

Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:51-52

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If you have your Bible, please turn with me to Matthew chapter 13. We'll be looking at verses 51-52 today. This morning as we begin advent, we are starting a new sermon series looking at the parables in the kingdom just for a few weeks. We won't hit every one of them.

As we look at Matthew going from the Sermon on the Mount in our last series to looking at various parables, we can see that Matthew is divided up into several main sections that are around these big blocks of teaching, sometimes called discourses. And today's text falls in the third discourse out of five. And we see Jesus speaking in riddled stories to the crowds. And then we witness Jesus teaching the meaning of those riddles to His disciples. To the crowds, He spoke in parables. To His disciples, He gave understanding.

Follow along as I read from Matthew 13:51-52.

"Have you understood all these things?" They said to him, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Father, as we read your word and as we hear how we might understand, we are completely dependent upon you for that understanding, for you are the teacher. Although I am speaking, may my words match your words. And where my words fall short and are not in sync with yours, may they be forgotten. May they fall like chaff. And what is abiding in your word, may those things take root deep in our souls. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

As you think about different times in your life that you've learned something, where you've gained understanding, what did it take for you to understand? Did you need to hear something again and again? Did you need to see it demonstrated?

Bob Dylan once wrote, "Sometimes it's not enough to know what things mean. Sometimes you have to know what things don't mean." And Albert Einstein said, "Any fool can know. The point is to understand." And that's the point, isn't it? You can hear something. You can put it to your memory. You can even recall it later, and you lack understanding. You can see something, and you can even duplicate it in your own action and not have understanding. Understanding takes deliberate instruction, modeling, practicing, coaching, giving that feedback and further instruction, and learning things old new again.

In the sermon series we just did on the Sermon on the Mount, we discussed both the character of a disciple and we looked at practices of the disciples as what it means to live in the kingdom. And over the next several weeks, we'll be exploring a few of Jesus's parables describing the kingdom of heaven.

Before we go any further, let's just take a brief moment to define a parable. A parable is often described as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. That is a common definition. Parables in a generic sense are really just proverbs. They are comparisons. They are riddles. They are ways of describing something with short statements or extended stories. But at their core, they are comparisons of unrelated topics connected together in order to shed light on each. They usually have one meaning, but they can have multiple focal points. The caution that we have when we're interpreting parables in the gospels is that we should avoid inserting allegorical interpretations or allegorical symbolism that we are putting in the text. The caveat is when Jesus Himself gives us the clues or gives us the cues of what things symbolize.

As we seek to understand parables, we need to place them in their original context as well as why the gospel writer might be using them. What message is the author conveying about Jesus's teaching. And of course, parables have meaning for us today as we look at God's living word.

We see parables being discussed in the Old Testament. I'll give just a couple examples. From Psalm 78:2, the psalmist says, "I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings from of old." Ezekiel 17:2, "Son of man, propound a riddle and speak a parable to the house of Israel." We see even in Jesus's day that rabbi's often employed parables as teaching devices, instructional methods for people. But we need to ask the question not only what is a parable, but why did Jesus use them? And our answer comes from chapter 13:13-15 where Jesus says,

"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'" [ESV]

Jesus used parables as a way of instructing and teaching true things about the kingdom to the crowds, but He also used them as a way of shrouding the meaning of the kingdom. For those who are observing on the outside who might be intrigued, they are invitations to come closer, to draw near and learn more. To those who are repulsed or annoyed by these parables or who find them as silly nonsense, they actually move people away from what Jesus is offering. But for the disciples, He gives meaning.

As we're looking at themes of hope this advent season, themes of light in the darkness, remembering that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that the world wouldn't perish, to know the very essence of the gospel proclaimed is the announcement of Jesus's birth, that the coming Messiah, the one promised is here. He is now on the move, and He is going to be ushering in the kingdom. Everything that we've longed for, everything that we've hoped for is now entering into time and space as they've been waiting.

Through Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven breaks in. It enters into place and time and people's lives. The kingdom is proclaimed by Jesus's teaching, and it's demonstrated by His actions. And as Jesus goes about His ministry and His life, likewise as we read the word as follow Christ today, Jesus is inviting us into the kingdom. And the passage today connects that invitation to be in His kingdom to being participants as His disciples.

As we kick off this series and as we think about a couple things in this passage, we need to draw our attention to two things for today. The first is that a disciple must understand the kingdom. The core is understanding what the kingdom is. Number two, a disciple must be skilled for the kingdom.

Let's first look at a disciple must understand the kingdom. With that, let's look at verse 51. We see that Jesus is concluding this section that goes back to the beginning of chapter 13, and He's with His disciples, and He asks them a very simple question. "Have you understood all these things?" This is such an important question to ask, and we'll look at the first part of that question first, the idea of "Have you understood?"

This word is used six times in this chapter alone. And it's a key theme throughout the chapter as well as other places in Matthew. For example, in what we read in verses 13-15, Jesus is describing why He speaks to the crowds in parables. Understanding becomes an important aspect of when He explains the parable of the sower, the actual pieces of the soil and the seeds and what Jesus is describing as the meaning. To understand something involves both the basic comprehension about a particular subject, but also means that you're gaining insight that makes further connections which can be applied to your

thinking and can be incorporated into your practice. The goal of such insight is not just trivial knowledge, but it's to appropriate it, to embrace it for your understanding in your life.

The second part of this question directs the attention of the hearer to the actual object of the understanding, "all these things." What is He referencing there? He's discussing everything that's come before in this discourse. In this section at the beginning of chapter 13 as He's teaching and speaking to the crowds, He shares these parables. As He comes to an end, He's no longer with the crowds, but He's with His disciples. And He asks them, about the things that you've heard regarding what I've said about the kingdom of heaven, do you understand?

Now, Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" more often than the other gospel writers. But the reality is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is synonymous. And often, as Matthew even does himself, they are often used interchangeably. So, they're the same thing.

If you look at chapter 13 in this section of Jesus's teaching, different people outline it in various ways. Some people count seven parables. Some people count eight parables. I am of the camp that sees eight distinct parables here. In this section, there are two longer stories that then Jesus explains further to His disciples. In addition to those two, then there are several shorter parables that are more pithy statements that He makes comparing the kingdom of heaven.

The first two, the parable of the sower, which gets an explanation, and the parable of the kingdom of heaven is like the man who sows seed in a field and weeds also grow up in that field. That parable is the second parable that gets an explanation to the disciples. The shorter parables that I mentioned are a grain of a mustard seed that grows to a large plant, leaven placed in flour, treasure hidden in a field which a man goes and sells everything so that he might buy the field, a merchant in search of fine pearls who sold everything to purchase the one pearl of great price, a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind, and then the eighth parable in our text is this brief comparison about the kingdom of heaven like a householder and master of the house.

In this question, "Have you understood these things?" There is a certain level of weight that hangs in the gap of the question being asked and the answer being given. If you think about what we've discussed briefly about these parables, to then be asked, have you understood what these mean? The crowds don't understand. And the disciples are having to say, hey, Jesus, what are you talking about here? Can we get the after-lecture notes from you? But yet, we see this astounding response. They say, "Yes."

Now, Matthew is much more generous to the disciples as compared to Mark. Mark is quite down on the disciples. He criticizes them for their lack of faith, their dullness in thought, their inability to get it. But here, we see the disciples saying, "Yes."

We can say with certainty, because as the story goes on, to say yes to their understanding does not imply or necessarily mean that they have to know everything about what He's saying. But they're getting the very essence of what He's saying about the kingdom of heaven. And they're making connection with who is this proclaimer of the kingdom of heaven? Who is this who speaks with authority? Who is this who is doing miracles? How do we understand this kingdom of heaven? Well, we can only understand by the teacher who gives understanding.

For you and for me, the question is relevant as we hear Jesus asking us through the text, "Have you understood these things?" Matthew is writing it in such a way that yes, he's recounting the story, but he is asking you directly through the words on the page. For you and for me, whether you are a follower of Jesus Christ or whether you are exploring Christianity, the question is being asked. "Have you understood these things?" And in the weight of the silence, what is your response? This is rhetorical. Do you answer with yes? Do you answer with no? Do you answer with, I don't care?

All of these things are what we're witnessing in the text of how people are responding to Jesus whether they are the crowds who are observing Him and listening to what He has to say. Maybe they're

interested. Maybe they're just curious about what all the buzz is about. Maybe they're just interested in a little gossip about what's happening in the town. Maybe they're curious whether He's going to do something that they've heard rumors about. Maybe He'll do a miracle and they will stand in amazement. But maybe people are interested. Maybe they are curious. Maybe they are seeking more to what Jesus has to say.

The question for you, for me, whether you're a disciple yet or not, Jesus is asking us, "Have you understood these things?" He comes as a representation of who God is in the flesh. And He's asking us, do we understand the kingdom of heaven?

With that then come some follow-up questions. If you are indeed a disciple of Jesus, the question then becomes how are you growing in that understanding? How are you deploying that understanding that you have? How are you using it? You might even ask, what do you need to understand with more clarity? These types of questions become part of the process of what it means to be a disciple on this journey of following Jesus, walking in His ways, learning His teaching, and understanding what scripture is pointing to about who Jesus is, what He came to do, and how He accomplished it so that we might have life everlasting in Him. "Have you understood these things?"

Recognizing that to be a disciple requires us to understand what Jesus is teaching, we likewise need to move on to how a disciple must be skilled for the kingdom. After their response of "Yes," Jesus goes on to say this parable. He compares the task of the disciple to that of a scribe who's been trained in the kingdom of heaven.

Scribes were specialists in the law of Moses. They were experts. They were scholars of what we call the Old Testament. The scribes had their place in the community, and they were representatives that served on the Sanhedrin which was the supreme counsel in Judea. They served alongside Pharisees and Sadducees that were part of the religious life of the people there in Judea.

Jesus interacts with scribes throughout His ministry. And when He is referencing them, it's not usually in a positive light. But here, He's using the term and He's redefining it. He's re-appropriating what it means for them to be someone who is following them. So, as He uses this term, He's speaking about one who is familiar with the teaching of Jesus, who is well versed and connected to His ministry. It is this idea of the one who has been trained. This is a beautiful play on words. The verb is the same verb that's associated with disciple, the one who is a student. And it's the idea of the one who is in the way of the rabbi, in the way of the master who is learning and hearing and watching and seeking to imitate what they are learning.

The one who has been trained in the kingdom of heaven is a disciple of Jesus. And this word carries several implications with it. It's a process. And so, it's a process that involves a person receiving instruction. So, there's a passivity to it. I am the one who is being trained. I am the disciple. Jesus is the discipler, and I'm learning from Him. I'm receiving His teaching.

Another implication of this process of discipleship involves that the person who's receiving the instruction is in a close relationship with the instructor. It's a very different method of instruction that we don't necessarily experience in our school system of the 20th century and beyond. We've assembly-lined it. We've industrialized it. We've mechanized what learning is as content delivery, content download. Let's sit at our desk and receive instruction and then go on to the next subject. And we'll do this for 20 years of our lives, and then we'll go on to more school and do that more. And then we get to put it into practice.

The school of Jesus, which was similar to the school of the other rabbis at the time, was to come and be with me. Now, what was unique about the discipleship of Jesus was He actually selected His disciples. It was very common in that age for a person who is interested to learn from a rabbi to actually approach the rabbi and say, I would like to be your student; will you be my rabbi? But in Jesus's method,

He intentionally went out and hand-selected those He wanted to instruct. “Come, follow me.” And they put down what they were doing, and they followed Him.

Thirdly, as a process, discipleship necessarily suggests that it involves an outcome. And what is that outcome? It’s not just knowledge. It’s not just, I understand what the Bible says. I can quote what Jesus teaches. I can give you facts about what different prophets might have said. Discipleship certainly involves those things, but rather, it also goes beyond that. The outcome that Jesus is pointing His disciples to in the process of being His pupils, and same for us, is His skilled stewardship of the message. And by extension, it involves the continuation of the instructional process for new masters of the house, so to speak. Come, be with me. I will make you a master of my house. And part of my message is to actually instruct you in the ways that you can go and share with others so that they might join and be masters of my house.

What’s important to make the connection in this last parable is what Jesus is making a connection to about that master of the house. What is the master of the house to do? Verse 52, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” The word “treasure” certainly has been used previously in this chapter, and so it does imply value. It does imply something that is important and significant. But it takes on the meaning of something more like the storeroom, the storage chest, maybe something we might call a cabinet.

I’ve been reading the book by Bill Bryson *at Home: A Short History of Private Life*. He goes on to talk about how we came to use the word “cabinet.” Cabinet is a mini cabin. It’s a place to house things. So, the cabinet was the room of the house that stored the valuables, maybe the silver, maybe the flat wear, the china, whatever might have been valuable in the house. And so, it took on a meaning of the cabinet being the place that the advisers then met with the master of the house, or the council member, or the king, or the other noblemen. The cabinet took on that meaning of the place where important business takes place. And the members of my cabinet are my important and valuable trusted advisors.

Similarly, with treasure here, it takes on that meaning that what is valuable is where I put my things. As a master of the house, I know where my things are. I know what my things are. I know what I have in my inventory. You like video games or RPGs? It’s your supplies list. What do you have in your storeroom? Do you know how to use what’s in your storeroom?

So, when He’s asking us to be a scribe who has been trained in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is encouraging us to take on the skills which can utilize what is in our arsenal if you will, or what is important to us and of value. He references “what is new and what is old.” He ties these two things together.

Now, this is in contrast to the scribes of the day, the scribes that were the experts of the law of Moses. They would’ve been experts in what is old. And Jesus is making the connection that His disciples will be experts in what is old and also what is new, taking on where the story of Jesus is a fulfillment of the old and a continuation of that story, and it is able to utilize both.

Michael Wilkins, who has written quite a bit on discipleship in the gospel of Matthew writes this,

“Jesus is not merely describing the disciples, but as usual in parables is challenging them to fulfill a role. They have received treasure through his instruction. Now, they are to bring it out in teaching others. Jesus’s disciples are to give close attention to the priority of the kingdom in their lives so that they may continue to be the treasure of Jesus’s revelation to the watching world.”

Did you hear what he did? “They are to bring it out in teaching others. Jesus’s disciples are to give close attention to the priority of the kingdom in their lives so that,” there’s purpose. There’s a goal in mind with being a disciple, “they may continue to be the treasure of Jesus’s revelation to the watching world.”

His instruction is the treasure, and He entrusts us with the treasure to share that treasure with others, and to live and to be in front of the watching world.

As the master of the house, he knows what's in his inventory. He can pull it out. He's not a one-trick pony. He doesn't show preference for either the new or the old, but he ably uses both. He doesn't only know the old because he stops learning the new, and he doesn't only know the new because he's forgotten the old.

It's like with anything, really, whether you're playing a musical instrument, or whether you're dancing, or whether you're doing some sort of hobby. You start with the basics, the basic skillset that gets you going in the fundamentals of what that is. And then you play, and you learn, and you grow, and you practice, and you learn more advanced things. But those advanced things are built on the old. They go hand in hand. And so, just like jazz, what may sound to some might be horrible, to others it makes sense. It's flowing. It's working together. But it's built on something that is making sense to the people playing the music. They're playing and improvising because they know how to work with the scales of the old, and then they can make sweet transitions and flourishes and elaborations off of that.

Matthew Henry in his commentary says this.

“Christ compares him to a good householder who brings forth fruits of last year's growth and this year's gathering, abundance and variety, to entertain his friends. Old experiences and new observations all have their use. Our place is at Christ's feet. And we must daily learn old lessons over again, and new ones, also.”

So, when we go from understanding the kingdom to being skilled in the kingdom, it requires this process of discipleship. Learning, of course, cannot be reduced to merely analyzing, critiquing, or deconstructing what is false and just proclaiming and reading books on what is true. It's more than that. It certainly involves that, doesn't it? But it's more than that. It's embracing. It's constructing what is true about the kingdom of heaven by demonstrating it in our lives. It's the flourishing in our relationships. As you understand the kingdom of heaven and we see the parable of drawing value and significance to the gospel being treasure, is it treasure to you?

Of course, our prayer, our desire is may the kingdom of heaven be lived in our families. May it be experienced in our workplaces. May we demonstrate it with each other, but also to those we might invite to our community groups. And may it be proclaimed and also lived out when we are serving together in ministry.

As we see this passage summarizing what Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom of heaven, this question is put to us. Are you, am I, are we growing in our understanding and are we developing as masters of the house? Are we able to deploy gifts and skills as disciples so that others may hear and see the goodness of the gospel? Are we growing in a way that you as a disciple can call to mind the word of God in the midst of temptation? That you can show the pearl of great price to a small child? That you can sow the seed, cast the net, and walk with someone who is a person in the crowd watching Jesus and bringing them along by invitation, walking with them, and showing them, coaching them, encouraging them as a disciple of Christ?

In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus's own instruction, His own methods fit nicely with Marshall McLuhan's famous line about the medium is the message. But also, with Jesus, the messenger, the message, and the medium are all interconnected. He fulfills that perfectly in His person and how He lived His life and for what purpose He lived His life. But it is also meant to be amongst His disciples, that the message, the messenger, and the medium would be at the core shaped by the kingdom of heaven and also, the very catapult into why we would then share what the kingdom of heaven is.

As we look at parables of the kingdom this advent season, if you are a disciple of Jesus already, of course this is a wonderful time to remember and hear of things old. And maybe it's a time to learn things

of new associated with the beauty and the scandal of the incarnation, the mystery that God became flesh, the humility of that, but also the glory that God dwells among us. It is a time to see that in God's wisdom and timing, He Himself came in the form of a baby to live a life of learning the law and obeying it perfectly, growing in wisdom, growing in favor in the eyes of His family and the eyes of His community, and being called to proclaim the glories of the kingdom of heaven.

This is certainly an encouragement to you if you're not yet a disciple to move from the crowds and to draw near. There is a beautiful motion that changes in chapter 13 where He goes from being in a boat on the edge of the sea preaching to the crowds to where He then leaves, and He goes into a house to be with His disciples. Jesus is always welcoming and always inviting members of the crowd to come and be with Him so He may teach you, that you, too, would have understanding of the kingdom of heaven. There's nothing secret where if you don't understand it, that means you're outside the kingdom. No. The kingdom is here and present because Jesus is here and is present. And He calls and He invites us to be with Him.

Advent is also a time of recognizing that in addition to needing to understand the kingdom, in addition to seeing the importance that we need to be skilled in the ways of the kingdom, advent is a time of waiting. It's a time of lamenting that the world is broken. The world is in need of a savior.

Author and Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren recently wrote this in a *New York Times* article about advent. She writes this.

"I'm well aware that for most Americans, Christmas has less to do with contemplating the incarnation of Jesus than celebrating friends, family, reindeer, and Black Friday sales. Even among observant Christians, the holiday season has often been flattened into a sentimental call to warm religious feelings, if not a charged yet pointless argument over happy holidays versus merry Christmas. Still, I think advent offers wisdom to the wider world. It reminds us that joy is trivialized if we do not first intentionally acknowledge the pain and wreckage of the world."

She goes on to write,

"Our response to the wrongness of the world and of ourselves can often be an unhealthy escapism. And we can turn to the holidays as anesthesia from pain as much as anything else. We need collective space as a society to grieve, to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and in our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich, and resonant, not as an act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope."

This is the kingdom of heaven breaking forth, that in the form of a baby, the kingdom has come. In the perfection of His life being sinless, of Him proclaiming with His words to people who did not believe Him, to family members who did not recognize who He was in the beginning, and in the mystery of all this, in the mundane nature of all of this, we have our God who has made Himself known and who has taken on flesh and dwells among us. And what is fractured and cracked in our world becomes mended, repaired, and whole. There is life in His death and His resurrection.

For this advent season, this Christmas season, as we celebrate the hope that we have in Christ, it is indeed a defiant act of hope in a hopeless world. It is the light shining forth in a dark place that certainly involves our heart, and it includes our world. Christ and the kingdom of heaven is breaking forth. You here today, have you understood these things? Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we pray asking that by your Son and Spirit we would see and hear and have understanding. We pray that you would bring hope to our darkness, that you would bring forth renewed faith where there might be doubt. We pray that you would bring renewal where there is brokenness. Bring healing where there are wounds. We recognize that it is by your wounds we have been healed. We

recognize that all the beauty of the old is fulfilled in the new as we give thanks and praise to you, O Christ.
In your name we pray. Amen.