

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT13B)
Matthew 13:10-17

The Purpose of the Parables of Matthew 13 (13:10-17)

Introduction

The kingdom motif has played a major role in Matthew's gospel. Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" on 33 occasions.¹ He uses the phrase "kingdom of God" on 5 occasions.² He uses the term "kingdom" on seventeen occasions.³ J. Dwight Pentecost has stated that it is "almost impossible to make one's way" through the maze of interpretations.⁴ In my opinion, much of the scholarly discussion of the kingdom of God is at such an abstract level to be essentially meaningless and/or irrelevant to the Church Age believer. For instance,

- Nineteenth century liberal theologians Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack believed that the kingdom of God is not something to be established in the future, but is now present in the form of the brotherhood of man. Thus, the predominant liberal view was that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke was a present ethical, non-temporal, and non-political kingdom.
- Johannes Weiss believed that Jesus expected the kingdom to come in the immediate future and that Jesus' ethical commands were **interim rules** (rules applicable to the period between His two advents) in anticipation of the imminent kingdom and not rules of conduct for all time.
- Albert Schweitzer's view built on Weiss' with the exception that Schweitzer believed that Jesus was so discouraged that the kingdom did not come that He died in despair and disillusionment.

We will not waste any time examining the liberal perspective on the subject of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry; however, I will note in passing that it is readily apparent that these liberal views ignore a dispensational hermeneutic and have been very instrumental in promoting human good in the desire to advance the kingdom of God.

In the remainder of this lesson, I will provide a very brief overview of some of the more prominent perspectives toward the subject of the kingdom specifically with regard to Matthew 13. I desire to accomplish the following objectives in doing so: 1) understand the primary reasons why classic and revised dispensationalists have allowed the Church in these parables; 2) sort through the confusing maze of perspectives on the kingdom and on the purpose of the parables in Matthew 13; and 3) demonstrate how these traditional dispensationalists have established a precedent using an inconsistent hermeneutic.

Objective #1 – The primary reasons I believe that traditional dispensationalists have included the Church in these parables are 1) they have attempted to address questions related to the nature of the kingdom of God during the Church Age posed by those of a Covenantal perspective who only recognize a spiritual kingdom; 2) to remain consistent with the distinction made between the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" throughout the rest of the Gospels in connection to #1 above; 3) a tendency to associate the word "mysteries" in Matthew 13:11 with the Church since Paul uses the term in that manner in the Pauline epistles; and 4) a tendency to overemphasize the sovereignty of God when interpreting the

¹ The 33 occasions in which the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is used in Matthew are 3:1; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19 (twice), 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52, 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1; and 25:14.

² The five occasions in which the phrase "kingdom of God" is used in Matthew are 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31; and 21:43.

³ The seventeen occasions in which the term "kingdom" is used in Matthew are 4:23; 6:10, 13; 8:12; 9:35; 12:25, 26; 13:19, 38, 41, 43; 16:28; 20:21; 24:7, 14; 25:34; and 26:29.

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 247.

phrase “to them it has not been given” in Matthew 13:11 when trying to understand the purpose of the parables verses realizing the reason that some were not given understanding is that they chose not to receive. The last point (#4) recognizes the close association between a thought paradigm that has been heavily influenced by Calvinistic thought (sovereignty of God emphasis) and covenantal (spiritualizing) interpretation of Scripture.

In the remainder of the lesson, I will focus upon *objectives #2 and #3*, i.e. sort through the confusing maze of perspectives on the kingdom and on the purpose of the parables in Matthew 13 and demonstrate how these traditional dispensationalists have established a precedent using an inconsistent hermeneutic.

Covenant Theology

Covenant theology understands that Jesus will return as He promised and that He will bring in the fullness of the kingdom; however, this aspect of their understanding is minimized in contrast to an emphasis upon the nature of the kingdom today. In other words, they are so focused upon the spiritual nature of the kingdom that they neglect (to the point of denying the Millennium – amillennialist) truths related to earthly, temporal kingdom of God that will one day be established. Charles Hodge is one example of this system of theology.

First, it is spiritual. That is, it is not of this world. It is not analogous to the other kingdoms which existed, or do still exist among men. It has a different origin and a different end. Human kingdoms are organized among men, under the providential government of God, for the promotion of the temporal well-being of society. **The kingdom of Christ was organized immediately by God, for the promotion of religious objects. It is spiritual, or not of this world,** moreover, because it has no power over the lives, liberty, or property of its members; and because all secular matters lie beyond its jurisdiction...**The kingdom of Christ, under the present dispensation, therefore, is not worldly even in the sense in which the ancient theocracy was of this world.**⁵

More recently, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

It is a kingdom which is to come, yes. But it is also a kingdom which has come. ‘The kingdom of God is among you’ and ‘within you’; the kingdom of God is in every true Christian. He reigns in the Church when she acknowledges Him truly. The kingdom has come, the kingdom is coming, the kingdom is yet to come. Now we must always bear that in mind. Whenever Christ is enthroned as King, the kingdom of God is come, so that, while we cannot say that He is ruling over all in the world at the present time, He is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all His people.⁶

Of course, what is not explicitly stated in these references is that on most occasions when the covenant theologian recognizes the kingdom which is to come, it is the **eternal** kingdom and **not the earthly** kingdom that is being acknowledged. The promises of the Old Testament are viewed as having been largely fulfilled by the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus, and the spread of the gospel to all nations although their complete realization will be seen when Christ returns in judgment.

Historic Premillennialists and Progressive Dispensationalists

As a general rule, these two groups have emphasized the flip side of the coin when compared to the Covenant theologian. [Basically, progressive dispensationalists are just the newer form of the group known as Historic Premillennialists]. These groups of theologians emphasize the future literal fulfillment

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, reprinted 1995), 604-605.

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959-60, reprinted 1997), 16.

of the Old Testament promises regarding an earthly kingdom, while at the same time allowing for some fulfillment of these Old Testament promises today in the Church Age. Instead of the view that the Church is related to the kingdom by virtue of only being a participant in the future Messianic kingdom, they have adopted a *both/and* or an *already/not yet* view of the kingdom in which the kingdom of God is viewed as having already arrived in an inaugural form and will not be fully consummated until the Second Coming of Christ. In other words, this position attempts to incorporate a covenantal perspective into a dispensational framework.

The positive aspect of this approach is that these views attempt to address certain passages and issues that have been largely neglected or not examined fully by traditional (classic and revised) dispensationalists; however, the negative is that in doing so, their interpretation of certain passages inevitably leads to a degree of legalism and a view of the believer in relation to the state that is influenced by laws directed to Israel. The kingdom and the Church gets confused. Some of the more prominent names connected with these positions are George Ladd, D.A. Carson, Craig Blaising, Darryl Bock and Robert Saucy.

Classic and Revised Dispensationalists (a.k.a. Traditional Dispensationalists)

Depending upon the particular question at issue, there are different positions taken by traditional dispensationalists. In general, the major point of distinction between classic and revised dispensationalists has to do with their views regarding the eternal state of Jewish believers and Church Age believers, i.e. heavenly or earthly people. Classic dispensationalists saw a distinction, whereas revised dispensationalists either placed all the redeemed in heaven or on the new earth. With regard to the subject of the kingdom in the Gospels and the phrase “mysteries of the kingdom” found in Matthew 13:11, the following chart reflects the positions of some of the major traditional dispensationalists.

| Name | Classic or Revised | Kingdom of Heaven/God Position | The phrase “mysteries of the kingdom” |
|---------------|--------------------|--|---|
| C.I. Scofield | Classic | Believed that the two phrases were distinct, i.e. the <i>kingdom of God</i> referred to the moral rule of God without reference to a dispensation whereas the <i>kingdom of heaven</i> was a reference to the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant that began with Jesus Christ in His 1 st Advent and would culminate in the Millennium. He saw the kingdom of heaven as consisting of three phases, i.e. at hand with the 1 st Advent, mystery form during the Church, and Millennial. ⁷ | After Jesus’ death, the kingdom of heaven was present in mystery form although he tried to distinguish the mystery form from the Church. He considered the mystery form to be <i>Christendom</i> and defined it as a mystery form of the Davidic kingdom to be established on earth one day. ⁸ |

⁷ Craig Blaising & Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1993), 30-31.

⁸ Ibid.

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| Lewis S. Chafer | Classic | Believed that the two phrases were distinct, i.e. the <i>kingdom of God</i> referred to the sovereign authority of God over all creation and the phrase <i>kingdom of heaven</i> referred to the Davidic, earthly, Messianic kingdom. ⁹ | Essentially the same as Scofield; however, Chafer attempts to distinguish it from the Davidic kingdom. ¹⁰ |
| Alva J. McClain | Revised | No distinction between terms. However, McClain introduced the terminology of a <i>universal kingdom</i> and a <i>mediatorial kingdom</i> . The former was God's sovereignty over all things, whereas the latter was God's rule over the earth through a divinely chosen mediator. The Church was seen as an interregnum, a period between the reigns. ¹¹ | Apparently no mystery form of the kingdom today. |
| Stanley Toussaint | Revised | Agreed with McClain. ¹² | Agreed with McClain. ¹³ |
| Charles C. Ryrie | Revised | Agreed with McClain in regard to the idea of a universal kingdom; however, largely followed Scofield without Scofield's terminology in regard to the kingdom of heaven. He simply used the phrase Davidic kingdom to refer to the same concept. At the end of the Millennium, both Israel and the Church will be in heaven under | Ryrie agreed with Scofield's view of the mystery form of the kingdom and called it Christendom also. Christendom spanned the period between the Advents of Christ. Ryrie also recognized a spiritual kingdom which he defined as the rule of Christ over the Church. Thus, the spiritual kingdom was that aspect of Christendom that |

⁹ Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Volume V* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 315-16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹¹ Blaising & Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 39-40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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| | | the universal kingdom of God. ¹⁴ | consisted of believers of the Church Age. ¹⁵ |
| John Walvoord | Revised | Walvoord defends a distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. In this regard, Walvoord is more like Scofield. Walvoord used the phrases <i>universal kingdom</i> to refer to God's sovereignty over all that He made and the phrase <i>spiritual kingdom</i> to refer to what is essentially Scofield's definition of the kingdom of God, i.e. God's rule over the saved of all ages. ¹⁶ | Walvoord uses Scofield's language, i.e. the mystery form of the kingdom. However, Walvoord equates the mystery form with the Church and does not adopt a trans-dispensational view, i.e. the mystery form is the period between the Advents of Christ. ¹⁷ |
| J. Dwight Pentecost | Revised | Recognized that the terms are used interchangeably on some occasions, but they are not synonymous. Used the phrase <i>spiritual kingdom</i> in a manner similar to Walvoord's kingdom of God, i.e. God's rule over the saved of all ages. However, he also recognized that the phrase <i>kingdom of heaven</i> sometimes referred to the Davidic kingdom of the Millennium. So, Pentecost also recognized a distinction between the phrases. ¹⁸ | The mystery form of the kingdom in Matthew 13:11 is viewed as the period between the Advents of Christ and "is composed of saved and unsaved alike (wheat and tares, good and bad fish)." ¹⁹ |

¹⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42-44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 142-144.

¹⁹ Ibid., 143.

What we see from this brief analysis is that there is much diversity of opinion between respected theologians regarding the meaning of the kingdom and specifically the phrase, the “mysteries of the kingdom” in Matthew 13:11. Some of this is due to an attempt to address the attacks upon dispensational thought by the covenant theologian, a theological system which has dominated the larger portion of professing, organized Christian religion since the second century with Origen. The result is that the parables of Matthew 13 are seen as presenting teaching that is somewhat divorced from the greater context of the chapter and which require a certain amount of eisegesis to interpret depending upon one’s particular slant. Also, a certain inconsistency in hermeneutic is introduced that merely opens the door for other passages to be interpreted using the same inconsistencies.

My View of the Parables of Matthew 13 and the Phrase “the Mysteries of the Kingdom”

The parables of Matthew 13 should be interpreted in view of Jesus’ consistent message and purpose in the gospel narrative both prior to Matthew 13 and subsequent to the chapter until His acknowledgment of the nation’s rejection and teaching regarding the final seven years of the Age of Israel (a.k.a. the Tribulation) and the judgment at His Second Advent in Matthew 23:37ff. This means that not until later in Matthew’s narrative (i.e. Matthew 23:27ff) does the focus of Jesus’ ministry shift from teaching concerning the kingdom. Both Jesus and His disciples were focused upon the “gospel of the kingdom” until then. This also means that the parables of Matthew 13 relate exclusively to the kingdom about which Jesus and His disciples taught. This all occurred during the Age of Israel just prior to the beginning of the Church at Pentecost. Jesus was not presenting a spiritual form of the kingdom to the exclusion of the temporal/political kingdom. He did not come to present a mystery form of the kingdom.

This means that the first parable of the sower that we studied in our last lesson teaches that "the word of the kingdom" will be preached, but the "word of the kingdom" will be rejected by those whose hearts have been hardened, and by those who become persecuted because of the "word of the kingdom," and by those who allow the details of life to choke out the "word of the kingdom." However, there will be one group who will receive the "word of the kingdom" and there will be various levels of divine production from their lives. The parable of the sower relates to the gospel of the kingdom in which the kingdom was offered prior to the nation’s rejection of Jesus and which will one day be preached again in the Tribulation.