

Glad Tidings Church Life Group

Leader: Dan Thomson

Study of the Gospel of Matthew

Study Guide for Meeting on November 05, 2020

Please review chapter 17 for perspective. We will study parables contained in Matthew Chapter 18-25 (below)

The notes attached give an overview of the themes we will be touching on.

The themes are:

- The growing seed (Mark 4:26-29)
- The unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23-35)
- The vineyard workers (Matt 20:1-16)
- The wedding clothes (Matt 22:2-14)
- The wise and foolish Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)
- The bags of gold (Matt 25:14-30)

Having read the chapters during the week, we will be discussing the themes outlined and I will have a series of questions prepared to focus our discussion.

Read, study, meditate, pray – the road to enlightenment.

THE GOSPELS: MORE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 13 is the largest collection of parables that are specifically said to be about the kingdom of God. But Matthew has five additional parables describing the kingdom of God, and Mark has another. A brief analysis of these parables will show that Jesus did not describe the kingdom as an ideal age after his return. Rather, he described the kingdom as an age leading up to the final judgment.

The growing seed

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. ([Mark 4:26-29](#))

This parable, like the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of yeast in the dough, is a story of growth. The kingdom of God is not just a seed, not just a harvest—it involves the whole story of growth—a growth that occurs whether or not humans notice it or understand the way it works. The gospel produces its fruit in people’s lives, and then comes the harvest—the judgment.

The unmerciful servant

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. ([Matthew 18:23-35](#))

This entire story is what the kingdom is like, Jesus said. It's about judgment, and about the King forgiving our debts, and about our need to forgive one another. And it is also about severe consequences for those who don't.

The kingdom of God involves a time in which people are forgiven, and are likewise expected to be forgiving toward one another. The amount we owe God, so to speak, is thousands of times greater than whatever anyone might owe to us. Since he has been merciful toward us, we are to be merciful to others.

Some of the detail is exaggeration. God does not torture people in an effort to make them repay what they owe. No amount of suffering could possibly pay off our transgressions against God. This detail is a rhetorical device, used to emphasize the importance of responding to God's grace; it is not a commentary on the purpose of hell.

We do not forgive others as well as God forgives us. We always fall short in that—but this is not the unforgiveable sin. God forgives us of this failure, too. However, whenever we fail to forgive others, it shows that we have failed to appreciate how much God has forgiven us, and that we are still striving, at least in part, to earn something that has already been given to us. We live in a self-imposed torture of feeling that God is angry at us, when he really is not. We will not *experience* the forgiveness of God unless we are forgiving toward others.

The main point for us right now is that this parable describes life in this age, not our situation after Christ's return.

The vineyard workers

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one has hired us," they answered.

He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. ([Matthew 20:1-16](#))

The kingdom of heaven is an age in which we work before we are rewarded. Some work much, and others work only a little, but all are paid. This does not mean that we earn our salvation, of course; work simply provides the setting of the parable. The point is that God is generous, and he is so generous that it troubles some people.

If Jesus were describing the world after his return, the parable would not be very relevant to his audience, nor to us. The work he describes as part of the kingdom is the work we are doing now, in this age, and the grace that some people complain about is grace that can be seen in this age. Some people work long and hard to do God's will, and others work less, but in one respect the Master treats them all the same: He forgives them, whether their debt is large or small.

This parable presents us with two questions: 1) Do we think that God is too liberal? 2) Are we willing to do our best, even if it's difficult, even if others get the same reward for doing less?

The wedding clothes

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

Then he sent some more servants and said, "Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."

But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Then he said to his servants, "The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find."

So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, “How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend ?” The man was speechless.

Then the king told the attendants, “Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

For many are invited, but few are chosen. ([Matthew 22:2-14](#))

Here, Jesus compared the kingdom to a wedding feast—not the banquet itself, but to the invitations. Jesus is not talking about what it will be like after we get there, but rather how we get there in the first place. The original invitees are the unbelieving Jews, but they ignored the message and persecuted the messengers.

God then invites everyone else, both good and bad, and that includes us. But God does not want bad people to stay bad. Eventually a day of judgment will come, when we will need to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The main point of the parable—what people need to know about the kingdom of God—is that the invitations are going out now, and we need to respond to them.

The wise and foolish virgins

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.”

“No,” they replied, “there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.”

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the others also came. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us!”

But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. ([Matthew 25:1-13](#))

Jesus is talking about the day that the master will return ([Matthew 24:50](#)), and he is saying that the kingdom will then be like a wedding for which some people will be unprepared. Not everyone who wants to attend will be permitted to.

Jesus' point is not to make a prediction, but to encourage his disciples to be wise, to be prepared, to be always ready. The parable about the future is really an exhortation for today. Jesus does not say here what the oil represents, or how we "buy" more, or how we can be prepared. The point is simply that we need to be prepared.

The bags of gold

The traditional name of this next story is the parable of talents, from the Greek word *talanton*. Anciently, this was a large amount of money; the NIV has attempted to give the approximate value by translating it as "bags of gold." The precise dollar figure is not important; it represents everything that God has given to us. Some people get more than others, but God wants us to use whatever amount we have.

Again, it [the kingdom of God, v. 1] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" The man with two bags of gold also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest."

“So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ([Matthew 25:14-30](#))

Just as the good seeds produce grain for the harvest, here the good servants work for their master. There is a long time period, and the people are expected to do something, and to have some results. Those who fail to respond to the King will not be rewarded, and will miss out on the blessings of the kingdom.

The King determines how much to reward each person. He is the one who determines when to call each worker, and he determines when he will return for judgment. When Christ returns, the kingdom of God will be like the return of a wealthy landowner. Faithful servants will be rewarded; fearful and lazy servants will be excluded from the blessings.

The focus is more on the present than it is on the future. Jesus told the parable because it is relevant to the way we live now. Some will work hard and bear much fruit; others will bear less fruit, but both will be rewarded generously, and both will share in the master’s happiness.

Jesus wants the gospel to have results in our lives. He does not want us to think that he is hard, or that he makes unreasonable demands. We do not need to be afraid, or to use that as an excuse for doing nothing. Rather, we are to grow—at least a little, hopefully more. Jesus wants us to be about our Father’s business. He doesn’t always spell out exactly what we are to do, but he wants us to at least make an effort, to try while we can.

Conclusion

We have now looked at all the parables that Jesus specifically said described the kingdom. Let’s try to summarize what he said.

First, the kingdom of God begins in a small way. It is not conspicuous. Many people will not notice it. Others will hear about it and want to be part of it, but will fall away for one reason or another. The kingdom has too much work, too many trials. It is not the utopia that some people want it to be, and some people prefer the things of this world. But others treasure it so much that they are willing to give up everything for it.

The kingdom begins with God. He is the one who sows the seed; he is the one who hires the workers and gives the talents. He is the one who seeks a harvest, who sets the standards, who makes the judgments, who gives both grace and duties. He tells us to forgive others and to work for the kingdom.

When Jesus used parables to describe the kingdom, he did not describe a wonderful world that comes only after the King returns. Rather, he described a time of trials, choices and growth, and then a judgment when the King returns. Jesus does not describe what the kingdom looks like

after that. God's kingdom includes both positive consequences and negative consequences. Jesus described our own age as a time of invitation, testing and growth.

The kingdom of God is now in a stage of growth, in which we are given grace, and given opportunity to bear fruit. We are expected to be forgiving, to be working, and to be ready. For the time will come when the kingdom will be like a harvest, when accounts will be paid, and decisions will be made as to who enjoys the celebration.

Author: Michael Morrison, 2000, 2012