

The Parables

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon on 'The Parables' explores the nature of the kingdom of heaven through the teachings of Jesus, emphasizing the importance of understanding and valuing God's word.

Scripture: Matthew 13:1

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "The Kingdom of Heaven"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on the parables found in Matthew 13, illustrating the nature and characteristics of the 'kingdom of heaven.' He emphasizes that these parables collectively reveal God's plan and provide comfort to believers, highlighting the distinction between those who accept the word of God and those who do not. Darby explains the significance of the sower, the seed, and the various types of soil, representing the different responses to God's message. He encourages believers to cherish their relationship with Christ and to be vigilant against distractions that may hinder their spiritual growth. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the kingdom and the necessity of receiving eternal life through Christ.

Transcript

THE PARABLES

MATTHEW 13 : 1-50

I have read to You the entire collection of parables brought together in this chapter, because they collectively contain one general view of the plan of God, as developing "the kingdom of heaven": that it is not an isolated circumstance but a connected whole, full of comfort to the saints of God. It unfolds the distinguishing features of the " kingdom of heaven." This term, together with the " kingdom of you Father," is exclusively used by Matthew, and particularly in this chapter, where are developed the character and circumstances of the kingdom in the dispensation of God.

" Jesus saith unto his disciples, Have ye understood all these things ? They say, Yea, Lord. Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed into the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Now we know that a scribe who was taught from the law of Moses was instructed in the mysteries contained therein, which were to be unfolded in process of time, as the Lord quotes : " I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things that have been kept secret from the foundation of the world."

We find there were seven parables uttered by our Lord here seven being a complete and perfect number, symbolical of entireness and perfection, wanting nothing, a completeness of intention and performance. Thus seven Spirits of God are taken for a whole; seven churches, seven trumpets, seven plagues, etc. Some of those parables were uttered for the disciples only, and the others for the multitude, which we shall perceive by just looking at the structure of the chapter.

In the first parable we have a symbol of the world as at present; of all who shall or shall not become partakers of the kingdom of heaven. Here we have the full mind of God upon the subject. The six others represent a likeness of the kingdom of heaven. In the first the man sowing the good seed is just a statement of what our Lord was doing in the world, "the field," out of which the kingdom of heaven springs up. He was there sowing good seed, while the devil was sowing tares mingling with them, and mixing with them, but not of them; but of this there is no complete development till the resurrection. This is the testimony of the Spirit of God: at that time the wheat will be gathered into the garner, and the tares afterwards burned.

Now in the other parables we find that which resulted from the sowing of the seed absolutely and definitely. The last three are addressed to the disciples alone, and not to the multitude, as well as the explanation of the first of these six, as it says in verse 36: "Then Jesus sent away the multitude, and went into a house with his disciples"; and, after explaining to them the parable of the tares and the wheat, He says to them, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is likened unto," etc. The other three, spoken to the multitude were, the tares and wheat; the little seed, or grain of mustard seed, descriptive of the increase and growth of this kingdom; and the leaven hid beneath, but working unseen till the whole is completely leavened. The three to His disciples alone were, the treasure hid; the pearl of great price; and the net cast into the sea. Thus He commences with the sowing, and ends with the gathering in.

The first three exhibit the development of the character and habit this kingdom should assume in the world ostensibly. And of the latter three, two are descriptive of its high value in the sight of God, and the consequences of that love: and the last displays the entire distinction and separation between the children of the world and of the kingdom. The explanation of one parable, given along with this last parable, portrays the manner and mode of this separation - of those who are children of God, or those who are friends to God's enemy, the devil: The friendship of the world is enmity with God."

You will find, on examination, the analogy very strong between the six; between the three to His disciples, and the three to the multitude, to which the explanation of the one is the key; from the first, which is sowing the good seed, to the last, which is drawing the net, of which the others are the medium-the ostensible character; the organisation of the plan; the building up of it; the actual value of the treasure; the beauty and excellency of the pearl of great price; the management and development of that which is the dispensation of the kingdom of heaven. These we will not go through now, only just to shew the structure and order of the whole. Thus the Spirit of God unfolds the way in lively emblems, which are God's most definite testimony to the world, and which are acknowledged as such by all when taught of God's Spirit. Here we have the perfect summing up of the dispensation, which is characterised in Scripture as the "kingdom of heaven."

It is calculated for the joy and comfort of disciples, though spoken to multitudes in parables: they press in the general throng, but they understand not, for they are spoken to in parables. But, says Jesus, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." The world may despise them (it does despise them), it may heap obloquy and contempt on them, for these are not of the world, and the world

loves its own. But the saints have the inestimable, the profound, the incalculable blessing of being children of the kingdom-children of God; they have a joy and heavenly delight in retirement with Jesus-of fellowship and communion with Him (of which the world in its natural state knows nothing; of which it is unable to form any conception) ; conscious of their association with Him, of being in the same position with Him, of being assimilated to Him ; this is the constitution of their joy. They are made friends of God; they are in the same situation as Abraham, when the Lord says, " Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do ? " The Lord condescends to open out His mind-His plans-to them. Abraham was called " the friend of God." Exactly in the same way does the Lord now spread out the plan of His dispensations to His own, as He says, " Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth ; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." Now this is said for the joy and comfort of you who are His disciples. Treasure it up in your hearts, and, oh! feel the blessedness, the wondrous blessedness, of being made the depositaries of the Lord's mind: "for who hath known the mind of the Lord ? But we have the mind of Christ."

Since this is your position, dear friends, be jealous of squandering your affections, lest you dishonour your trust. If you sin in the cold, heartless world ; if you lightly esteem, or seek not continual enjoyment in, your high privileges, the Lord can put no confidence in you, Christ cannot trust you. If you are amusing yourselves with the things around you (no matter what), your minds must be opened to the world, and this leads to the love of it; and this is direct usurpation of Christ's prerogative. Christ's mind is not opened to the world, but is opened to His own. He reveals their portion to them, and He sends the Spirit into their hearts, enabling them to cry, " Abba, Father." He makes known to them that they have the inheritance of sons, shews them their family interest in it, meets them all, as it were, and unfolds the circumstances of His family, and points out to them their individual interest in it ; tells them that they are heirs of this inheritance, and have a part and portion with Himself.

If this is our situation (and it is so if we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ), should we not be very jealous of admitting anything into our souls that might disturb this harmony, and so disable us from receiving communications with delight with the filial fondness of children ? This is what the world knows nothing about, but is the saint's privilege and lot, and neither Satan nor the world can take it from him. The parable with which this chapter begins introduces this glorious dispensation of which we have been speaking: " A sower went out," etc. (v. 3-9).

The great principle upon which all the blessing of the kingdom of heaven is founded is the sowing of the seed ; there is no external development of the position of man till it is sown. The Lord Jesus Christ goes forth as the sower. The seed, in itself, is a perfectly new and distinct thing ; it is not in principle assimilated to anything that was there previously ; it finds nothing there that it can call its own ; it is not a seed of the soil springing up from it, but it is the seed of God-it comes down from heaven. It is not a principle in the soil which the Lord acts on and improves : when it comes, it finds nothing akin to it there-nothing even like it. It comes from heaven, and leads to heaven ; for it is the seed of eternal life. It is a perfectly new principle-extraneously so. When put into the soil, there is then in the soul what was not there before; it is no improvement or modification of that which was previously there. It is eternal life. " Of his own will begat he us." It is an implanted principle of life which knows no end.

Now, in all naturally there is no seed of eternal life, as life. We may have the seed of eternal endurance, but not of life. But this life is wrought by the implantation of a holy seed, by the power of the word of God, revealing what Christ is to the soul. It is planted by the word of God, watered by the Spirit of God, derives its growth and culture from the same God, and is found bearing fruit to the glory of God until the end, when

we come to the "manifestation of the sons of God."

Now, this, which is God's truth, breaks down all the natural hopes of aspiring proud man, who thinks there is that within himself which will lead to this, ignorant that the only principle within him is one of death. But let him once experience the implantation of this new seed, he will then think very differently. He will find that he has now a new life ; that it is a given life (consequently it could not have been there before) ; and, moreover, that it is "eternal life," and that that life is in Jesus: he that hath the Son hath life."

There is one broad principle with which it is most important to be acquainted, namely, that it is nothing from within ourselves that originates this holy principle. And we who are taught of God know this to be the case ; for the mind, once alive to God, is fully conscious that it does not live by any power in itself, but from the power of the life of Christ, which they were once conscious of not having, but now have been given. They now see how they stand in the presence of God, not as Adam, for God has stamped death on all that he, or his race, could bring before Him of their own, which is sin ; but they know, that though once aliens and wanderers, they have been gathered into the flock, and have been (not made better in their original condition but) translated into another position, even into the kingdom of God's dear Son, who is now in glory.

There is no communication then from man to God, which can be the real cause or means of receiving heavenly blessings ; for man, by nature, has nothing to bring but sin, which cannot draw down a blessing; for God has stamped this judgment on it-" The wages of sin is death." Now, notwithstanding this truth, what is the expectation of the natural man ? Why, that though God has said this, yet in his case He will not observe it; that-God must set aside the honour of His word, the strictness of His holiness, and not give him the wages of sin, which is eternal death; that, in his case, God will dispense with the quickening power which He speaks of as necessary to life, and through and for His Son He will shew him mercy. But it is not so, it cannot, it will not be so: "he," and he only, " who hath the Son hath life," " they," and they only, " that hear the voice of the Son of God shall live." The perceptive power comes to him from heaven, and he then has everlasting life ; he has what he never had before, but he knows that he has it now. This is God's truth in the face of a sinful and lifeless world, and testifies the power and agency of the Spirit as manifested in it. They who hear, bear by His power: " the dead shall hear," therefore the dead must be quickened to hear.

This parable shews us the way in which the seed is scattered. The Lord is here represented by a sower, and is scattering the seed of His word. He that receives it receives life into his soul, which was before " dead in trespasses and sins." The Lord is scattering the seed now, whether you believe it or not. He is testifying that you are naturally enemies to God, " alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works," and that the only way of escaping the punishment due is by the reception of this life which He gives, which is in Christ and nowhere else.

The possession of this life is necessary to the entrance into glory. Now where will you seek it, where will you find it, but in Christ ? God has told you, that " that life is in his Son." Have you then this Son of God ? Do you know Him as your life ? Do you hold sweet communion with Him ? Have you a personal fellowship and enjoyment in Him ? Do you understand the blessing of identity with Him, so as to comprehend His own words : " Because I live, ye shall live also " ? If you do, you are blessed, for God is true, and He has said, " He that hath the Son hath life " : there is a certitude, an everlasting truth, in it. The word sown carries the knowledge of Christ to the soul, and that brings us into relation with God; it opens out the blessing of life, and shews us that that life is in Christ, and Christ only.

The Lord scatters the seed, but the enemy does his utmost to hinder its progress ; he tries to turn it aside, and to prevent its taking root. The Lord scatters and divides the seed, but it springs not up alike : there is a marked distinction made in the parable between the manner in which the seed was received in the first and last places where it was sown, which we have in the explanation of the first. It is said, " When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not " ; and of the latter it is said, " He that heareth and understandeth." And so we see the work of the devil in the former: " When any man , heareth and understandeth not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart." Oh, how subtle is Satan! he well knows that, if once entered in, his power will be resisted and he endeavours to blind them, because he knows, that except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," nor ever shall see it ; they cannot perceive it, and therefore he loves to catch away from them the scattered seed, lest they should see, and believe, and be saved : " Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God," can neither perceive it, nor enter into it.

" If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his and when once we have it, what is the effect ? " He hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." This is the way, the particular process, which the Lord uses, which is brought before us in the word with reference to the sinner's salvation. It is hard to receive, for we are very slow to hear and understand, surrounded as we are by a world lying in wickedness ; therefore it requires the power of One beyond ourselves to give us the knowledge of it.

We are in a far country ; that is, we are not where our heavenly inheritance is-in our Father's house. We live among those who have the guilt of rejecting the Heir of the kingdom. Now, the heirs of the kingdom are there, but the testimony of God's word declares that He is now gathering them out of it, opening their eyes, and revealing Christ. But this is not understood by the world ; they are specially distinguished by this, that they do not understand it. The word has been sown, but it has not entered. They know nothing at all about the kingdom of God: they hear the word ; but it all passes away as though they heard nothing, for they do not understand it. And while so, while in this position of incapacity of comprehension, they have nothing to do with it : it conveys no ideas of happiness to them-it is associated with no portion of enjoyment to them. They are satisfied with the world: that they have, that is their portion, they are looking for no other. Their position is just that they know nothing in the world about the kingdom which is set up in Christ, in which, if any one be, he is blessed. But these receive it not ; for, though the word of the kingdom has been sown and scattered, the devil has come and caught it away from them. This then is one very important distinction, that you would do well now to consider, that though the word is at this present moment being scattered to all, there is a wonderful difference in its effects. If you just hear and do not understand it, you may be sure there is one busy among you-busy in your hearts to snatch out the very remembrance of the thing, lest it should enter in. It fell only on the outside, for Satan keeps it out, and they are well pleased to let him ; and this is God's truth about the matter.

Brethren, the world is a lost world, and Satan reigns ; there is only one way of escape-by being taken out of the position in which the world is placed and planted in Christ's kingdom. There is no life but in Christ, Have you then entered into Christ's kingdom, or has the devil yet the key of your hearts ? At that tremendous day, when the secrets of all hearts will be known, then will the distinguishing fruits be manifested, and many of the " wayside " hearers will then, for the first time, find they have been mistaken, when asked what they have been about here, and brought in condemned by the judge Himself. Then will He recognise none but those who are united to Him, one with Himself in life, now for ever to be one with Him in glory.

These, and these alone, are His own-His crown of rejoicing -the travail of His righteous soul; and they know Him; they recognise Him, so as to be able to say, This is the Lord we have been longing and looking for. They know His countenance ; they are, from close familiarity, well acquainted with His lineaments ; they have had such communion, such fellowship, with Him, that they cannot be mistaken. Oh, the contrast between the sorrow (then unavailing sorrow) and misery of those who knew Him not, who have been ignorant of Him who comes to them now as a stranger and a judge!

The next verse shews that some fell among stony places ; and the explanation tells us, that they heard the word, and anon with joy received it, but had no root in themselves but endure for a while; and, when persecution arises because of it, are offended. These have heard the gospel extensively preached, are mixed up with the people of God, and appear to understand and enter into their joy. They commence a regular course, as if on the way heavenwards. They hear of God, of God's love to sinners, of God's wonderful love in giving His only Son to die for sinners. They hear of One " who loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood." They hear of One, " who, though in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant." They hear of One, calculated, when thus spoken of, to win the natural affections, just as the exhibition of these beauties in any other being would do; and their natural feelings are awakened, but nothing more. " They have a name to live," and yet are practically dead ; they have heard 4' a very lovely song," and are pleased ; they have heard of Christ's demeaning Himself to the capacity of a slave, that He might exalt them to heaven ; suiting Himself to their situation and wants; doing wonders in all the world; and the mere external apprehension of these things made a way to win the natural affections. They could not deny them as matters of fact-of historic faith ; they were drawn, as it were, by the "bands of a man," but that was all; their feelings were excited, but they have never mourned for sin ; there was no consciousness of their particular individual share in the sufferings of Christ ; there was no internal perception of love, leading the soul to seek the object of it ; there was no feeling of life, making them know that they were living on Christ for all things, making them feel that the sins that were on them had been placed to His account, bringing Him " into the dust of death."

This humbling work they know not ; when Satan's dominion is broken down in the soul, and Christ admitted as a Sovereign and a Saviour; when He becomes all to the soul, and the soul rejoices in that portion. And the day of trial, of affliction, of tribulation, or of persecution manifests this, and the day of the Lord's fierce wrath terminates it ; this apparent joy comes to nothing, for they knew not Christ ; the seed was only on the surface-the root of the matter was not in them : theirs was only the manifested outward joy of natural feelings awakened ; they had not the joy of the inner man of the heart ; the surface of their affections was pliable and soft, but their heart was still hard as a stone-it was a stony heart-the stone had never been removed; therefore there was no warmth, no love, no life, no Christ within; they had Christ without, but the stone within. No Spirit's teaching, no work in the conscience; they had nothing to look to for comfort or assurance, when the great question, the great controversy which is between God and man, came to be decided ; not being associated with Christ, they just came to nothing. They had no root, and they all fell away.

Now the next class have less of this character which is described in these last. The seed fell, but it was received into a ground previously occupied and overrun with thorns. They appeared well ; had received the seed, as far as human observation could go ; and there were indeed roots in these, but they were the roots of something else-" some fell among thorns " ; they were growing there before the scattering of the seed. The thorns had pre-occupied the ground; they occupied all the ground, and were nourished from it.

Doubtless, when the word was first received on the soil, these thorns might have appeared feeble, and of very little importance, perhaps supposed to be plucked up ; but they left the roots there, which sprung up, to the rejection of the good seed-choked it-and so no fruit came forth. These are they who profess to hear, understand, and receive the word of the kingdom; who seem to set a value upon the great gospel plan of salvation; who go on for a while prosperously, but the latent enemy has been and is working underneath and soon shews himself. He flings into the balance the trials, cares, pleasures, profits, lusts, and deceitful tricks of this world, and the progress of the seed is choked up and becomes unfruitful. They are occupied with the things of this world-its sorrows, its sadness, or its delights ; they are buried in them; the things in which they engage are those which choke the seed-things associated, not with Christ, but with that which He will judge.

It would be the saints' delight to have the weeds plucked up by the roots ; they know the value of the true seed, and therefore are jealous of admitting or having anything in the soil which may render it unfruitful. They well know that if the thorns are there, their natural tendency is to choke the seed ; and therefore they desire their entire departure.

Is this your estimation of the worth and value of the true seed ? God takes care of His own seed; He husbands it, He waters it, He is very jealous over it; and when He sees a thorn spring up, even in the good ground, He says in affectionate remonstrance, " Thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing only is needful " : and leads them then to say and feel, " We are debtors, not to the flesh to live after the flesh."

If any thing keeps the seed from springing up, having occupied the place where it should be, that is not of God, He says, " How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! " The gathering them, living for them, and enjoying of them choke the seed, shut up the mind from the things of God, and make it rest in what is an abhorrence in God's sight. " One thing is needful " ; and we see how the Lord vindicated Mary's choice: " Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." And in that day, when all worldly wealth, riches, and honours can no longer be esteemed, even by the possessors of them, then the till then unseen (unseen except by faith) realities of the true riches hid in Christ will be wonderfully exhibited, when they who have chosen Him for their portion shall have their portion, and all others will be destroyed.

There is one class more to which we must direct our attention, and they are distinguished here, as " he that heareth the word and understandeth it." And here one delights to rest on the blessedness of the hope of glory implanted in the soul of the true believer ; his heart is opened-the seed descends, and abides, springing up and bearing fruit. They understand that they are in a world which wearied Christ, and they too are wearied of it ; they seek a separation from it ; they understand that Jesus was " holy, harmless, and undefiled " ; and God the Spirit, dwelling in them, leads them to follow in His footsteps. They understand from the word of grace that the Lord Jesus has set up this spiritual kingdom in the midst of a world which has rejected Him, and in this His grace settles them-no rest in any other portion ; their controversy with God, and their question with hell, has been settled by Jesus. They understand that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ their Lord, has sealed with His own blood their forgiveness, and this takes the spring of their hearts, and sends their affections out again to centre on Jesus.

These are the things which the saints understand ; and the devil cannot dispossess them of them. Were they only on the surface, he might catch away the word, or cause them to be offended, or choke its fruitfulness ; but, being planted within by the Spirit of the living God, and taking root, Satan in vain

assaults, for there the Lord reigns, who has proved Himself stronger than Satan. Satan may torment, but cannot overcome; for, though choking cares may intrude, and noxious weeds will shew their heads, the possessors of this heavenly seed are willing-are longing-to have them all plucked up and burned, with all the briars and thorns of nature. They " have tasted that the Lord is gracious 11 ; they understand His word, and they love it amidst distresses, trials, and sorrows ; they know that Jesus came to unbind the heavy burdens, and soon He will come again to set His own free from every fetter. In the contemplation of this the believer will rest His soul on Jesus, viewing Him as gathering in His own elect, when His oppressed, persecuted, but very dear children shall see and inherit the kingdom of their Father.

They have then passed through the cross, they have left everything behind at the " door," which is Christ. Guilt cannot pass through Him; sin can no longer shew itself; being purged, it has no longer any hold of the believer : he is standing in the favour and smiles of God, being included in the body to which Christ belongs. He has entered by Christ, and is therefore recognised as His. And this blessedness he has in anticipation and perspective here-the reality is there for him ; that he knows, for he has the dawn of it within himself, the seed of a divine nature. He is waiting for the coming of the " Morning Star," when the seed He blesses will be known. And in this the believer rejoices, being conscious of having life, of being quickened, of being in the second Adam. He is also conscious he has not the glory at present; but he knows he has " eternal life," the fruits of which he is called upon to exhibit while here, as described in the Epistle of James ; which he desires and seeks for, and to which it is his delight in his measure to attain. This is the character, the hope, the attainment of the believer ; of one who has received the good seed, understands the word of the kingdom, and brings forth fruit according to his measure.

In closing this testimony, let us remember, that " he that hath the Son hath life " ; he actually possesses it at present that is the fact. The word of God says not shall have, but " hath eternal life " ; and God the Spirit testifies of this to our souls. He testifies of the electing love of God, of the redeeming grace of Jesus, and enables us to recognise ourselves as " accepted in the Beloved , " having received and believed the word of the kingdom, and this in the face of a world lying in wickedness, on which judgments are now about to be executed.

The times portend great things : the dark and heavy clouds are gathering in the air, and hanging over a guilty world, which shall soon be discharged in tremendous judgments ; the day of God's long-suffering will soon be over: now, " now is the accepted time." If ye have resisted the voice of truth, the voice of the Holy Ghost till now, resist it no longer. judgments are coming, more terrible than on them to whom it was said, " Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" I say not, ye do - do ye yet resist His power ? I say not, it is the case-but is it the case ? Is it not very possible that some, even among you, are still rejecting the counsel of God against yourselves ? If you say you are not, let me ask, Have you received and understood the word of the kingdom ? With what are you seeking to please God ? Honour ? God does not want honour. Or wisdom ? God does not want your wisdom, nor learning, nor outward profession, nor knowledge. These you may have, and be admired for the possession of ; and you may have nothing that assimilates you to God. If you know not the hidden life, you know nothing: the princes and wise men of this world knew not, and so they crucified the Lord of glory.

Have you been doing this ? If so, even now turn to the Lord Jesus. Look at the testimony of Him in every passage of His word, and you will see that it is one whole testimony of love. It shews the work of the Lord Jesus undertaken and accomplished for sinners, the Spirit's witness of Him, the Father's love in sending Him. Till this is understood, the testimony of God's witnesses is spent in vain, as far as regards those who receive it not, and threatened vengeance awaits them.

May the Lord introduce and nourish this seed in your souls, give you the tastes, desires, and aims of His people, and fill you with unspeakable, everlasting blessing hereafter. Amen.

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