the will of the heavenly Father.

Why is this here? Matthew puts this here because a new relationship is being introduced. The family of God is not defined by physical relation but by spiritual obedience. In the book of Matthew, this is huge. A startling change is being made. At this point, we don’t know what all the ramifications are going to be. That is for the next 10 chapters to unfold. And so, what is next...

An Illustrative Parable**(13:1-9)**

There is a change in scenes with an illustrative parable.

Its Setting as Connection**(v.1-2)**

Now don't let the chapter break ruin the flow for you. Watch how the setting makes a connection.

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

What happens next is on the same day, but a dramatically different location. From the house to the beach they move as the crowd grows and gathers. Interesting scene isn't it – Jesus gets in a fishing boat and sits down. From this vantage point, he begins teaching them.

Its Telling as Demonstration**(v.3-8)**

³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Do you see it in verse 3? He told a lot of parables. Others will follow later in this chapter. But here is a sample of one. It is illustrative. It is a demonstration of what he did and eventually, why he did it that way. The rest of the ones he told from this boat to this crowd were not recorded. Why? They don't fit into Matthew's purpose and therefore were not necessary.

Now we are used to hearing this parable having the interpretation that we get later on. But that is not how it would have come across. Jesus sits in the boat. An attentive crowd gathers around. In the midst of a bunch of little stories, he gives a short story from the Farmer's Almanac.

Someone goes out with a bag of seed. He walks through a field just flinging it about as they would have in their day. The seed falls in different kinds of locations. Some landed on the path where naturally, the birds gobble it up. Some landed on rocky ground with a thin layer of topsoil. There the seed comes up but then withers under the sun. Some seed lands where there are thorns and weeds. It comes up but then dies as it choked out by the weeds. The last bit of seed fell on fallow ground. It grows up into full grown plants and different plants produce different amounts of grain.

End of story. Now stop – hear this just like you've never heard it before. There is a sort of, "Well, of course," isn't there? I mean, so what?

Its Exhorting as Conclusion

(v.9)

¹⁰ He who has ears, let him hear.

This is odd. A command as a conclusion. Looking out over the crowd and disciples, Jesus points to them and says, “Every one of you who has ears, you must hear.” Yes, this is an imperative. It is a command. So obviously, he is not referring to the physical act of hearing the sound of his words. He is commanding an attentive listening that produces understanding.

So, Jesus sits giving all these parables, this one being the only one that is recorded for us now. He finishes up and presumably sends the crowd away.

An Interpretative Explanation

(13:10-23)

Wonder what they are thinking? Well, probably with the same befuddlement as the disciples.

Its Present Purpose

(v.1-13)

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

Parables serve to both hide the truth to the world and to reveal the truth to disciples. The disciples have been given the grace to know what has been hidden in the past. They are given the secrets of the kingdom so that they can understand them. See, parables are not merely illustrations nor are they just stories meant to convey truth. We do not have here Christian Education theory.

We have a profound and perplexing truth. Some truth God intends to hide from unbelievers. God had designed to communicate the truth in such a way that those who do not believe will not understand. Those who believe and follow, those who are disciples, to them has been entrusted understanding. It takes more than the physical act of hearing and the rational processes of the mind to get it. No, it is a gift from God.

Its Biblical Basis

(v.14-17)

Jesus gives the Biblical basis for why he is doing this.

¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah [6:9-10] is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. ¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

First, it is because of where they are in redemptive history. The kingdom is in a massive change – not an unexpected one. This change has been ordained from

eternity past and is now unfolding exactly along the lines of God's purposes, plans and prophecy.

Second, Jesus connects himself to Isaiah. His ministry fulfills and finalizes what was begun with Isaiah preaching and prophesying. Jesus is One who comes to finish what Isaiah began. He is also the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesies. He has come, sent by God, to speak the Word for God but to a people who will not and cannot respond. Like Isaiah, He is to do until the holy seed in the remaining stump spring up into life anew.^{xv}

Finally, the people and nation of Jesus' day are connected with those of Isaiah's. At that time, Israel was collapsing as they were about to go into the Babylonian captivity. God had ordained national and personal blindness and heart dullness. He has judged them so that they cannot repent and God will not restore them. Now, they continue in the judicial blindness and only a remnant will be given hearing ears and understanding hearts to repent and be restored.

This is the blessing of being a disciple, a follower of Jesus. In verse 16, Jesus once again sweeps his arm indicating his disciples. They are the blessed seed of the remnant in the dead stump of Israel. They are being given the eyes to see and ears to hear. They themselves are and they are experiencing what prophets and righteous people longed to see but never did.

Its Authoritative Explanation

(v.18-23)

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Through his authoritative explanation of the parable Jesus grants hearing and seeing to the disciples. Eyes to see and ears to hear are granted when the truths of the Word of God are explained and applied. This is God's ordained means. This is God's way to open eyes and ears – He sends His Son and His Spirit who gives disciples understanding.

It was first and primarily the ministry of Jesus. He is interpreting and applying the Old Testament for the disciples. He did this while living in and under the Old Covenant, before he died and was raised. It was recorded for us by Matthew who lived in and under the New Covenant, after the cross. Just as Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 6:3-4, "If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing..." So, what we teach today must align with the sound words of Jesus. This is really important for our understanding of the kingdom. Over and over again, Jesus teaches and asserts that a great change is taking place. The kingdom is changing. It is no longer for

national Israel. Yes, Jews will be in it, but it is being given to the Gentiles as well.

Jesus gives then an explanation as to what was happening and what will continue to happen with the preaching of the word of kingdom. This is pattern of response is evident throughout Jesus' ministry. It marked the disciples ministry in the early church. It continues to this day.

The same word of the kingdom falls on four different kinds of soils with four different kinds of responses.

The first falls on hard hearts. The word of the kingdom is not understood. It is snatched away by the evil one, the devil. The gospel, word of the kingdom, never even germinates, much less break the surface or produce fruit. Here is a hard-hearted, unrepentant sinner who simply rejects the gospel.

The second falls on the kind of hearts that receives it immediately, even with joy! Yet, because no real rooting takes place, the hardship of persecution and suffering that come because of the gospel, causes it to wither and die.

The third falls on hearts that hear the word and seem be genuine plants. But the cares of the world and materialism choke the life out of the plant. It therefore never produces fruit. Like the one before it, this is not a true believer and probably corresponds to Hebrews 6. Here are inquirers or awakened sinners who initially seem to be believers but then fall away.

In the final one, the word of the kingdom falls on hearts that are enabled to hear it with understanding. They believe and thus produce fruit. They may produce varying amounts of fruit. But they are really believers and thus, really do the will of the Father.

Reflect and Respond

This is a massive shift in the Bible's definition of the kingdom. Who are members of Christ's family and his kingdom? It is no longer by natural relation like family, by Jewish birth or by Israeli citizenship. True members of God's family and God's kingdom are those to whom it is granted to hear, heed and harvest the Word of God sown in their lives.

Acts 17:29-34 shows us three of these kinds of responses to gospel preaching.

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Some mocked. Some inquired. And some believed.

Where are you in all this? Have you heard the gospel, the word about God's kingdom where Christ is our ruler and our redeemer? How do you respond?

Do you turn away with disdain and mockery? Is your soul hard and dead? May God grant you life and faith and repentance.

In the past, have you responded to the gospel, maybe even with joy? But now, suffering has burned you and you have withered away. Or now, the good life, money, pleasures all have taken over your life and you are not producing the good fruit of obedience. Maybe you have turned away in your heart and yet you sit here week after week. Maybe you have turned away, even in your actions.

May God grant you to see, to hear, to be born from above and believe.

Notes

^{xv} Note Isaiah 6:8-13:

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." ⁹And he said, "Go, and say to this people: " 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' ¹⁰Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." ¹¹Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, ¹²and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. ¹³And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.