

The Sermon of Mysteries

A parable is an ordinary/earthly story which illustrate spiritual/heavenly teaching.

In this sermon, the Lord tells 7 (or 8) parables. Interestingly, the Lord does this in a deliberate attempt to withhold from the crowds the "mysteries/secrets of the kingdom of heaven." But he does expect his disciples to understand them, and he directly explains the meaning of the first two to them. The basic spiritual meaning of the parables should be clear to those who have a grounding in the teaching of Christ and his apostles, as we shall see. But the obscure nature of these parables might also lead us theorize about deeper meanings and patterns, which are by no means clear and which we cannot be dogmatic on.

The 7 parables:

1. The parable of the sower and the soils
2. The parable of the wheat and the weeds/tares
3. The parable of the mustard seed and the great tree
4. The parable of the leaven
5. The parable of the hidden treasure
6. The parable of the pearl of great price
7. The parable of the dragnet/net

The final parable: The parable of the old and new treasures

Key themes:

- The parables relate to the spread and growth of the kingdom of God, but there is a heavy focus on how the kingdom has been (or will be) "infiltrated" by frauds, and fiends.
- The fifth and sixth parables (the hidden treasure and the pearl) stand apart, with no clear mention of evil, but emphasises the finding and buying of something valuable (we suggest this is a reference to Christ giving himself for the citizens of his kingdom, rather than the other way around)

The secrets of the kingdom

A mystery/secret implies something that cannot be known apart from God revealing it. There are several illuminating verses to note:

- "To you [Jesus' disciples] it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [the crowds] it has not been given." (v11)
 - Jesus is teaching truth which comes from God, but he does not make it public knowledge. He explains that this is because the crowds lack the prerequisite attitude for receiving God's word in faith (vv12-15)
- "He who has ears, let him hear." (vv9,43)
 - The Lord wants even the crowds to understand. But they lack the proper spiritual approach.
- "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."
 - The truths are not just generic spiritual truth that can be known if we have the right attitude, but they constitute new revelation from God - truth which was not revealed in the Old Testament.
- "I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." (v35)
 - These truths form part of God's eternal counsel and will. The infiltration of evil into God's kingdom
- "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (v52).
 - The one who understands the mysteries of the kingdom ("a scribe" implies intimate knowledge of the scriptures) will not minister exclusively from the new revelations of the Christian but will be able to bring out the significance of old and new testament truth in harmony.

Brief explanations of the parables

In the passage, the Lord gives the explanations of the first two parables (The Sower and the weeds) and the seventh (the dragnet). The meaning of the rest must be the subject of interpretation. We will interpret these best when we come with a spiritual attitude (humble faith) and understanding (from scripture).

1. The Sower and the Four Soils

This parable illustrates the different ways people might respond to the gospel of Jesus and his kingdom. There are those who "do not understand it" (because of moral and spiritual hardness, v15), who show no response. The devil is actively working against such to prevent the truth reaching or impacting them.

But what is insightful is that there are many who appear to receive the word but later prove to be false (unlike the good soil) and fall away from the true faith (altogether, or simply through hypocrisy). They are exposed by trouble in life, and by the allure of material things.

"The one who hears the word and understands it" (v23) implies that all other responses, though they appeared sincere at first, were not based on a proper (spiritual) understanding of the word (the gospel).

2. The Wheat and the Weeds

If weeds (specifically "darnel") found root among the freshly sown wheat, they would look indistinguishable at first (they both look like blades of grass). Their roots also intertwine, which would make de-weeding even more risky for the wheat. So in ancient times, the practice was to just wait until the harvest. Then you could see clearly the wheat (full of grain) and the weeds (little grain).

If we take this as a reference to the present age (loosely speaking), then we are being taught that God allows false profession and belief to coexist with those who have true spiritual life. Time will tell the difference, and God will judge at the end.

3. The Mustard Seed and the Great Tree

The kingdom of God (which we will equate, rightly or wrongly, with the Church at this point) starts insignificantly (among one tiny nation on earth, Israel), but quickly explodes onto the scene and spreads throughout the empire. The "birds" might simply emphasise the vastness and shelter of the tree, or it could hint at evil making a home in the kingdom (this fits better with the uniting themes of most of the other parables)

4. The Leaven

Another picture of evil (a common significance of leaven) being inserted and infiltrating the kingdom, with no hope of distinguishing or removing it. We might press the metaphor further and suggest that leaven (yeast) makes the bread rise, causing it to become even greater in size and appearance than it otherwise would appear. (We might apply this the say the external appearance of the "church" is much vaster than the "true" church of God).

Note that other interpreters see the leaven as something positive - the growing cultural influence of the gospel on society. This would align with a "postmillennial" view.

5. The Hidden Treasure in the Field

6. The Merchant and the Pearl of Great Price

These parables are very similar to each other. In both cases, we could see Christ (or his kingdom) as the thing of value (the treasure and the pearl). In this case, we see the radical nature of discipleship ("forsaking all to follow him"). But this interpretation is challenged when we press it deeper. In light of the cross, surely the one who "sells all to buy it" is Christ himself, the lamb of God who gives his life for the world (the field). Then we would see that the treasure and pearl refer to the kingdom of God consisting of his redeemed people. He paid for the whole world, to redeem (and transform) those who would respond in faith to him.

7. The Parable of the Fish in the Dragnet

This parable is very similar to the second parable (the wheat and the weeds).

Digging Deeper

There are several reasons why we are tempted to dig deeper into this parables, wondering if they have some richer, hidden meaning to be deciphered. This leads us into the "theories" and "extrapolation" that we talked about last week. Not everyone will agree at this point. Some would be happy to leave the parables as simple lessons to be read in isolation, while those who press them harder will find wide disagreement on what the hidden meaning is.

Observations

There are several observations from the passage which catch the attention of even casual readers.

- The scene is primarily terrestrial (parables 1 to 5), before shifting to a maritime setting (parables 6 and 7). Is this significant to the prophetic nature of the parables?

- There is a physical shift for the Lord between parables 4 and 5 (in front of the crowds at the sea shore, v1, to the private space of the house, v36). Does the separation of the 4 and 3 in any way parallel the "feats of Jehovah" in Leviticus 23?
- There are two pairs of very similar parables (the wheat and weeds // the dragnet; the treasure // the pearl). Are these redundant? Why have such similar parables?
- There are two parables which stand out because they do discuss the infiltration of evil into the kingdom (5-6, the treasure and the pearl)

Questions

Based on our understanding of the rest of scripture, we are left with some perplexing questions that require us to figure out how all this truth relates together.

- What is the "kingdom of heaven"? Wasn't Israel going to be established as the kingdom? Is Israel the subject? Or does it apply to the growth of the Christian "church"? It is easy to see how the early parables can be applied to the early and contemporary history of the growth and corruption of the church, but could we also apply this to the history of Israel prior to and up to the coming of Christ, when "it was all leavened"
- How does the picture of judgement described in parables 2 and 7 ("Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.", v30) relate the teaching of the rapture and following tribulation in 1 Thessalonians?

A dispensational theory

Here is one explanation that begins to paint an interesting picture of how a deeper meaning and pattern is found in the parables that fits well with the understanding of other passages

- The "terrestrial" parables (1-5) deal with Israel specifically (the land / the field), while the maritime parables deal with the world broadly.
- Israel grew from just one man Abraham into a mighty nation (Israel), just like the mustard seed. But they became infiltrated by leaven, which corrupted the whole nation.
- At that time, Christ came, not in glory but in humility (public -> private shift between 4 and 5). He considered Israel a "treasure" (parable 5), but because of their rejection of them, he has "covered" them again, setting them aside for a time.
- Meanwhile, his focus has turned to a "pearl" of great price, that is the Christian church in this age, which shall be taken out of the world before the judgement of God comes.
- God will resume his dealing with Israel and both Israel and the World will be judged in the same way at the same time, through the removal of evil and the keeping of the righteous (the wheat and weeds, the dragnet)

Final Thoughts

You will find a great deal of variety in the interpretations that exist. This is one that I have come up, that is influenced by teaching I have heard, while also applying my own observations and judgements. Some of the above is widely accepted (by dispensationalists), some of it might be very idiosyncratic (my own ideas). Outside of dispensationalism, you will find an even broader array of interpretation and discussion.

The point is, this is a "theory". It is not in the text itself. And while I believe the Lord wants to us ponder how all these things fit together, the core fact is that he does not tell us as a matter of fact the answers we are seeking.

It is easy to take someone's chart and check the box that you've understood the Bible's teaching on prophecy. But that is missing the point. The Lord has deliberately veiled this truth in such a way as it demands us, each one, to wrestle the mysteries for ourselves, seeking the Lord's light and giving diligence to the rest of his revelation.