

Part I: Parables

Lesson One

The Kingdom of God What Happens When the Gospel Is Preached

Introduction

If a wife says that her husband “sure is like a bear in the morning,” what point is she trying to make by that comparison? What is she likely *not* trying to say about her husband?

She’s likely trying to describe her husband as being surly or grouchy in the morning—not that he is hairy and eats raw fish that he catches from a stream.

We call this little picture a *simile*, a figure of speech using *like* or *as* to illustrate a truth.

The first section of this study will be on *parables*, which are often defined as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. A parable is an *extended simile* or *metaphor*, that is, one extended into a longer story containing various elements.

Throughout the lessons on parables, we will emphasize this important truth: To read parables correctly, treat them like the simile above. Start by discovering the main point of comparison between the parable and the kingdom of God, and only then, carefully note other elements in the parable that may have parallels to life in the kingdom.

Studying God’s Word

When we Christians pray “your kingdom come” in the Lord’s Prayer, I’m sure that many of us think of heaven, the place where God’s throne is often pictured in the Bible.

But throughout Christ’s ministry, he often told parables about the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven,” and as you read those parables, it soon becomes clear that Jesus isn’t describing heaven itself.

Martin Luther’s catechism rightly teaches us that God’s kingdom comes when the gospel is taught in its truth and purity. As we study the “parables of the kingdom” in the next three lessons, we should understand the kingdom of God as being *what happens whenever the gospel is preached*. Or to put it another way, *what happens when the King does his work of extending his rule* throughout the world through the gospel.

The preaching of the Word gathers true believers and bold hypocrites

The gospel is the most powerful force on earth. It’s the message that God in love sent his Son to die so that forgiveness of sins might be his free gift to the world. It’s not surprising that this message always has an effect. What may be surprising is the effect it sometimes has.

Read Matthew 13:47-50.

1. What were caught in the same net? What do they stand for?

Good fish and bad fish. They stand for the righteous and the wicked, that is, believers and unbelievers.

2. If the preaching of the gospel is the net, where should you always expect to find believers and unbelievers side by side?

Where the gospel is most often preached: in Christian churches.

3. What expectations should this give us about life in the visible church?

God *tells us* to expect to find unbelievers and hypocrites within the church. That doesn't (necessarily) mean that the church is being managed improperly; it's simply something God predicts will happen until the end of the world.

4. If we take Christ's words to heart, what personal question should this lead us to ask ourselves?

These words are not only a call for perseverance within the church. They also ask us to reflect on this question: *What kind of fish am I?* Examine your hearts and lives for any signs commitment to the gospel is growing weak or failing to bear fruit in your life. Run back to your Savior for forgiveness and strength.

The preaching of God's Word does not segregate believers from unbelievers

While most parables have one simple point of comparison, Christ himself reveals multiple points of comparison in the next parable.

Read Matthew 13:24-30,36-43.

5. Identify what each part of the parable represents:

- a. The field

The entire world.

- b. The sower

The Son of Man (Jesus).

- c. The wheat

The sons of the kingdom (believers).

- d. The weeds

All that causes sin and all who do evil.

- e. The harvest

The end of the world.

6. At times this parable is used to discourage "hypocrite hunts" within the church. What element in the parable tells us that this is not Christ's point here?

The field is the *world*, not the church.

7. How might Christians work against the point of this parable and seek to isolate themselves from unbelievers in the world?

A number of answers are possible. We can do this by intentionally not making friends with anyone who isn't a Christian, seeking to have our social life revolve only around church, etc. Historically, the calls from "Christian" leaders to kill or expel unbelievers are also fitting examples.

But if we do these things, we no longer have a chance to share the gospel with those who need it!

The preaching of God's Word is worth more than all else

Maybe the last two parables discouraged you. "Will even the church be peppered with hypocrites?" we ask.

To be sure, the preaching of the gospel will be accompanied by pain and frustration. That's why our next two parables are so meaningful.

Read Matthew 13:44-46.

8. What two different ways of "finding the gospel" are apparent in these parables? Can you give examples of each?

The parable of the treasure in the field shows that the gospel is at times found unexpectedly. We may think of babies brought to Baptism, an unbeliever who attends a wedding or funeral and comes to faith, etc.

The parable of the pearl shows that there are those who are aggressively seeking the truth and end up finding the gospel. We may think of some of those "seekers" who try many different religions and philosophies before coming to faith in Christ.

9. If the preaching of the gospel is our highest treasure, what applications might you draw for yourself?

Some possibilities:

- Faithfully attend church where the gospel is preached.
- Pray for those who proclaim the gospel.
- Support the work of the church with your offerings.
- Encourage those who are studying for the ministry.
- Consider studying for the ministry or taking an active part in your congregation's efforts.

10. We mentioned the importance of sticking to the point of comparison. What false teachings could come from this parable if you ignore that?

We could think that the gospel is something to be hidden and kept to ourselves or that it needs to be purchased.

Summary

Key Points:

- The parables of the kingdom of heaven teach us what to expect when the gospel is preached here on earth.
- We should always expect unbelievers and believers to live side by side—both in the church and in the world—until the end of time.
- Even though it doesn't create a paradise here on earth, the preaching of the gospel is worth more than anything else.

God grant us the strength and the heart to continue faithfully preaching his Word!

During the Week

1. Read through other parables that teach us to examine our hearts to see if we're standing in the faith the way we ought to. Some possibilities are Matthew 25:11-13 and Luke 12:25-40.
2. A number of Christ's parables highlight the blessings that come from our proximity with unbelievers. Read those in Matthew 5:14,15; Mark 4:21,22; Luke 8:16; and Luke 11:33.
3. Make a list of people with whom you *regularly interact* who don't seem to believe in Jesus. Pray for them. Consider ways you might actively share your faith with them.