

WHY FOUR GOSPELS? THE FOUR-FOLD PORTRAIT OF CHRIST

in
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

PROFESSING CHRISTENDOM DURING THE ABSENCE OF THE KING

Matthew 13:1-58

When the nation of Israel rejected her King, then He began to teach “**the multitudes**” seven parables which present a prophetic, comprehensive outline of the true condition of professing Christendom during this church age.

These seven parables are recorded in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, and are called by our Lord “**the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven**” (verse 11).

Christ knew that He would soon go to the cross; that, between His death and resurrection and His return to earth in glory as Israel’s Messiah, this age of grace would intervene; and that in professing Christendom there would be true believers and false teachers with their following of hypocrites and scoffers and deluded, darkened souls.

Therefore, He taught, in these seven parables, the course of this church age; so that those who really wanted to know the truth might understand, but that those who would not love Him might not understand “**the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.**” That is what He meant when He answered the disciples’ question,

“**Why speakest thou unto them in parables?**” (verse 10).

And in His reply He quoted yet another prophecy from Isaiah concerning His coming into the world and Israel’s rejection of her King:

“**He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.**”

“Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (verses 11-17; cf. Isaiah 6:9, 10).

Surely the prophets would have rejoiced to see and hear their King! But during their earthly service they saw Him only by faith. And what was true of the Christ-rejecting nation of Israel when their King was in their midst — spiritual blindness and dullness of hearing — is always true of those who refuse to believe in the deity and atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. To such as these the Bible is a closed Book; for they repudiate the teaching of the Holy Spirit who wrote it, and who alone can interpret it.

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew clearly outlines the course of this church age, proving that the church will not convert the world, but that, when Israel’s King returns to reign, He will find both the true believers and the false professors.

Yet those who hold that the church will convert the world and “*bring in the kingdom*” pervert the actual teaching of this marvelous chapter, and try to make it conform to their interpretation of prophecy.

From our study of these seven parables, we shall see that they all present the same message — that the true and the false will both be found in professing Christendom, even until the King Himself sends His holy angels to separate the born-again souls from those who do not really love Him.

From all eternity the Son of God knew that Israel would reject Him as a nation, and that professing Christendom would include the true and the false; but He did not see fit to reveal the “**mysteries of the kingdom of heaven**” until He spoke these seven parables unto the multitude “**by the sea side**” some nineteen hundred years ago and more.

That is why we read in verses 34, 35 of this chapter these significant words,

“ . . . without a parable spake he not unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.”

The Holy Spirit, through Paul in Ephesians, spoke of this same church age in these words:

“ . . . by revelation he made known unto me the mystery . . . which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel . . . the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Ephesians 3:3-10).

Now a **“mystery”** in Scripture is not something mysterious, but something *“not hitherto revealed.”* And the **“mystery”** concerning the church, which is being called out during this age of grace, while Israel’s King is away, was first foretold by our Lord in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, and later and more fully revealed to Paul.

“The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” — to repeat for emphasis — outline the true character of professing Christendom while Israel’s King is away, just waiting for His bride to be called out before He returns with her in glory to rule over Israel and all the earth as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In our consideration of Matthew 11:11, where the Lord said that **“the least in the kingdom of heaven”** is greater than the truly **“great”** John the Baptist, we spoke briefly of the meaning of the phrase, **“the kingdom of heaven.”** We need to remind ourselves of the significance of this expression, if we are to understand our Lord’s teaching through the seven parables of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew.

We saw that **“the kingdom of heaven,”** a term used only in Matthew, in accordance with the purpose of the book, refers to the rule of the heavens over this earth in the Person of God’s appointed King, the Son of David.

We have seen that the preaching of **“the gospel of the kingdom”** announced the **“kingdom of heaven”** as at hand — until Israel rejected her King. And now, **“the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,”** not hitherto revealed, are being fulfilled in this church age. Moreover, we have seen that, during the reign of the Antichrist, the faithful Jewish remnant will preach once more **“the gospel of the kingdom,”** announcing the soon coming of Israel’s once-rejected King.

Perhaps we shall better understand the meaning of this all-important truth if we pause for a moment to explain a more inclusive term, used by our Lord when He talked to Nicodemus; we refer to the expression, **“the kingdom of God.”**

In John 3:3, 5 Christ said to Nicodemus,

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Here our Lord explained that **“the kingdom of God”** can be entered by man only on the basis of the new birth.

The holy angels and all unfallen beings, including the cherubim and the seraphim, are in **“the kingdom of God.”** Wherever the authority of God is recognized, there is **“the kingdom of God.”**

“The kingdom of heaven,” Christ’s personal rule over this earth, will be in **“the kingdom of God,”** just as the state of California is in the United States of America. But it would be erroneous to speak of California and the United States synonymously. In like manner, the church will be in **“the kingdom of God,”** even as **“the kingdom of heaven”** will be in **“the kingdom of God.”**

But, to repeat, **“the kingdom of heaven”** is synonymous with Messiah’s kingdom over this earth. That is why the use of the expression is most significant in the book of Matthew, whereas the other evangelists do not mention it at all.

Therefore, the seven parables, which present in outline the course of events between the setting aside of Israel as a nation and God’s dealing with them once more as a nation, are called **“the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”**

The first two verses of chapter thirteen of Matthew are also significant, for the actions of our Lord are important, as well as His words:

“The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.”

Then it was that He **“spake unto them in parables.”** **“The same day”**; that is, the day when He pronounced judgment upon Israel, Jesus went out of **“the house”** and sat **“by the sea side.”**

From the seventeenth chapter of Revelation we learn that the sea is a type of the Gentile nations.

Therefore, Christ’s going out of the house to the sea side was prophetic of His leaving the house of Israel and going to the Gentiles during the setting aside of His ancient people.

And now let us read these seven parables before we look at each one briefly: The parable of the sower, of the wheat and the tares, of the mustard tree, of the leaven, of the hidden treasure, of the pearl of great price, and of the dragnet.

1. The Parable of the Sower
verses 3-9, 18-23.

“Behold, a sower went forth to sow . . .”

The story is familiar to all of us; and the Lord Himself gave us the interpretation thereof.

Moreover, His explanation of the very similar parable of the wheat and the tares adds more light to this first parable; for in that interpretation He said, in verses 37-39,

“He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the consummation of the age (R. V.); and the reapers are the angels.”

In the parable of the sower, as also in the parable of the wheat and the tares, **“the field is the world.”** Here, however, the good seed is the Word of God, which falls upon four kinds of soil, only one of which brings forth fruit. Hindering the growth of the seed sown are the birds, the stony ground, and the thorns, representing the Christless world, the flesh, and the devil.

Thus the Lord made the meaning very plain. During His absence there is this period of sowing the seed. Some ground yields an abundant harvest; other ground is stony. Some who hear the Gospel message heed it, while others turn a deaf ear to its appeal. During the absence of the King the sowing of the seed continues, but nothing in the parable indicates that all who hear will accept the offer of salvation. Nothing indicates that the church will convert the world. On the contrary, this parable explains what the book of Acts and the later epistles teach, that in this age God is calling out **“a people for his name”** from among a **“crooked and perverse generation”** (Acts 15:14; Philippians 2:15).

2. The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares verses 24-30, 36-43.

As we have just read from Christ’s own words, the second parable makes clear that during this age there is to be a mixture of the false and the true in professing Christendom. A tare is a weed greatly resembling wheat. It represents a spurious Christianity that will grow side by side with the true, and will continue until the end of the age. At that time there will be a great separation, when the reapers, God’s holy angels, shall glean the harvest, even as the Lord said:

“ . . . the harvest is the end of the world [consummation of the age]; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (verses 39-42).

The apostasy in professing Christendom is very clearly foretold here.

Moreover, even as it is difficult to distinguish between wheat and tares, so also many who profess the name of Christ, at the same time denying His deity, His atoning work on Calvary, His bodily resurrection and His coming glory — many of these appear to be what they are not, parading a righteousness of their own, even as they reject the righteousness of God which is in Christ Jesus, the Lord. And it shall be so until the end of the age, for the Lord Himself has declared it.

3. The Parable of the Mustard Tree
verses 31, 32.

“Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.”

This parable speaks of the fact that in the early church a small number made a profession of faith in Christ; then this body grew until today professing Christians are found in every part of the habitable globe. The birds of the air, coming in and lodging in the branches of the mustard tree, are not sinners entering the church to find rest, but are representatives of demons, who are working in the church to mar the testimony of God’s people, and to deceive the untaught, undermining **“the faith . . . once for all delivered unto the saints”** (Jude 3).

This is not mere supposition or fanciful interpretation; for Christ tells us in the explanation of the parable of the sower that **“the birds came and snatched away the seed.”** The parable of the mustard tree is prophetic of professing Christendom, with a great body of adherents, but sheltering a brood of darkness, as well as true believers in the Christ of God.

When we think of all the Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Russellites, and a host of adherents to other false systems, to say nothing of the many rationalists in so-called evangelical churches who take the name of Christ and yet deny the efficacy of His blood, we see how literally this parable has come to pass. There is nothing here to indicate that, when the Lord comes, He will find a converted world; just the opposite is clearly foretold.

4. The Parable of the Leaven
verse 33.

“Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”

This parable gives us an insight into the inward corruption of professing Christendom. Leaven is always a type of sin in the Scriptures; the meal here typifies the Word of God, the children’s bread. As the woman takes the leaven and hides it in the meal, **“till the whole”** is leavened; so the forces of Satan seek to hinder the teaching of the Word of God by their subtle, wicked devices, permeating **“the whole”** of professing Christendom with their evil influence.

Those who interpret the leaven to be the Gospel not only make this parable contradict all the other six; but they make leaven what the Bible never signifies it to mean. In the Old Testament ritual it always typified evil (See Exodus 12:15; 34:25). Our Lord used leaven as a symbol of false doctrine, as in Mark 8:15 He warned against the **“leaven of the Pharisees and . . . of Herod.”** In I Corinthians 5:6-8 Paul used leaven to represent **“malice and wickedness.”** Always in Scripture it typifies sin.

While the parable of the mustard tree speaks of the outward expansion of professing Christendom, the parable of the leaven represents the inward corruption of the same. If we, with our finite minds, can see flagrant tokens of this corruption, what must the all-seeing eye of a holy God behold as He looks into the hearts of those who falsely bear His name, “**wolves in sheep’s clothing**”!

5. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure
verse 44.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.”

The treasure represents Israel, now hid in the field, which typifies the world, as in the other parables in this chapter. Israel as a nation is now buried among the Gentile nations.

She is, as it were, in a national cemetery. But the day will come when she shall be as one alive from the dead. The Old Testament refers to Israel as a treasure, as the two quotations which follow state:

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people” (Exodus 19:5).

“For the Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure” (Psalm 135:4).

The man in the parable, who in his joy goes and sells all that he has and buys the field, is the Lord Jesus Christ, who on the cross of Calvary paid the price for the redemption of a world lost in sin. He set aside His glory, not His deity, to redeem the world, which is His by right of creation and His by right of redemption. The treasure, Israel, during this age is hidden in the field; but it will not always be so. After the true church has been caught away, Israel’s Messiah and King, even Jesus, will bring the dispersed of the nation of Israel out from among the Gentiles and put them in their own land.

“And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people . . . And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (Isaiah 11:10-12).

This parable can not mean that the sinner “**buyeth**” the “**treasure,**” meaning Christ; for the sinner is bankrupt! And salvation is the free gift of God’s grace. Man cannot do one thing to earn it; he must accept it by faith in the finished work of Christ.

6. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price
verses 45, 46.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”

This parable refers to the church, the body of Christ, the blood-bought company; and the merchant seeking goodly pearls is Christ, for He came **“to seek and to save that which was lost”** (Luke 19:10). The pearl of great price is the one body, the church; and the price that He paid for her was His own life’s blood on Calvary. **“Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it”** (Ephesians 5:25).

How wonderfully the pearl represents the mystical body of Christ!

This precious gem is found at the bottom of the sea. Now in the Scriptures the sea represents the Gentile nations. The church is being called out from among all the nations, and to Christ she is precious. Moreover, the pearl is produced through suffering. A grain of sand enters the oyster and causes irritation. The oyster seals the grain with a substance, layer upon layer, until the pearl is produced, fit to occupy a place in a king’s crown. Likewise, through the sufferings of Christ, believers are being baptized into the one body, which one day will shine in the Redeemer’s crown.

The difference between the hidden treasure and the pearl is significant; for the treasure is hidden in the field, which is the world; whereas the pearl is taken from the sea, a symbol of the Gentile nations.

7. The Parable of the Dragnet
verses 47-50.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world [age]: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Again, the good fish and the bad picture the true and the false in professing Christendom; and this parable, in particular, points on to the end of the age. The faithful remnant in Israel will preach once more **“the gospel of the kingdom.”** As a great net, this message will be cast into the sea of the nations, culminating in a final separation by the holy angels of the good from the bad, the true from the false.

How wonderfully these seven parables set forth in outline the history of this age, while the King is away! They show us what we may expect during His absence, and they point toward the day of reckoning that is to come upon the world when He returns in power and great glory.

They tell us not to be discouraged by the fact that the church has not led the whole world to Christ; for they tell us that it is God's purpose and plan that He shall bring the world to Himself — perhaps very soon! They encourage us to go on sowing the seed, which is the Word of God, trusting Him to give the increase, and leaving the issue with Him.

The closing verses of the chapter present the sad picture of our Lord's own acquaintances in Nazareth calling the virgin-born Son of God **“the carpenter's son”**! But Jesus said unto them,

“A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house. And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (verses 57, 58).

An interesting fact of history is found in verses 55, 56, giving us the names of the half-brothers of our Lord, born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus was born of the virgin. They were James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas. We wonder how many half-sisters He had, and what their names were; but the Holy Spirit only mentions the fact that He did have **“sisters.”**

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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