

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 13:1-58

To understand the purpose and meaning of Jesus' parables.

Let Me Give You An Example

Every Spring Break, our church's youth group organizes a local mission effort with some of the other local churches in the area. In 2019, they served the local YMCA, as well as the daycare that rents our children's facility on campus. With them being so close, I told our youth pastor that I'd like to help out. For this particular



mission effort, they had organized a two-day skills clinic. They broke up all of the kids into four groups and they organized four skill-based sessions for the kids to participate in. They learned how to do first-aid, how to paint, how to bake cookies, and I taught them how to play disc golf (at a 5-8 year old level). I chose disc golf because there was a great illustration for the devotional that we did. In disc golf, you attempt to throw the disc as few times as possible before you get it in the basket. So, we lined them up with putters (a type of disc for putting, similar to ball golf), and had them throw into the basket. They, of course, missed a lot. We then talked about how sin in the New Testament means, "missing the mark." All the sudden, it made sense. They were able to correlate that concept to missing the target that they had been throwing at all morning. This is an effective way of teaching, and one that is similar to what Jesus does repeatedly in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. However, what we find in Jesus' parables is that they are not always a means of making a deeper spiritual reality easier to understand. On the contrary, sometimes, they are to veil spiritual truth.

Which Seed?

The largest parable in this chapter is the first one Jesus tells, “the parable of the sower and the seeds” (Matt. 13:3-9). Just like all of His parables, Jesus is borrowing from imagery that would have been easy to understand by His audience. Galilee was well-known for its fertile soil and as a result, farmers were saturated throughout the countryside. The method of sowing seeds was to carry a large bag of seeds and literally toss them out by hand as you walked the land. Jesus borrows from this well-known practice to describe the nature of sharing the gospel with the lost. After some confusion over the meaning of the parable, Jesus explains the meaning of it to His disciples off to the side.

The Sower: Anyone who is proclaiming the gospel.

The Seed: The, “word of the kingdom,” or in other words, “the gospel” (v.19).

The Road: The road is one type of individual that would hear the gospel. However, the birds in the parable are Satan, and he comes and snatches up the seed before it can settle in their hardened hearts. These are individuals who not only reject the gospel but have opened themselves up to Satan’s direction. These are likely the individuals in chapters 11 and 12 who have willfully rejected Jesus and attributed His power and His miraculous works to Satan.

The Rocky Ground: The rocky ground is another type of person who hears the Gospel, and is initially excited, but because the gospel didn’t ever take root in his own life, it eventually dies out when persecution comes. Today this would be the, “Fair Weather Christians.” These types of individuals know what to say, but lack the conviction to truly follow Jesus by, “taking up their crosses” (Matt. 10:38).

The Thorns: The thorny path is the third type of person who hears the Gospel, and this person’s problem is that they have more concern for the cares of the world than the cares of God’s kingdom. This is antithetical to what Jesus taught on in Matthew 6:19-21.

The Good Soil: The good soil is the final person in the parable, and they are in the ideal condition to receive the Gospel and enter into the kingdom of God. This person not only hears the Gospel, but he understands it, and he bears fruit as a result of it. That third component is the often missed and yet equally important detail.

Isaiah Said It Would Happen

After Jesus gives the parable of the sower and the seed, a question arises among the disciples regarding Jesus’ usage of the parables in His teachings, which were apparently rather confusing. The illustrations themselves were easy to understand, but the deeper spiritual reality that Jesus was referring to in them was not so obvious. Jesus responds with a difficult truth: The parables are meant to confuse those who would not heed His words to begin with. Interestingly, Jesus says that He is doing this to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 6:9-10. In that passage, God speaks to Isaiah and tells him to tell the people of Judah to, “keep on hearing but do not hear, and keep on seeing, but do not perceive” (Is. 6:9). God is planning on bringing judgement and destruction to Judah, and He does not want the prophet to present anything to them that would temporarily make them turn. It is important to remember that Isaiah 6 was a real event that took place in Isaiah’s time, but characteristic to Matthew’s Gospel, there is a *further fulfillment* in Christ. The word for “fulfillment” in the Greek is a word that means, “to fill completely.” It holds the idea that something has already been partially filled, but now is fully filled. The partial fulfillment of Isaiah 6 happened with Isaiah, but the full filling of that took place in Matthew 13. Jesus, in speaking in parables, is creating an environment for judgment against a people who would ultimately reject and crucify Him.

More Parables

THE WHEAT AND TARES

Jesus is once again speaking to the crowds, and there was apparently some question as to why, if Jesus is really the herald of the kingdom of God, there isn't a more universal acceptance of Him. This parable presents a harsh reality. The slaves in the parable are the disciples, and the reapers are angels. The enemy is Satan. The type of "weeds" Jesus is referring to is something called *darnel*, an often indistinguishable poisonous crop that looks nearly identical to wheat. This parable presents the idea that sometimes disciples and opponents of Jesus look very similar. Disciples make stupid mistakes, and opponents of the Gospel can perform good works from time to time. To usher in the kingdom suddenly with swift judgment would inevitably harm some of those who are good disciples. Instead, patience is required on God's part (2 Peter 3:9). In the end, the wicked people of this world (the weeds) will be gathered together and judged and punished.

THE MUSTARD SEED

Next, Jesus unveils the inclusivity of the kingdom of God via a parable about the mustard seed. The mustard seed is a tiny seed, but when it grows into its fullness, Jesus says it becomes a tree in which, "the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (Matt. 13:32). Jesus is here speaking of the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's kingdom. The tree is the kingdom of God, starting out small (only Jesus, and then only 12 apostles), but growing into the global church. The birds of the air are people from every nation. And Jesus reveals that this has been a part of God's plan all along. Jesus is likely quoting from Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12. In the Ezekiel passage, Israel is compared to a cedar tree, where all the birds of the air will come and dwell. The size of a mustard bush is nowhere close to the size of a cedar, but it may be that Jesus is using deliberate irony here. Something like a mustard seed, which looks insignificant, will actually fulfill all of God's promises.

THE LEAVEN

This parable uses another everyday practice that would be well-known to Jesus' hearers. A Palestinian woman would use leavened bread from a previous bake (likely sourdough) and mix it into fresh dough, and that leavened dough would spread into the new batch. This parable is actually similar to the last one, but also different. It is similar in that something small and insignificant is capable of big accomplishments. However, the difference in this parable should be noted. Unlike the mustard seed that sees its own growth increase, the leaven's expansion happens in whatever it touches. The Gospel is like this. Whenever the Gospel is proclaimed, it invades and penetrates the hearts of the hearers who would receive it, and it expands inwardly.

THE TREASURE IN THE FIELD / PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

These are both short parables and both are getting at the same point: when someone understands the value and gravity of the kingdom of God, it will become the highest priority and desire in their life.

THE DRAGNET

The final parable illustrates a combination of the wheat and tares and the mustard seed. All different types of fish will be brought into the kingdom, reminiscent of all the birds of the air. However, God's angels will separate the good from the bad, like the wheat and tares.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23. Who is Jesus speaking to? What is the meaning of this parable? Write down each of the correlating parts.
2. Read Matthew 13:10-17. What is Jesus saying here? Read Isaiah 6:9-10. How does Jesus "fulfill" this?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43. What is the purpose of this parable according to Jesus? Write down each of the correlating parts.
2. Read Matthew 13:31-35. In your own words, write down the meaning of these next two parables. Read Psalm 78:2. How does Jesus' usage of parables fulfill this Psalm?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 13:44-46. In your own words, write down the meaning of these two parables. How are they similar to the previous parables? How are they different?
2. Read Matthew 13:47-50. Write down the different elements of this parable and what they correlate to. What does the furnace of fire correlate to?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 13:51-52. What is the meaning of what Jesus tells His disciples in verse 52?
2. Read Matthew 13:53-58. Why is a prophet rejected in his own hometown? Also, what other prophets can you think of that this applies to?

Week 17 Discussion: Hometown Hero or Zero?

Jesus makes a well-known statement at the end of Matthew 13 regarding how He is being received in His hometown. He says, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." It's true for every prophet. They begin a normal life, just like everyone else, but when they walk into their calling and begin making people uncomfortable, people often begin to question their authority. "I've known this guy his whole life! Why does he think he can boss me around now?" Discuss how this reality impacts anyone who becomes a follower of Jesus.

1. Icebreaker: What were the responses people had when they found out you became a Christian?
2. Does your past, prior to faith in Christ, disqualify you from being used by God in any way? Use Scripture if possible.
3. Is it difficult or easy to share your faith with your friends and family? Explain.
4. Is it difficult or easy to share your faith with total strangers? Why or why not?
5. How do you think these realities impact the youth in our church? In other words, how challenging do you think it is for them to step up and become leaders, having been a kid in the church? How can the church work to empower youth and college-aged kids to step into adulthood and lead?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus utilized parables to veil truth from those who would reject, fulfilling a prophecy in Isaiah.
2. Prophets have difficulty in their hometown because people have a preconceived idea about them.

PRAYER REQUESTS: