

The Mysteries of the Kingdom

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the mysteries of the kingdom, revealing the present spiritual reign of the King and the dual nature of the present age.

Scripture: Matthew 13:16

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "End Times"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, which marks a new division in the gospel where Jesus addresses the rejection of Him as the promised King. The chapter introduces the concept of a postponed kingdom due to the rejection of Christ by His own people, leading to the mysteries of the kingdom being revealed through parables. The parables in this chapter illustrate the dual line of development within the professing church, emphasizing the presence of both good and evil until the final judgment at the end of the age.

Transcript

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew marks a new division in the gospel, in which Jesus addresses Himself to the problem of what will occur when He goes back to heaven as the rejected King. The gospel of Matthew began with the proofs that Jesus was indeed the promised Son who would reign on the throne of David (chap. 1), supported by the visit of the wise men and the early ministry of John the Baptist (chaps. 2-3). After His temptation, Jesus presented the principles of His coming kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), emphasizing spiritual and moral principles that govern the kingdom of God, but especially as these applied to the prophesied kingdom on earth, which the Messiah-King was to bring when He came. The Sermon on the Mount accordingly contained timeless truths always applicable, some truths that were immediately applicable to Christ's day on earth, and some truths that were to have their fulfillment in the millennial kingdom.

Following the presentation of the principles of the kingdom, in Matthew 8-10, the miracles which served as the prophesied credentials of the King were itemized. It becomes apparent, however, that increasingly, the Jews were rejecting these evidences that Jesus was indeed their Messiah and prophesied King.

Accordingly, in chapter 11, His rejection and the postponement of the kingdom were anticipated. In most severe language, Jesus itemized their sinful rejection with severe indictment upon the cities where His mighty works were done. Chapter 11 closed with an invitation to individual believers to come unto Him for rest. The further rejection of Jesus is recorded in chapter 12, climaxing in the charge of the Pharisees that

He performed His miracles in the power of the devil. Jesus likened the state of His wicked generation to a man possessed of eight evil spirits (12:45).

With this as a background, chapter 13 faces the question, What will happen when the rejected king goes back to heaven and the kingdom promised is postponed until His second coming? The concept of a kingdom postponed must be understood as a postponement from the human side and not from the divine, as obviously God's plans do not change. It may be compared to the situation at Kadesh-Barnea, when the children of Israel, bound for the promised land, because of unbelief, had their entrance postponed for forty years. If they had believed God, they might have entered the land immediately.

What is contingent from the human standpoint, however, is always planned from the divine standpoint. The rejection of Christ by His own people and His subsequent death and resurrection were absolutely essential to God's program. Humanly speaking, the kingdom, instead of being brought in immediately, was postponed. From the divine viewpoint, the plan always included what actually happened. The human responsibility remains, however, and the rejection of the kingdom from this standpoint caused the postponement of the promised kingdom on earth.

This chapter, accordingly, does not only introduce a new subject and a new approach but also involves a new method of teaching, namely that of parables. While many of the illustrations which Christ used were designed to make plain the truth, parables were intended to reveal the truth only to believers and required explanation in order to understand them. In a sense, they were riddles which required a key, but supplied with the key, the truth became prophetically eloquent.

As Tasker expresses it, "Jesus deliberately adopted the parabolic method of teaching at a particular stage in His ministry for the purpose of withholding further truth about Himself and the kingdom of heaven from the crowds, who had proved themselves to be deaf to His claims and irresponsible to His demands... From now onwards, when addressing the unbelieving multitude, He speaks only in parables (34), which He interprets to His disciples in private."⁶⁰

In this chapter are presented in the seven parables the mysteries of the kingdom. Only Matthew records seven parables. The parables of the sower and mustard seed are found in Mark 4:1-9, 13-20, 30-32, and in Luke 8:5-15. The parable of the leaven is found in Luke 13:20-21. The other four parables are only in Matthew. The parables are designed to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom, that is, the present age.

Mysteries, a word used of secret rites of various religious cults, refers to truth that was not revealed in the Old Testament but is revealed in the New Testament. More than a dozen such truths are revealed in the New Testament, all following the basic definition of Colossians 1:26, which defines a mystery as that "which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints." A mystery truth, accordingly, has two elements. First, it has to be hidden in the Old Testament and not revealed there. Second, it has to be revealed in the New Testament. It is not necessarily a reference to a truth difficult to understand, but rather to truths that can be understood only on the basis of divine revelation.

The Old Testament reveals, in clear terms, the earthly reign of Christ when He comes as King to reign on the throne of David (which truths are not mysteries). Matthew 13 introduces a different form of the kingdom, namely the present spiritual reign of the King during the period He is physically absent from the earth, prior to His second coming. The mysteries of the kingdom, accordingly, deal with the period between the first and second advent of Christ and not the millennial kingdom which will follow the second coming.

Parable of the Sower, 13:1-23

The scene of this prophetic sermon of Jesus was the Sea of Galilee. Because of the great multitudes thronging the shores, Jesus went into a small boat a short distance from the shore, and by this means, was able to command a view of the entire multitude. While they stood, He sat in the boat in the role of a religious teacher.

The first paragraph does not have the precise formula of the later paragraphs, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto," but is, rather, an introductory parable, serving as a basis for all that follows. In the parable, a sower went forth to sow, sowing his seed upon four kinds of earth. Although sometimes the ground was prepared by plowing, in other cases, seed would be sown with no preparation whatever, which seems to be the case in this parable. Some of the seed fell on the wayside (i.e., the hard-beaten path), where there was no receptivity, and fowls came and devoured it. Some seed fell on the second type of soil defined as "stony places" (v. 5). This refers to stony ground with sufficient soil to allow the seed to sprout but with insufficient depth to allow adequate roots. Beginning to grow, the new plants withered in the heat of the sun.

Some seed fell among thorns, that is, soil that was good enough but full of weeds. Here, the competition of the thorns was too much, and the young plants were choked out. The fourth soil receiving the seed was described as "good ground" (v. 8), bringing forth seed up to one hundredfold. In each case, the seed is the same, but the difference is in the receptivity of the soil.

In the conclusion of His presentation of the parable of the sower, Jesus made the challenge, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (v. 9). Later, after Christ had sent the multitude away (v. 36), the disciples came to Him to ask why He spoke unto them in parables. His explanation was that it was proper for them, His disciples, to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to the people who were largely unbelieving, it was not. Christ declared the principle, "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath" (v. 12). Accordingly, Christ stated that He spoke in parables that the unbelievers might not understand and would thereby fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10, that the people would not hear the message. His disciples, however, were to be blessed by this new revelation which was not revealed to the prophets and the righteous men of old but was now being revealed to them (Mt 13:17). This confirms the previous definition of a mystery as a truth not revealed in the Old Testament but now revealed in the New Testament.

Some have found it difficult to harmonize the concept that truth is revealed in such a way that unbelievers cannot understand it. The point is that there is a long background of unbelief and disregard of previous revelation. Accordingly, when additional revelation is given to believers, it is couched in terms that only they will understand. In a sense, unbelievers have sinned away their day of opportunity. It is in keeping with the principle that darkness follows light rejected.

In Matthew 13:18-23, the parable of the sower is explained. The birds that devoured the seed by the wayside represented satanic influence, which supports the hardness of the heart that rejects the message. The seed on shallow ground pictured superficial reception of the Word, where the Word does not bear fruit. The seed among thorns depicted "the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches" which choke the Word and make it unfruitful (v. 22). The seed on the good ground, which brings forth fruit up to an hundredfold, represented the one who not only hears the Word but understands it and lets it bring forth its fruit abundantly.

As this parable makes plain, there is no anticipating in the present age that there will be universal reception of the truth, as postmillenarians teach. Most of those who hear the message of the kingdom will reject it. Some, however, will receive the message, cherish it in their heart, and believe in the truth of the kingdom. This first parable establishes the basic character of the present age, awaiting the return of the rejected King. The age will include some who believe, many who will not believe.

Parable of the Tares, 13:24-30; 36-43

In the second parable, Jesus likewise used the figure of a sower, but this time, dealt with the character of the seed rather than its reception. In this parable, the sower sowed the good seed, described as wheat, and the enemy sowed tares, referring to rye grass, the darnel which often grows up with the wheat. One side effect of the darnel seed is that it is subject to a parasite fungus, which infects seed and is poisonous to both men and beasts.⁶¹

In the parable, when the servants asked whether they should uproot the tares, the instruction was to let both go to the harvest time, because uprooting the tares would also uproot the wheat. Accordingly, Jesus stated, "Let both grow together until the harvest" (v. 30). As Spurgeon comments, "Magistrates and churches may remove the openly wicked from their society; the outwardly good who are unworldly worthless they must leave; for the judging of hearts is beyond their sphere."⁶² At the harvest, the tares are gathered first, then the wheat is gathered into the barn.

In the interpretation in Matthew 13:36-43, when the disciples later privately asked Jesus concerning the meaning of this parable, He identified the field as the world, the sower as the Son of man who sowed the good seed, the enemy as the devil who sowed the tares. The good seeds represented the children of the kingdom, and the tares the children of the wicked one, that is, the devil. The reapers were identified as the angels; the time of the harvest was "the end of this world," or more properly translated, "the consummation of this age." The judgment was described as a work of the angels gathering out of the kingdom of the Son of man any that would offend, and casting them into a furnace of fire. The judgment is parallel to that described in Matthew 25:31-46, where the sheep are separated from the goats.

Posttribulationists have made much of the order of the judgment described in 13:30, that is, that the tares are gathered first and that later the wheat is gathered into the barn. This is used as an argument for posttribulationism, or the teaching that the rapture occurs in connection with the establishment of the kingdom. This argument, however, is invalid.

Matthew 13 is not dealing specifically with the church age, the period between Pentecost and the rapture, but with the entire period of the kingdom in its mystery form, that is, the period between the first and second advents, during which the King is absent and which includes the period between the rapture and the second coming. The rapture is not in view at all. As far as the order of events is concerned, in the seventh parable, where the good and bad fish are separated, the order is reversed with the good gathered first.

A reasonable conclusion is that the order of events is indeed the destruction of the wicked and the ushering of the righteous to the millennial kingdom. However, both are simultaneous events in fulfillment, although actually the tares are destroyed before the kingdom is brought in fully.

The second parable, as a whole, makes clear the dual line of development within the sphere of profession, with the true believer not clearly identified until the time of judgment. This parable is not a picture of the

universal triumph of the gospel, as the postmillennialists teach; neither is it a fulfillment of an earthly reign where Christ is supreme on earth. Rather it is the period before the return of the King, who was rejected in His first coming.

Parable of the Mustard Seed, 13:31-32

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven was compared to the small mustard seed which became such a large plant that birds were able to lodge in its branches. This mustard plant is a species different than the common one used as a condiment. Although left without interpretation, it anticipated that Christendom as a sphere of profession will grow rapidly from a small beginning to an organization with great power and wealth. While the plant included both true believers and those who professed to believe, the mustard plant was distinguished from the birds lodging in its branches which were unbelievers (cf. Dan 4:20-22).

Some have noted that the mustard seed described as "the least of all seeds" is not actually the smallest seed, and that this is an error in the Scriptures. The answer is twofold. The Greek word translated "smallest" (mikroteron) is actually a comparative and should be translated "smaller," as it is in the New English Bible and in the New American Standard Bible. The thought is that it is "very small." Second, as Lenski points out, "Jesus is speaking of the seeds that were ordinarily planted in ancient gardens, hence the remark that botanists know about many seeds that are still smaller is pointless."⁶³

The parable of the mustard seed is also found in Mark 4, where it is related to the kingdom of God. This has supported the view of many that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are identical, as they are occasionally found in parallel passages. There is some indication in Scripture, however, that the kingdom of heaven emphasizes the professing character of the kingdom as including unbelievers who look like believers, as illustrated in the tares, in contrast to the kingdom of God, containing only true believers. It is significant that the kingdom of God is not compared to the second parable, that of the wheat and the tares, as those in the kingdom of God are genuine believers. Putting Matthew and Mark together, the conclusion can be reached that both the number of true believers (the kingdom of God) as well as the sphere of profession in the present age (the kingdom of heaven) will grow rapidly. This is in contrast to the future millennial kingdom, which Christ will bring at His second coming, which will begin abruptly as a worldwide kingdom, rather than as a product of gradual growth.

Parable of the Leaven, 13:33-35

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is likened unto leaven hidden in meal (cf. Lk 13:20-21). In biblical times, it was customary to retain a small portion of leavened dough from each batch to mix in with the next batch of dough, thereby leavening the new dough. In modern times, yeast is usually used. What does the leaven represent? Postmillenarians and amillenarians, like Lenski, usually assume dogmatically that leaven cannot represent evil in this parable, although it is universally used to represent evil in both the Old and New Testaments. Lenski states, for instance, "It is impossible to use leaven in this sense when picturing the kingdom."⁶⁴ If the kingdom was all good, this would be true, but the other parables make clear that there are tares among the wheat, bad fish as well as good fish in the net. The kingdom includes both good and evil. To make the leaven synonymous with the gospel as a permeating and ameliorating principle in the world may coincide with postmillennialism but does not coincide with this chapter in its presentation of the present age. It is more evident than ever in the last third of the twentieth century that the gospel has not permeated the whole world and that evil tends to permeate the entire professing church, which is exactly what Matthew 13 teaches.

In the Old Testament, leaven is used consistently to represent evil. In sacrifices, which represent Jesus Christ, such as the unleavened bread on the table of shewbread, no leaven was permitted. In cases where leaven was permitted, they inevitably represented human situations, as the peace offering of Leviticus 7:11-13, and the two loaves anticipating typically the professing church, mentioned in Leviticus 23:15-18. In the New Testament, leaven was used by Christ of the externalism of the Pharisees, of the unbelief of the Sadducees, and of the worldliness of the Herodians, and in general of evil doctrine (Mt 16:6-12; Mk 8:14-21). In Paul's letters, likewise, leaven represents evil, as in I Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:7-10.

In the parable, the meal represented that which is good, as it was made from wheat and not from tares. The professing church, however, is permeated by evil doctrine, externalism, unbelief, and worldliness, which tend to inflate the church and make it larger in appearance, even as the leaven inflates the dough but actually adds nothing of real worth. The history of the church has all too accurately fulfilled this anticipation, and the professing church in the world, large and powerful though it may be, is permeated by the leaven of evil which will be judged in the oven of divine judgment at the end of the age. The parable applying to the kingdom of heaven in its mystery form applies to the professing church which will continue in the world after the true church, the body of Christ, is caught up at the time of the rapture. To some extent, evil will extend even to the kingdom of God, which includes the body of true believers in the church as well as those who come to Christ after the rapture. As Luke 13:20-21 brings out, even true believers fall far short of perfection and can embrace to some extent worldliness, externalism, and bad doctrine.

Parable of the Treasure, 13:44

The parable of the treasure is linked with the sixth parable, the parable of the pearl, and the final parable of the good and bad fish, as three parables reflecting the divine point of view rather than the historic human point of view, which was presented in the first four parables. Like the third and fourth parable, no explanation is given, and expositors have tended to find support for their overall view of the chapter. A common interpretation, such as is advanced in Trench's work on parables, is that the man who finds the treasure is the believer who finds Christ, with the same interpretation carried over to the merchant who finds the pearl.⁶⁵ Everyone agrees that Christ is a treasure whom all the world has not discovered, but upon close examination, the interpretation is shallow and unsatisfactory.

In the parable, the man was represented as hiding the treasure and selling all he had to buy it. The facts are, of course, that a believer in Christ has nothing to offer and the treasure is not for sale. The believer does not buy a field, representing the world, in order to gain Christ. Further, upon discovery of the treasure, a believer shares it with others rather than hides it.

The key to the parable is to determine what the treasure was that was held in the field. Although the interpretation should not be dogmatically held, there is scriptural evidence that what was referred to here was none other than the nation Israel. Although Israel is an obvious factor in the world, apart from scriptural revelation, no one would recognize Israel as a treasure, and especially a treasure for which anyone would sell all that he has to buy.

Scriptural support is given for interpreting the treasure as Israel. According to Exodus 19:5, God declared to Israel, "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine." According to Psalms 135:4, "The Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure."

The fact that Israel is a treasure not recognized by the world and therefore hidden is all too evident today. Even among evangelical Christians, there are those who question whether Israel is an important biblical nation today with a prophetic future. Yet as we trace the gospel narratives, it is clear that Jesus came with a special purpose of redeeming Israel, although at the same time He reconciled the world unto Himself. It was Jesus, therefore, who sold all that He had in order to buy the treasure, Israel, and to purchase it with His own blood (Phil 2:7-8; 1 Pe 1:18-19). During the present age, Israel is a hidden entity in the world, only to emerge at the end of the age as a major factor in the prophetic fulfillment leading up to the second coming of Christ.

Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, 13:45-46

In this parable, the same thought was presented as in the preceding one; only here, the pearl seemed to represent the church rather than Israel. In the world of gems, the pearl is uniquely formed organically. Its formation occurs because of an irritation in the tender side of an oyster. There is a sense in which the church was formed out of the wounds of Christ and has been made possible by His death and sacrifice.

The parable emphasized that the church has been made possible by the merchant who sold all that He had to secure the great pearl. So Christ, leaving the glory of heaven, made the supreme sacrifice of dying on the cross in order to make possible the formation of the church. The concept of the church as a living organism, composed of living stones which are added each time a believer is saved, was an apt portrayal of the formation of the true church in the present age, and made clear that this is one of the major purposes of God in the interadvent period. In the treasure and the pearl are the two major purposes of God for Israel and the church from a spiritual point of view, and His purposes for both are realized, even though there is the dual line of development of good and evil culminating in the second coming of Christ.

Parable of the Dragnet, 13:47-50

The seventh parable, similar in many ways to the parable of the wheat and the tares, summarized the main ideas of the entire chapter. Like the first two parables, it was interpreted immediately. The kingdom of heaven was compared to a large net, described by Lenski as "the largest kind of net, weighed below with corks on top, sweeping perhaps a half mile of water."⁶⁶ Because of its large character, the net collects a multitude of different kinds of fish, described in the text as "every kind." Nets of this size were too large to empty into a boat and had to be drawn to shore. Here the fish were sorted. Those that were bad, or for any reason unusable, were cast back into the sea. The good fish were gathered into the vessel.

This familiar operation on the shores of the Sea of Galilee was compared to the judgment at the end of the age. Angels were described as separating those who are wicked from among the righteous, the wicked being described as wailing and gnashing their teeth as they were cast into the furnace of fire (Mt 13:50). The situation is parallel to the judgment of the nations in 25:31-46. The righteous who remain after the wicked are gathered out are able to enter into the kingdom. The general situation is the same as the separation of the wheat and the tares and their judgment, described in 13:41-43.

The fulfillment of the prophetic truth in this parable will occur at the second coming of Jesus Christ, when the world is judged and the kingdom instituted. It is clear from this parable, as those preceding, that the present age does not end in a postmillennial triumph, with the entire world being Christianized; neither does it fulfill the kingdom promises of the Old Testament nor does it describe the period when all nations will serve the Lord. Rather, as in preceding parables, it describes the dual line of good and evil, continuing until the time of the end when both the good and evil are judged according to their true character.

It is significant that the net representing the kingdom of heaven as a sphere of profession included all kinds, both wicked and righteous, and that the separation did not come until the end. This passage serves to distinguish the kingdom of heaven from the kingdom of God which includes only the righteous. Neither the parable of the wheat and the tares nor the parable of the good and bad fish, as related to the kingdom of God, is mentioned in the other gospels.

Concluding Statement About the Parables, 13:51-52

At the conclusion of the parables, Jesus asked the disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" Amazingly, they replied, "Yea, Lord." It is rather obvious that they did not understand the parables, except in their general teachings. It would have required much more perspective, the clear revelation of the present age, and, to some extent, perspective of history, for them to have really understood these parables. At this time, they did not understand that there would be an age between the two advents. Christ did not challenge their assurance, however, but rather told them that if they were truly instructed in these truths, they would be able to bring out of their treasure house of truth things both new and old.

Christ's Final Visit to Nazareth, 13:53-58

After concluding His discourse at the Sea of Galilee, Christ went back to Nazareth. In His earlier visit, recorded in Luke 4:16-29, although some commended His gracious words (v. 22), others challenged His claim to be a prophet, and, when rebuked by Christ, attempted to throw Him over a cliff (vv. 23-29). In this second and last visit to Nazareth, the same rejection occurred, though this time, less violently. They recalled that He was Joseph's son and that His brothers and sisters lived among them.⁶⁷ Again, as in the earlier visit, Christ stated, "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house" (Mt 13:57). Their unbelief barred mighty works such as had occurred elsewhere. This final touch, emphasizing His rejection by His own city and His own people, was part of the larger rejection summarized in John 1:11, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

60 R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, pp. 134-35.

61 Zondervan's Pictorial Dictionary, S. V. "Tares." Unger's Bible Dictionary, pp. 1144-45.

62 C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 104.

63 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, 1943), p. 528.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 530.

65 Richard C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, pp. 102-10.

66 Lenski, p. 547.

67 While Protestants generally have held that Mary had children by Joseph subsequent to the birth of Jesus, Roman Catholics have denied this, as the brothers and sisters could have been children of Joseph's by an earlier marriage, or could even be cousins. Most Protestants find no problem in Mary having other children.

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