

THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 13

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Without a doubt Matthew 13 is a pivotal chapter in the development of the first Gospel in our New Testament. What makes that chapter so critical is the Lord's teaching about the kingdom. It is almost universally agreed the Lord is discussing the present age and its culmination in Matthew 13. Because of this, one's view of the kingdom in this dispensation depends on one's understanding of the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13. Is Christ telling his disciples the kingdom of heaven will be in some form of existence between his two advents? Is it possible the Lord Jesus is informing His followers about something else than a kingdom in this age? The question before us is, what is the Lord saying about God's kingdom in this age in Matthew 13?

A couple of assumptions are being made in the presentation of this paper. First, the verbal, plenary inspiration of the original manuscripts of the Bible is taken for granted. Along with this, only evangelical and conservative interpretations of the Scriptures will be considered. In other words, critical viewpoints will not be discussed.

A second assumption is the interchangeable use of the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God. It is taken for granted they are practically synonymous. This becomes important because many use Matthew 13 to show unbelievers (tares) are in the kingdom of heaven whereas John 3 says only the saved are in the kingdom of God. Those who say this fail to recognize the Lord's statement in Matthew 18:3 that unless one is converted and becomes like a child he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. The requirements for entrance into the kingdom of heaven are just as strict as those for entering the kingdom of God. It will be seen even later in this paper that the tares are not in the kingdom of heaven.

I. Relevant Background Materials

I. The announcement of the nearness of the kingdom

This proclamation is made by John the Baptist in 3:2, by the Lord in 4:17, and the disciples in 10:7. In all three cases precisely the same words are used: The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Contrary to some theologians the kingdom was not said to be here (in the person of Jesus Christ and His power as they claim) but it was in a state of nearness. The kingdom had not yet come.

Significantly, none of those who preached the nearness of the kingdom ever explain it or clarify the meaning of the term. This is very important because all agree the Jews were anticipating the coming of the golden age predicted in the Old Testament. If John or the Lord Jesus or even the disciples had a different interpretation of the term kingdom, they certainly would have or at least should have explained it. No such clarification is found anywhere in the Gospels or Acts.

What is especially significant is John the Baptist's warning about the nearness of the judgment preceding the coming of the kingdom. The axe was already lying at the root of the trees (Matt. 3:10) and God's winnowing fork was already in His hand (Matt. 3:12). Israel knew from the many Old Testament warnings that judgment came before the kingdom (As an illustration see Mal. 3:13B4:6). John's expectancy of the nearness of this judgment will become important in the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares.

In view of the Old Testament promises, the people of Israel's expectations, and the preaching of the kingdom's nearness with no clarifying statements, it is quite clear the term kingdom is a noun describing the literal messianic reign of Christ on earth.

II. Israel's rejection of Jesus as Messiah

Fairly early in the Lord's ministry His rejection began to be seen. It is broadly hinted at in the Lord's statement in Matthew 8:11-12 in connection with the faith of a Gentile centurion, "I say to you that many will come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

By Matthew 11 what is implied in Matthew 8:11-12 is clearly stated. In fact, in Matthew 11:12 Christ stated the kingdom of heaven had suffered violence ever since it was first announced as being near by John the Baptist. He further stated that violent men seize it. The verb that is used here was used of robbers seizing objects or soldiers grabbing loot and booty. Here it must mean they seize it in the sense of robbing it and keeping it from coming. They were opposing the kingdom. This helps to explain why Jesus in the following verses shows how Israel could not be pleased whether by John or by Himself (cf. Matt. 11:16-19). They were like spoiled children.

Matthew 11 goes on to record the Lord's pronouncement of judgment on Israel. Most of His miracles were performed near the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 11:20). Yet these people refused to repent. Therefore, they were destined for a future judgment worse than Tyre, Sidon and even Sodom (Matt. 11:22, 24).

Even Christ's gracious invitation to come to Him in the following paragraph (Matt. 11:25-30) implies the spurning of Him and His message. His followers were to leave the heavy yoke placed upon them by the religious authorities and find rest in Him.

Perhaps the clearest indication of Israel rejecting Jesus as Messiah is seen in their accusing Him of casting out demons by satanic power. The Lord responds by saying they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit and thereby committed the unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:24-32).

The chapter goes on to pronounce judgment on that generation because of their eagerness to see miracles without catching on to the spiritual significance of who Jesus is. In fact the Ninevites and the Queen of the South will stand in judgment against that generation. It was like a person from whom a demon had been cast out only to have the demon return with seven others. (Evidently this describes the revival that had taken place under John and the subsequent rejection of the Lord Jesus).

The context of Matthew 13 is the rejection of Jesus by Israel, particularly by the religious authorities.

III. The Lord's response

Matthew 13 is the Lord's response to the opposition. Matthew 13:1 begins "On that day," that is, the day of rejection. His response is in the form of a series of parables given to instruct His disciples about His kingdom and the kingdom program.

Matthew 13 must be approached with some understanding of these three factors—the announcement of the nearness of the kingdom, the rejection by Israel of

Jesus as Messiah, and the Lord's recognition of Israel's refusal to accept Him as their Messiah.

II. The arrangement of Matthew 13

Matthew is famous for the careful arrangement of his Gospel. For instance, in recording the Lord's genealogy he divides the names into three groups of fourteen each; in Matthew 5 the discussion of six Old Testament laws is broken into two groups of three by the adverb *again* (v. 33); and the nine miracles of chapters 8-9 are separated into three's by discussions on discipleship (8:18-22; 9:9-17). One of the clearest illustrations of Matthew's skill in arrangement is his use of the clause, "And it came to pass when Jesus had finished . . ." (cf. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each time it is used it comes at the end of a discourse implying the words of the Lord are the climax of each section. This means the narrative materials are used by Matthew to serve as a backdrop for the discourses. To Matthew the discourses are the most important element although the works of Christ are crucial to the account.

Matthew 13 is another illustration of material that is very carefully arranged into sections. This clearly has significance not only for meaning but it also makes it easier to remember the contents.

The first division is seen in the clauses "Jesus went out of the house" (13:1) and "He went into the house" (13:36). The four parables spoken outside of the house are addressed to the general public (cf. v. 36); the four given in the house were only for the disciples. It seems only the disciples were given the explanations of some of the parables; the multitudes were given no interpretations of any.

It must be observed that although eight parables are presented, only six of them begin with the clause, "The kingdom of heaven is like" or some similar statement (cf. 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47). The first and last parables have no such introduction. This has some significance. The beginning parable is the story of the sower and the soils and is not a kingdom parable. It is given in the context of explaining why the Lord spoke in parables. All the soils fail to produce fruit except the good soil. The one distinguishing feature of this soil is it represents those who hear and understand (v. 23). All heard the word but not all understood; therefore further truth was hidden from them (vv. 11-17), but it was given to the disciples by way of the parables. This is the fruit that is born: more understanding. The first parable then is not a parable of the kingdom, but serves as an introduction to the next seven parables. This helps to explain why the next parable is not given until verse 24. All that precedes is an introduction to what follows.

The last parable is the story of the head of the house who dispenses new and old things from his treasury. This represents the disciples who were to wed old truths found in the Old Testament with the new truths given by Christ in His teachings, especially in the parables of Matthew 13. In a word, it is a concluding parable in which the Lord makes an application to the disciples to teach what they have learned. The first and the last parables are practical in nature. The parable of the sower helps to explain why the Lord speaks in parables and the parable of the householder is a practical application.

This means only the six interior parables give instruction and information about the kingdom in this age. These six become the basis for the discussion that follows.

III. Some Approaches to Matthew 13

I. The Covenant/Reformed/Amillennial view

These fellow believers teach the kingdom that was announced in Matthew 3, 4, and 10 was a spiritual kingdom. It had arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus. In Matthew 13 Christ simply confirms the spiritual nature of its being. Therefore the kingdom is now and will exist in eternity. In this sense it is "already . . . not yet."

The problem with this approach begins with their failure to properly understand the meaning of the kingdom as preached by John, the Lord and the disciples. (As was stated earlier it was clearly an earthly, eternal kingdom).

II. The classic dispensational view as represented by Scofield

This view, which represents the majority of dispensationalists, holds to a literal earthly kingdom being proclaimed as near by John, the Lord and the disciples. In the face of opposition and because of Israel's rejection, the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13 introduces a new form of the kingdom which is in existence during the church age and the tribulation. This is described as "the kingdom in mystery form".

The primary evidence used to support this interpretation is Matthew 13:11, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven . . ." The term mystery refers to something previously unrevealed but now revealed. Therefore, there is in existence today a previously unknown form of the kingdom. When Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation He will establish His kingdom on this earth.

It is also claimed the kingdom exists today because 13:41 says the Lord's angel will gather the wicked out of His kingdom at the end of the age. Therefore the kingdom must be in existence throughout this dispensation.

The largest problem with this interpretation is the expression "the kingdom in mystery form." Matthew 13:11 does not say this. It much more probably means and refers to new truths about the kingdom. This will be discussed more fully later in this paper.

Matthew 13:41 refers to the end of the age when the Lord returns to set up His kingdom. The judgment marks the beginning of His reign (cf. Luke 19:27; Ezek. 20:33-38). This is why the wicked will be gathered out from the Lord's kingdom (cf. Matt. 24:37-41).

A large problem is the change that is given to the expression "kingdom of heaven". If it describes the earthly kingdom in the preceding chapters, how can the meaning be changed in chapter 13? This is a dangerous hermeneutic. What is to keep a person from saying the spiritual form of the kingdom was what the Lord was describing from the beginning and in Matthew 13 He clarifies this point? Or what will prevent one from saying Israel rejected Christ so it has no future kingdom and the only kingdom according to the Gospels is a spiritual one?

III. The viewpoint of progressive dispensationalism

A key element to this approach is the "already . . . not yet" view of the kingdom. It is their position the kingdom arrived with John's pronouncement of its nearness. The Lord Jesus is now sitting on the throne of David. Therefore the kingdom has "already" come. However, the millennial kingdom will come in the future after the Great

Tribulation. Thus the kingdom has come but not yet in its final form of the millennium and eternity.

In their approach to Matthew 13 they say they are doing nothing more than building on the same structure that was erected by classic dispensationalism. They claim the present mystery form of the kingdom taught by the latter makes room for their view of the kingdom as being present now. Of course classic dispensationalists would argue the mystery form is a truly different form of the kingdom, whereas progressive dispensationalists say the present form of the kingdom is a prelude to the Davidic kingdom predicted in the Old Testament.

The problem with this view is the belief the promised kingdom arrived with the Lord's ministry. It was not present then, not even in the Lord's powerful miracles. Matthew 12:28, which states, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," is used to support the presence of the kingdom. First, if the kingdom had come, why were the disciples instructed to pray for the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 6:10)? Furthermore the verb that is used here may be used in the sense of something impending as in 1 Thessalonians 2:16, ". . . hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved: with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost." God's wrath will come upon them. The fact of the matter is the vast majority of passages dealing with the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven look at it as future, as a place, as something to be seen, etc.

The view of progressive dispensationalism founders on their concept of the kingdom as being "already . . . not yet."

IV. A Consistent View

This is the approach taken by this paper. It holds the term "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" are used consistently with the same meaning throughout the Gospels. That is, they always refer to the promised earthly reign on earth of the Messiah which ultimately goes into eternity.

Several factors support this concept. First, the terms have the same meaning in Matthew 3, 4, 10 and 13. If one changes the meaning in Matthew 13 what is to keep one from making the kingdom totally a spiritual one?

Secondly, Matthew 13 makes good sense if one simply takes Matthew 13:11 to say the Lord is revealing new truths about the promised kingdom. "The mysteries of the kingdom" refers to doctrine not previously known. In view of Israel's rejection a whole new age will intervene; this age is not the kingdom but precedes it. This is a totally new teaching and gives good meaning to each of the parables.

The first "kingdom" parable is about the wheat and darnel (Matt. 13: 24-30), which is explained in Matthew 13:36-43. The mystery or new truth in this parable is the concept of a new age in which good and evil would co-exist before the judgment preceding the kingdom. This age was not predicted in the Old Testament; it is a something new, a mystery. John had taught judgment was near because the kingdom was near. Now the coming of the kingdom was postponed and so was the judgment.

The significance of the second parable, the parable of the mustard seed, (Matt. 13:31-32) is debated. One possible interpretation is the growth of the number of the

heirs of the kingdom. The impression the Lord gives elsewhere is the kingdom will come suddenly, but here there is growth and prosperity in numbers. (The reference to birds in the branches describes outward prosperity {cf. Dan. 4:11-12; Ezek. 17:23}). The believers would grow from a small group to a large number.

The third parable, which is about leaven leavening a lump of dough, is very brief but much discussed (Matt. 13:33). Does the leaven portray what is good or is it evil? In the New Testament leaven consistently illustrates sin. Therefore, it seems best to say the age will end with utter apostasy. The man of sin is predicted in the Old Testament (cf. Dan. 9:27; Zech. 11:15-17, etc.) and it appears sin will be centered in Babylon (Zech. 5:5-11). The leavening of the whole lump appears to be the new truth; that is, the entire world in this age (except for the elect) will climax in a massive rebellion against God.

The last three parables are addressed to the disciples. They are the hidden treasure (13:14), the precious pearl (13:45) and the drag net (13: 47-50). The new truth in the first seems to be the hiddenness of the treasure. The man who finds the treasure is the Lord Jesus. The treasure probably represents the kingdom which was revealed in His ministry, and when He was rejected the kingdom was again hidden. Obviously, the Lord bought the field in which the treasure was hidden. One day it will be revealed. This is implied but it is obvious from the story. Why purchase the field if not to unbury the treasure?

The parable of the pearl is difficult. It is possible the pearl is the redeemed of all ages. The Jews were not the only people of God; there was a group of many nations who would be redeemed by the Lord Jesus. They would be the precious pearl.

The parable of the drag net reinforces the parable of the wheat and tares. At the end of this age there will be a judgment of all who are alive on earth. This assize will take place at the end of this age.

There may well be disagreement over the interpretation of these parables. That does not actually change the purpose of this paper. Its primary intent is to contend the Lord is not describing some form of His kingdom today but is revealing new truths about His kingdom program.

CONCLUSION

It seems best to take the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God in a consistent sense. The same term that refers to the kingdom that had drawn near in the beginning of Christ's ministry is in view in Matthew 13. This means Christ is not describing a kingdom presently in existence. Instead He is presenting new truths about His kingdom program, truths that had not before been revealed.