

**Matthew 13:1–23**



<sup>1</sup> On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. <sup>3</sup> And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, <sup>6</sup> and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. <sup>7</sup> Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. <sup>8</sup> But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears ought to hear.”

<sup>10</sup> The disciples approached him and said, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” <sup>11</sup> He said to them in reply, “Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. <sup>12</sup> To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because ‘they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.’ <sup>14</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says:

‘You shall indeed hear but not understand you shall indeed look but never see. <sup>15</sup> Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.’ <sup>16</sup>

“But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. <sup>17</sup> Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

<sup>18</sup> “Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup> The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. <sup>20</sup> The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. <sup>21</sup> But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of

*the word, he immediately falls away.<sup>22</sup> The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit.<sup>23</sup> But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.* ”

### **And he spoke to them at length in parables...**

What is a "Parable"? Definition: "At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 5) Less accurate, but perhaps more to the point – when heard, a parable should give you pause and turn your world upside down.

As captivating as Jesus' parables are, we do not always have the full cultural context for grasping the nuance. Consider the parable of the "Prodigal Son." Unless one understands the honor-and-shame culture of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, some of the impact will be lost. The parable of the "Talents" loses some of its edge when one does not understand the significance of the amount in play and why in the world someone would in fact bury the funds. The parable of the "Good Samaritan" is reduced to the parable of a "good guy willing to help" unless one knows who the Samaritans are and what the Jews hearing the story would have thought of a Samaritan being the "hero" of the parable. But then again, that is why we study the Bible in every generation.

Given Dodd's definition of a parable, what are the implications of this definition? Felix Just, SJ offers that:

- The meaning of most parables is not so obvious, or at least it shouldn't be. If we assume we know what Jesus is talking about, we are probably missing the main point; if we are too familiar with the story (having heard it so often before), we might not think carefully enough about its real meaning.
- Most parables contain some element that is strange or unusual. They should cause you to say, "Wait a minute! That's not how farmers do their work! That's not what kings usually do! That's not what normally happens in nature!" And this strange element should cause you to think!
- Parables do not define things precisely, but rather use comparisons to describe some aspect of how God acts or interacts with human beings. Yet to say "A is like B" does not mean that "A is identical to B in all respects"; so one should be careful not to misinterpret or misapply the parables.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Angelus message (July 10, 2011), commented on why Jesus used parables. He said that for Jesus the parable was "autobiographical" because "it reflects the experience of Jesus himself and of his preaching" as "different effects are achieved depending on the kind of reception given to the proclamation." Pope Benedict said that Jesus makes a distinction between the general crowd and the apostles. "To those who have already decided for him, he can speak openly of the Kingdom of God" while to others he must speak in metaphor "to stimulate precisely the decision, the conversion of heart" needed. Jesus' parables "require effort to interpret, challenging one's intelligence but also one's freedom." In grace, one has to decide to engage the parable. "God does not force us to believe in Him, but draws us to Himself through the truth and goodness of his incarnate Son. Love, in fact, always respects freedom...After all the real 'Parable' of God is Jesus himself, his person, under the form of his humanity, hiding and yet revealing the same deity." In this way "God does not force us to believe in Him, but draws us to himself through the truth and goodness of his incarnate Son."

### **The Chapter we skipped**

Last Sunday's gospel was composed on the final pericope in Matthew 11; today our gospel begins with

[Mt 13:1](#). One can rightly ask, “What happened to chapter 12?” As it happens, Matthew 12 is not used on any Sunday or Solemnity in the church’s celebrations – and with respect to bible study, that is a critical omission because Mt 13:1-23, the Parable of the Sower along with its explanation, is Jesus’ response to the events of chapter 12.

In the New American Bible (NAB) translation used by the Church for its proclamation of the gospel, Mt 12 “headers” include the following:

- **Picking Grain on the Sabbath** – Jesus’ status as the authoritative interpreter of the law is exemplified in the incident of the disciples’ plucking and eating grain on the sabbath. The account ends with the clear message: “... *the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath.*” (v. 8)
- **The Man with a Withered Hand** – The question of sabbath observance continues as Jesus initiated a challenge to the Pharisees rooted in his earlier question to them: “*If you knew what this meant, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’*” (v. 7). This account ends with the Pharisee plotting to put Jesus to death.
- **The Chosen Servant** – In the midst of the rising opposition to Jesus from the Pharisees, Matthew pauses and places Jesus’ response in the context of the OT Servant of the Lord. Jesus was fully aware of the rising opposition (v. 15) but continued his healing activity (vv. 15–16). His modesty and gentleness in the face of hostility are viewed as the fulfillment of Isa 42:1–4.
- **Jesus and Beelzebul** – The healing of a possessed man who was blind and mute provides the occasion for exploring the source of Jesus’ power. The healing (v. 22) produces two reactions: wonder on the part of the crowds whether Jesus is the Son of David or Messiah (v. 23), and hostility from the Pharisees, who are convinced that he is the instrument of Satan (v. 24).
- **A Tree and its Fruits** – Jesus takes the offensive with three warnings: (1) Closeness to Jesus is absolutely essential, and the Pharisees must recognize it or run the risk of being on the wrong side when God’s kingdom comes (v. 30). (2) The only unforgivable sin is attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, as the Pharisees were doing in the case of Jesus. Failure to recognize the Son of Man for what he is may be understandable and even pardonable, but failure to recognize the source of his power is inexcusable (vv. 31–32). (3) The Pharisees’ opposition to Jesus stems from their wickedness, and in the final judgment they will be judged with regard to their willingness or unwillingness to confess that Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit (vv. 33–37).
- **The Demand for a Sign** – Despite all the miracles that Jesus had already worked, the scribes and Pharisees ask for more signs. The basic meaning of the sign of Jonah seems to involve the preaching of repentance to non-Jews and its acceptance by them. In verse 40, Matthew has given a second interpretation of the sign of Jonah: the three days spent by the prophet inside the fish (see Jonah 2) were a type or a foreshadowing of the three days between Jesus’ death and his resurrection.
- **The Return of the Unclean Spirit** – The passage about the evil spirit’s return is joined to the sign of Jonah by its reference to “this evil generation” (vv. 39, 45), and to the entire section beginning at 12:22 by its concern with evil spirits.
- **The True Family of Jesus** – The long treatment of unbelief and rejection that began in the missionary discourse of chapter 10 and continued in the incidents of chapters 11–12 concludes with the definition of the true family of Jesus as those who do God’s will.

Chapter 12 tells how widespread is the opposition (or resistance) to Jesus’ saving message: Pharisees, the people, and perhaps even those closest to Jesus – his disciples and family. Signs of power and

healing only lead to requests for more signs. Why do people not believe? Is there any explanation for the condition of things we have arrived at by the end of Matthew 12? Indeed there is; the explanation begins with simple words: “*A sower went out to sow*” (13:3)

**A day of parables**

Matthew 13 is a “day of parables.” The parable of the sower is spoken in public to *great crowds* (vv. 1–3), but its explanation and the teaching about parables are spoken only to the disciples (vv. 10–11). More parables are then spoken to ‘the crowds’ (v. 34), but the crowds are again left behind (v. 36), and the second explanation and further parables are spoken to the disciples in ‘the house’ (which Jesus had left in v. 1). The unresponsive crowds are thus clearly distinguished from the disciples to whom alone explanation is given, and this distinction is spelt out in vv. 11–17.

The structure of our gospel reading is a bit odd:

- the parable of the sower and the seed (vv. 1–9)
- a passage explaining parables and the need for their explanation (vv. 10–17), and
- lastly an explanation of the parable of the sower and seed (18–23).

Despite the traditional title of the parable, “The Sower and the See,” the real focus is on the seed and their yields. More important than the fate of the four different plantings is the contrast between the three unsuccessful planting and the fourth superabundantly successful one.

**What did they hear?**

The parables focus on the seeds is an allegory for those who hear the word of the kingdom proclaimed. The parables describes the varying receptiveness to what they hear; all *hear the same word*. Yet each type of person is identified as what was sown in a certain place (v. 19). This might strike us as odd since we are biased to understand the “seed” as the Word of God proclaimed, but understanding of the parable rests on the interaction of the unvarying seed with the various types of ground.

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| <i>seed sown on the path... without understanding</i>    | To <i>understand</i> is more than an intellectual grasp of the message; cf. the contrast in 7:24ff. between hearing and ‘doing’ the word. The word which is only <i>heard</i> is easy prey for the <i>evil one</i> . It is a non-starter.  |
| <i>seed sown on rocky ground ...receives it with joy</i> | But to start is not necessarily to finish. Here the word is <i>received</i> (not ‘understood’) <i>with joy</i> , but joy without understanding and commitment cannot last: <i>lasts only for a time</i> is literally ‘is temporary’. <i>Tribulation</i> is a general term for suffering which comes from outside; <i>persecution</i> is deliberately inflicted, and usually implies a religious motive. <i>Falls away</i> is literally ‘is tripped up’ (cf. 5:29–30); it is not a gradual loss of interest, but a collapse under pressure. |
| <i>seed sown among thorns ...</i>                        | This time the soil is good, but it is already taken up. The <i>world</i> (as opposed to the kingdom of God) offers both <i>anxiety</i> and <i>lures</i> (the normal meaning of this word, <i>apatē</i> , is ‘deceit’), each occupying the attention and energy in a way that prevents even good soil from bearing fruit  |
| <i>seed sown on rich soil</i>                            | Hearing is matched with understanding, and the consequences are a superabundant yield.   |

In the context of Jesus' ministry the parable serves to explain why it is that the good news of the kingdom meets with such a varied response as we have seen in chapters 11–12, from enthusiastic acceptance to outright rejection. The fault lies not in the message, but in those who receive it. People are both inadequate in themselves to respond as the *word of the kingdom* requires (compacted and shallow soil), and also exposed to competing pressures from outside (tribulation and persecution, anxieties and lures, and behind them all the evil one himself). The wonder is not that some do not produce fruit, but that any do. But here lies the parable's encouragement both to Jesus' followers then and to all who since then have preached this same gospel; not all will respond, but there will be some who do, and the harvest will be rich. The theme is thus closely related to that of the verses which divide the parable from its explanation, the division between those to whom the 'mysteries of the kingdom of heaven' are revealed and those who can hear the same message but will never understand it.

Yet the parable is probably more often employed today as a call to members of the Church to examine themselves in their response to God's word. And this application, though secondary, is surely also within the parable's intention, for the careful spelling out of the causes of the seed's failure is not mere scenery. Unreceptiveness, shallowness, preoccupation with the world are not faults confined only to 'those outside', nor does the parable's division between fruitful and unfruitful necessarily correspond to the limits of parish's members.

### **The Purpose of the Parables**

Verses 10-17 are formally an interlude between the first parable and its explanation, but they are essential to the understanding of the chapter as a whole, as they set out the division between the enlightened disciples and the unresponsive crowd which is the focus both of the structure of the chapter and of much of its contents.

Unlike the telling of the parable, this is a private conversation between Jesus and the disciples who have initiated the conversation with the direct question: *Why do you speak to them in parables?* One presumes that the disciples have noticed that some of the listeners are perplexed and do not understand. – so why use this cryptic form of teaching rather than plain statement?

Jesus' response is that to know the truth about *the kingdom of heaven* is to have the *knowledge of the mysteries*. The Greek *mystērion*, used only here in the Gospels, became important for Paul to indicate that God's truth comes only by revelation, not by natural insight. That is the sense here too—only those to whom *it has been granted* (by God) can understand the nature of God's kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, and therefore the facts about its growth, membership, demands and privileges which these parables convey. Parables, which to the hostile and the merely curious were simple stories, would yield their riches only within this context, to those who have the *knowledge of the mysteries*. Thus there is an inevitable division between *you* (the disciples) and *them* (specified in Mark's version as 'those outside'). The carefully antithetical structure of this verse, as of v. 12 and of vv. 13 with 16, reinforces the division of people into two groups.

This division is reinforced with an allusion to Isaiah 6:9–10, which describes Israel's failure to respond to the prophet's message. Jesus sees himself in a similar prophetic role, meeting a similar unresponsiveness in those of his hearers who are not disciples, and it is this situation which makes parables an appropriate method of teaching. In terms of the division of vv. 11 and 12, the same form of words can reveal 'secrets' to *anyone who has*, but convey nothing but riddles or mere everyday stories to *anyone who has not*. It is the appropriateness of parables to this situation which is the point of this verse (as of vv. 11–17 as a whole); it does not spell out either their purpose or their result. Thus the common view that Matthew with his *because* is deliberately 'softening' Mark's statement of purpose ('so that'), making parables a means of overcoming their unresponsiveness rather than causing it, is

beside the point. Verse 13 alone could be read in that sense, but in the context of the paragraph as a whole this is impossible: the division between the disciples' enlightenment and the crowd's dullness is repeatedly affirmed and emphasized as the essence of the disciple's privilege, and parables are explained as appropriate to this situation, not as designed to change it. Anyone can *hear*, but only a disciple can *understand*.

The same passage in Isaiah which inspired v. 13 is now quoted in full in the LXX version (vv. 14-15). The wording of the introductory formula is not that of the formula-quotations, but it conveys the same idea of fulfillment. Isaiah 6:9–10 was not in fact a prediction for the distant future but rather for Isaiah's own experience, but this experience formed a typological pattern which is now *fulfilled* as Jesus re-enacts the role of the Old Testament prophet. Perhaps a statement of fact, *is fulfilled in them*, is used rather than the usual purpose clause to show that the spiritual dullness was the situation within which Jesus taught rather than itself the product of his teaching. The language makes clear that the people have actively closed their eyes and ears thus placing the blame for their unresponsiveness not on the prophet (Isaiah or Jesus) but on the people themselves. Thus, as we saw in v. 13, the emphasis is not on either the purpose or the result of Jesus' speaking in parables, but rather on the existing situation within which it took place.

Verse 16 forms a striking counterpart to v. 13, contrasting 'you' with 'them'. This beatitude stresses the theme of a division between the enlightened disciple and other people. The disciples are thus privileged (*blessed*) above their unbelieving contemporaries, but v. 17 adds a further dimension; even the people of God in the Old Testament period (*prophets and righteous men*, as opposed to those who refused the prophets' message) did not share the privilege of seeing *what you see*. Jesus thus claims again that in his ministry the time of fulfillment of the hopes of Israel has come.

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## Notes

**Matthew 13:1 on that day...went out of the house:** this connects the reader to all that has just transpired in Mt 12 and makes the day into a "day of parables." The house (presumably that of 8:14; 9:10, 28) serves here and in v. 36 to make clear the distinction between the public teaching which follows and the private explanation and further teaching.

**Matthew 13:2 large crowds:** the expression indicates that Jesus' ministry has attracted lots of interested parties. Yet one wonders how being in a boat serves to allow Jesus to address the crowd. Speculations are many, but there are many places on the Sea of Galilee where natural coves would form an amphitheatre-like setting with the "stage" being on the water with hills rising from the water's edge serving as the audience seating. Perhaps this describes the physical setting of the scene.

**Matthew 13:3 in parables:** The Greek *parabolē* is wider than our 'parable'; in the LXX it translates *māšāl*, which includes proverbs, riddles and wise sayings as well as parables. In all of these nuanced meanings, the common denominator is the use of analogy to illumine or obscure. Matthew uses it for instance for Jesus' cryptic saying about defilement (15:10-11, 15), and in 24:32 ('lesson') it indicates a comparison. Speaking *in parables* is therefore enigmatic, and requires careful interpretation.

**Matthew 13:4 some seed fell on the path:** Some scholars (e. g. Jeremias) insist that the sower is following good Palestinian farming practices by which sowing precedes plowing – in other words the sower intended to return and plow under the scattered seed. Some see a bountiful generosity in spreading seed even where it is not likely to bear fruit. Others write that the seed should probably be understood as falling on the packed soil beside the path, not the packed soil of the path itself.

**Matthew 13:5-6 rocky ground...soil was not deep:** the problem is an underlying shelf of bedrock, not multiple rocks in the soil. Such soil warms rapidly, and the seed sprouts quickly, but the plant wilts as the soil soon loses moisture (*cf.* James 1:11).

**Matthew 13:7 thorns:** *akantha* – a general word for “thorn plant” or “thistle” [EDNT 1:48]. Such plants were sometimes used to mark off the boundaries of a farmer’s fields and to keep animals from intruding. If this is the case then the sower is casting seed at the boundary of the field.

**Matthew 13:8 a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold:** From agricultural records we know that in Italy and Sicily soils averaged fivefold or sixfold return on the grain sown; irrigated fields in Egypt averaged around a sevenfold yield for wheat and eightfold or better for barley. Following the ancient rhetorical technique of praising a land (cf. , e. g. , Aelius Aristides on Rome), Josephus emphasizes the fruitfulness of Palestine’s soil (Apion 1. 195). The average Palestinian harvest may have yielded seven and a half to ten times the seed sown. Thus while even a hundredfold harvest is not “miraculous” for some parts of Palestine, harvests yielding thirty to a hundred times the seed invested are extraordinarily abundant (Gen 26:12; Jub. 24:15; Sib. Or. 3. 264–65), and one rarely exceeded one hundredfold. (Keener, 377-78)

**Matthew 13:9 Whoever has ears:** The same expression is used in Mt 11:15 to call attention to a significant teaching

**Matthew 13:10 granted:** the subject is not mentioned leaving one to assume God is the one who grants. This would be a typical Jewish construction of the phrase to avoid a direct mention of God and retain an air of “mystery.”

**Matthew 13:11 mysteries:** *mystērion* meaning “mystery” or “secret” [EDNT 2:466]. The gospel usage of *mystērion* relies upon the Jewish tradition of its meaning. Out of the Jewish tradition comes the transcendent, humanly inaccessible revelation of God, which is historically set in action by God himself in his acts of salvation and judgment in the past, present, and future, which already now has been made evident to the one who is called and will be made evident to all on the last day. In terms of content, *mystērion* refers primarily to the saving acts of God in Christ.

In the Gospels *mystērion* is found only in the account of the “sower and the seed” (Mk, Lk and Mt) in the expression “*the mystery of the kingdom of heaven/God*” The saying uses *mystērion* to describe the experience of the presence of / breaking in of God’s reign in the words and works of Jesus. It is basically still hidden, to be revealed in all its glory only in the end times, but is made accessible already now to Jesus’ disciples and can be experienced and comprehended by them in faith, while to those who stand on the outside it remains a puzzle and therefore hidden.

**Matthew 13:12 To anyone who has...:** the object is not specified, but it likely refers to “*knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*” (v. 11). This implies there are consequences to this grant of knowledge.

**Matthew 13:14 fulfilled:** Matthew uses the unique verb *anaplēroō* (rather than merely *plēroō*), meaning “to completely fulfill” the prophecy in question. It is suggested that “completely fulfilled” implies human responsibility and that Matthew’s overall introductory formula is phrased to avoid any thought of divine causation that might be mistaken as a lessening of human responsibility.

**Matthew 13:15 a general comment:** The quoted text from Isaiah 6 is from the LXX (the Greek language OT). The Greek text varies slightly from the original Hebrew. The expression in Hebrew “hear” becomes “hardly hear” in the Greek (and is translated in our English). The same is true of the other verbs in the LXX version – which are not literally carried into the NAB translation. The expression rendered “see” is literally “truly see” or “surely see.” In other words, the LXX adds some intensity about the verbs to communicate the gravity of the context of Isaiah’s original message.

**Matthew 13:16 blessed. . .:** The use here provides a reversal of the Isaiah 6 passage by describing the blessedness of those whom have been granted the mysteries. **prophets and righteous people:** not only are the disciples blessed as compared to their contemporaries who do not see/hear/understand, the

disciples are also blessed in comparison to the great Jewish heroes of the past.

**Matthew 13:22** *worldly*: the Greek word *aiōn* can refer to time (“this age”) or place (“this world”). Underlying its use in this context is the Jewish eschatological division between this age and the age to come.

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## Scripture

*The New American Bible* (NAB) available on line.

## Image Credit

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