

## Jesus the Christ (5 BCE-30 CE)

### *Teaching Through Parables*

Readings: *Matthew 13:1-52; Mark 4:1-34; Luke 8:4-18; 13:16-21*

### ***Reflections:***

- Jesus used many creative ways of communicating. One of his most common approaches was to tell parables or word pictures. This approach avoids falling into giving people a list of do's and don'ts or simple moralisms and forces his listeners to reflect on the transferrable principles. The list of parables found in Matthew 13 is the most comprehensive collection in any of the gospels. Matthew has a strong emphasis on capturing Jesus' teaching and so this aligns with his summary teaching in Matthew 5 to 8 called the Sermon on the Mount.
- The parable of the seed and the four kinds of soil: This is one of the most well known parables. Here we see again Jesus is focusing almost exclusively on a person's heart condition in determining response to what God says. The word of God in this context is not the Old Testament Torah although that may be implied. It is more likely a response to Jesus' message and the truth he declared. The various soils represent the different conditions of the heart. The parable also outlines a number of competing forces that work against the heart remaining soft, open and responsive:
  - The well worn path: People have become hardened and the enemy from the wear and tear of life and the enemy can easily steal the truth from a person's heart.
  - The shallow soil: a person is simply shallow and doesn't allow the truth to really sink in. As soon as tough times come, they give up.
  - The thorn infested soil: people whose hearts are infested with obsessing about material things, fears, wanting to get ahead. They hear the truth but then their preoccupations and emotions choke the truth from really bearing fruit.
  - The good soil: a person with a humble, soft and responsive heart.
- The parable also suggests that different people respond with varying degrees of fruit bearing. Some people when they embrace and live the message of Jesus have a big impact and bear a lot of fruit. Others still respond whole heartedly but have less impact

or fruitfulness. It is good to know that we don't all have to be the same to be fully valued before God. God embraces our uniqueness.

- The reason for parables: In the middle of this parable, Jesus explains the role of parables as a way to sift people. Jesus points out that the religious leaders have developed calloused hearts. They barely listen and have closed their eyes. In other words, they have made intentional and repeated decisions to reject what God is trying to communicate and in the process have permanently blocked their ability to perceive God. A callous is a toughening of the skin so that you can't feel things. Their calloused hearts could not feel people's pain or be sensitive to God's touch or movement. Jesus said that if they would have been open, they would have understood with their hearts, turned from their sin (particularly religious sin) and received divine healing and restoration. As it is, Jesus chose to speak in a way that separated people: those who were hardened and calloused and those who were soft, humble and seeking. Parables are pictures that you don't immediately understand but require reflection and mediation until you have that "ah ha!" moment. Jesus didn't make it easy for people to follow him. He made it tough. He wanted to see what was inside them. "Do you want me? Do you want the truth? If not, then don't worry, you won't get what I am saying and you can carry on with your life." I wonder if God usually speaks in a still small whisper for the very same reason.
- The parable of the weeds: This parable reminds us that we can't be the judge of who is in and out in God's good books within his kingdom. We also see in this parable that God is comfortable with a constant intermixing between those who get it and those who don't. God isn't looking for a pure community of the spiritually elite but will allow there to be constant mingling and interacting between those whose hearts are soft and those whose hearts are not. We can trust God to sort out everything in the end. We should also notice that the parable suggests that it is the work of the enemy to send people into community to cause this problem. We shouldn't over-spiritualize this parable but should accept that even if it looks like the enemy is working we can still trust God to sort it all out in the end. We don't need to go and try to root out every person who seems to be not in line with the message and grace of Christ. Over and over Jesus challenges us and encourages us to not focus on the appearances and to simply trust God. This parable ends with a cool thought: "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father."
- We see in the first two parables how Jesus explains things to his disciples but not to the crowds. Again this reminds us to keep seeking that intimate relationship with Christ, to keep pressing into that closer and deeper relationship where more and more things make sense and we can more clearly hear his heart and grasp the meaning of his truth for us.
- The parable of the lighted lamp: Israel was supposed to be a light to the Gentiles and instead they were living in a cocooned life, seeking to hide and defend themselves from

the nations around them. Jesus challenges them that God wants to have his light revealed so that all can see. This light was meant to be disclosed and revealed. As John's biography records, Jesus often said that he was the light of the world (see John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5). We see in Matthew 5:14-16 that Christ's followers will become the light of the world. We are called to let our light shine before all people: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." This parable continues to explain the importance of not cloistering or cocooning within safe Christian community but on the contrary to look for pedestals or public opportunities to communicate his message and demonstrate his compassion.

- The parable of the measure: the message of this teaching is short but powerful. The way we measure others, we will be measured. Yikes! In other words, the standards we use against other people will be used against us with some added on top. The more mercy we show, the more mercy we will receive in abundance. Jesus goes on to say something a bit shocking. Those who have, receive much more. Those who don't have, lose the little they have. Here Jesus is not talking about wealth but about understanding. If you get it (have ears to hear and eyes to see), then you will keep learning, discovering and understanding more and more about God. If you don't get it, pretty soon you won't get anything. The religious leaders were losing any sense of understanding about God as they actively rejected Jesus, God's Messiah.
- The parables of the growing kingdom: Jesus now tells three parables about how the kingdom grows.
  - The seed growing: The kingdom grows like a seed. Once it is planted it grows all by itself right up to the harvest (the final judgment). There is no need to have to do anything but simply allow the seed to be planted and then look out!
  - The mustard seed: The seed of the kingdom might be the smallest seed you can imagine but it will grow into a tree (rather than the anticipated bush) bigger than any plant in the garden. Here we see the unexpected. Instead of bush you get a tree and it is huge. In fact, the birds of the air (the marginalized and the poor) can even find a place of safety and refuge in this tree.
  - The yeast: This is a funny parable. A woman hides some yeast in a massive amount of flour and then it explodes into a huge amount of dough. Why is she hiding it? It is the principle of the secret kingdom. The exploding dough parallels the bush that turns into a tree. The nations of the world will respond and the message of the kingdom will into a much larger community than anyone could have ever imagined.

- The parable of the hidden treasure: Here Jesus picks up on this notion of the secret kingdom. A man finds a treasure, hides it again, then goes and sells all he has to purchase the field it is in. Here we see something that looks crazy to outsiders. A man selling everything with joy! He looks like he is losing everything but in fact what people don't know is that he is gaining a kind of wealth no one could ever imagine.
- The parable of the pearl: Ditto to the above parable. ☺
- The parable of the net: This parable returns to the themes found in the parable of the weeds. The kingdom catches in its net all kinds of people but not all have hearts true to God. They are in community but not living in communion with God. In the end, God will sort it out at the judgment. Again we are warned not to judge by appearances but to trust God.
- The parable of treasures: Jesus now makes a profound statement. Someone who is religious is not without hope! Someone who was at one time religious but then comes into a full understanding of the kingdom can then go back into the storehouse of their religious understanding and learning and find treasures. For those taught the Torah, once they understood Jesus and his message, they would be able to go back into the Torah and discover an incredible wealth of insight into God. We must remember that God loves to redeem everything he can. If we have messed up, he loves to redeem us by transforming our broken past into something he uses for the future. If we were hyper-religious, he will want to redeem those things we learned and experienced to help others. God's grace is that big!
- This section on the parables ends with a recap. Jesus spoke using parables as a way to reveal the secrets of God's work to his disciples but also to keep those who were not true seekers of truth hearing but not understanding. Again we are challenged to always seek first his kingdom and trust that everything else will be given to us as well.