

## Parables of the Kingdom:

### The Sower, Mt 13:1-23

#### BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

- The kingdom parables in Mt 13 reinforce what he has already told them, that his coming was neither militarily nor intellectually coercive (11:25-27), he came as the meek burden-bearer (11:28-30), and only the meek could recognize and follow him (11:25, 28).
- The context: Jesus speaks the parables “that same day” (13:1) that he has confronted Pharisaic opposition (12:24-45) and offered a culturally offensive statement about his family (12:46-50).
- The average Palestinian harvest may have yielded 7.5-10 times the seed sown.

#### QUESTIONS

##### *The Sower: 13:1-9, 18-23*

1. In Mk 4:13, in the parallel passage where Jesus explains the parable, reads  
And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”  
What is Jesus saying? Why does he open this group of kingdom parables with the parable of the sower?
2. Given the context in Matthew, what is the “message of the kingdom” of Mt 13:19? (You may want to glance at the rest of Mt 13.) Is this only a warning for those hearing the Gospel the first time? (What did Jesus mean by “fall away” in v. 22?)
3. Gary DeLashmutt asserts that the following is a central message of this parable:  
In its final phase, God's kingdom will come dramatically to all humanity in the arrival of the King himself in all of his glory and power (read Matthew 24:30). But during *this* phase, his kingdom comes and spreads through the sharing of a message to individuals.  
Do you agree? How would this parable have contradicted popular first-century expectations about the coming of the kingdom of God? How do you observe the coming of the kingdom around you?
4. In Mk 4:25, which is parallel to Mt 13:10-15 (where Jesus says why he is speaking in parables), Jesus says, “Consider carefully what you hear.” What does he mean?
5. Is the harvest of one’s life a good diagnostic for the health and productivity of the seed of the message planted in one’s life? Can one work backwards to prevent these three “failure modes” (as an engineer might call them)?

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<sup>1</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*.

*Teaching in Parables: 13:10-17*

6. Read Is 6:5-12. Of what was Isaiah sent to warn Israel? What would this quote have suggested to the disciples?
7. Other ancient teachers saved special truths for their disciples alone—such as Plato, wary of meeting the fate of his teacher Socrates. N. T. Wright contends that Jesus taught in a cryptic fashion because of the volatility of his message:

Someone who is telling strangely familiar stories and meaning the wrong things by them will land up in trouble. The parable about defilement, about the things which come out of or go into a person, in which the former defile and the latter do not, is a cryptic invitation to abandon one of the most cherished cultural boundary markers of Israel, a social and religious symbol which people in recent memory had adhered to even when the result was torture and death. [Mt 15:10-20. See e.g. 2 Macc 6:18-31; 7:1-42.] It is as though someone, claiming to represent the real hope for Polish Roman Catholics at a time of foreign domination, were to tell a short story in which, cryptically and symbolically, the figure of Mary was quietly downgraded or set aside. If people really understood what was being said, a lynching would always be on the cards.” [*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 179.]

Wright suggests that Jesus’ most blunt parable, the wicked tenants, supports this: When Jesus is ready to face a violent response he speaks more plainly, and is crucified.

- a. Do you agree with Wright?
  - b. Is this why none of Jesus’ disciples also taught in parables?
  - c. What was so volatile about *this* parable’s message, that Jesus didn’t give the interpretation to all his listeners?
8. Matthew says that Jesus spoke in cryptic or unexplained parables so as to enhance comprehension of some and avoid comprehension in others (13:12). Of the incomprehensibility of Jesus’ parables, R. F. Capon writes,

True enough, when he was alone with his disciples, he spoke more plainly—giving them, he claimed, nothing less than the mystery itself. But it is hard to see that such directness had a different result. On three separate occasions, for instance, he spoke quite clearly about the certainty of his dying and rising at Jerusalem, but when he came to those mighty acts themselves, his disciples might as well never have heard a word he said. The mystery of the kingdom, it seems, is a radical mystery: even when you tell people about it in so many words, it remains permanently intractable to all their attempts to make sense of it. [*Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 5-6.]

Was the mystery of the kingdom a mystery only to those who expected a conquering-king messiah, or is Capon right, and is the Gospel a mystery to all those who first hear it? If so, then why did Jesus use parables?

*Fun Fact:* The word “seed” (*sperma*) never appears in the Greek text of the parable of the sower.