

## 100 Key Texts Study #5

**General Background on Matthew:** We continue reading from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew is believed to have been written around 80-90 CE.

Matthew was clearly written by a Jewish author and displays distinctively Jewish concerns. More than any of the other gospels, Old Testament passages are quoted and expanded upon—a sign that the author wants to show that Jesus legitimately fulfilled Biblical prophecy. Jesus is shown to be the long awaited Messiah of Old Testament prophecy.

Yet, Matthew is also full of very critical passages, aimed toward the leaders of Judaism, especially the Pharisees. We read many passages in Matthew that threaten the religious leaders with hell itself. Many scholars believe this reflects the situation of the Church post 70 CE (the temple was destroyed by Rome and Judaism began to draw sharp lines of distinction between itself and what it regarded as the Christian heresy).

There is a lot of teaching material in Matthew, including the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus affirms the place and value of the Law in Matthew. Jesus is the “new Moses,” bringing a new or sharpened understanding of the Law of God.

**Background for this week:** Today’s text is filled with parables. Parables are stories drawn from everyday life used to illustrate a point or points. A lot of study has been done on the parables—their origin, their interpretations, and so on. In this text, Jesus himself gives an explanation as to why he teaches in parables.

The parables remain mysterious in some ways. Their meaning can catch you by surprise and what we hear in them may change from reading to reading. In the last two studies of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the crowds about the kingdom in a straightforward way; here, in Matthew 13, he uses parables. If you’d like to read more about Jesus’ parables, I would highly recommend Robert Farrar Capon’s three books, **The Parables of the Kingdom**, **The Parables of Grace**, and **The Parables of Judgment**.

**The Text: Matthew 13:1-58.** Please feel free to post your answers to the questions below on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page and engage in a discussion.

**First, read the text in entirety.** There are seven distinct parables in this text, two of which Jesus explains to his disciples separately. Parables 1-4 are directed to the crowds and parables 5-7 to the disciples.

Note the simple outline of the text below:

- 1-2 The setting of Jesus' teaching: in the boat beside the Sea of Galilee.
- 3-9 The Parable of the Sower
- 10-17 Jesus explains why he teaches in parables
- 18-23 Jesus explains the parable of the sower
- 24-30 The parable of the wheat and the weeds
- 31-32 The parable of the mustard seed
- 33 The parable of yeast
- 34-35 Jesus use of parables fulfills Scripture
- 36-43 Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the weeds
- 44 The parable of treasure hidden in the field
- 45-46 The parable of the merchant in search of pearls
- 47-50 The parable of the fishnet
- 51-53 The disciples as "scribes"
- 54-58 The hometown crowds take offense at Jesus

**Let's look at each segment in turn.**

**Verses 1-2.** Note that Jesus had preached from a mountaintop. Now he descends to the water's edge and preaches from a boat in the sea. The same sea which he displays his power to still, the waves upon which he later will walk.

**Verses 3-9. The parable of the sower.** Try reading this parable without reference to the explanation given later. Think first about God. If God is the sower, what does the parable say about God? Think about the seed. What is the seed the sower plants? Finally, the soil on which the seed falls. Are these descriptions of different people's hearts? Or do all of these "soils" exist within every person?

We often think this parable refers mostly to our personal receptiveness to the kingdom, but in its original form, it may say this: The kingdom of God comes through Jesus, despite all sorts of barriers and opposition. The combination of the Divine sower and good seed brings harvest!

**Verses 10-17. Why Parables?** The disciples are curious as to why Jesus would teach this way. Jesus appears to say that he speaks in parables in order to confirm that some people are hard-hearted and cannot understand or receive the gospel. That seems strange, as we would assume Jesus wanted everyone to actually hear and understand his words!

He also quotes an Old Testament passage dealing with the stubborn faithlessness of Israel toward God prior to the fall of Samaria to the Assyrian armies. Matthew often shows Jesus quoting Scripture to show that Jesus fulfills it.

Finally, Jesus says that the disciples are fortunate to be able to hear these parables—many people before them would have longed to hear his words, but could not.

**Verses 18-23. The explanation of the parable of the sower.** Most scholars do not believe Jesus actually said these words—but that they reflect the early church's interpretation of the original parable Jesus told. Does the explanation Jesus gives here match your thoughts about the parable? Why? Why not? Why might the explanation address the early Church's situation?

**Verses 24-30. The parable of the wheat and the weeds.** This is a second parable of the sower. Notice that the seed is good seed. The sower is not the reason for the weeds in the field. An enemy tries to sabotage his harvest by planting weeds that grow close to the wheat. (There is actually a weed that looks so much like wheat that it can easily be mistaken for it and its roots spread out and entangle themselves with other roots.) The sower discourages his servants from pulling the weeds for fear the wheat will also be damaged. They are to let them both grow until the harvest. Then they can be separated and the weeds can be burned as fuel. Again, harvest will come—and we must be patient.

How do you read this parable? Does it apply to you personally, in the sense that the weeds and wheat grow side by side within you? If so, why would God not destroy the evil within us and remove every temptation from us?

Does the parable seem to apply to the world around us? The people of our community? The people of our nation? Of the world? What does the parable say about our attempts to judge others?

**Verses 31-32. The parable of the mustard seed.** Note how this parable uses a common plant to make several points about the Kingdom of God. What does this parable tell you about the process by which God's message takes root and grows in us, the church, the world? What does it say about the purpose of the Christian life?

**Verse 33. The parable of yeast.** Here, too, a very common image is used: of a woman baking. She uses a bit of yeast to leaven a large amount of flour for baking. Interestingly, the Greek word translated here as "mixed in" means literally "hid in," suggesting that the kingdom of God has a sneaky, unseen role in transforming the world. Can you think of times a very small act or word of grace changed a relationship, a situation?

**Verses 34-35.** Here again, Jesus seems to say that he speaks in parables to demonstrate the truth that not everyone is able to hear the word of God.

**Verses 36-43.** The explanation of the wheat and weeds. The interpretation Jesus gives here is **allegorical** in nature. Each character and even the seeds themselves are matched with someone or something else. Sower-Son of Man. Good seed-children of God. Bad seed—children of the devil. Enemy—devil. Servants-angels. Harvest-end of time. Fire-hell. Barn—heaven. It again seems likely that this interpretation may have been added later. Jesus' own words indicate that he preferred to allow parables speak for themselves.

How does this explanation of the parable make you feel? It seems less about being patient and letting God be the judge as being warned that the end is coming and we are to repent and be certain that we are among the wheat plants. Do you

think of heaven and hell very often?” Are you afraid of hell? Do you look forward to heaven? Do you image the last judgement in a way similar to this text?

**Verse 44. Treasure in the field.** What strikes you most about this short parable: the finding, the joy, or the selling/buying? In what way does this parable related to experience as a child of God?

**Verses 45-46. Pearl of Great Price.** This parable is very similar to the one before it. Can you look back at your life and see a decision/decisions you made to align your life with God’s kingdom? Was it easy? Why or why not? Do you think the selling and buying is a one-time thing or something that is repeated over and over?

**Verses 47-50. Fish caught in the net.** Which other parable in this chapter is similar to this one? How do you respond to the images here (and throughout Matthew) of judgment? How does the prospect of the “furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” affect you? Are you afraid of judgment? Why or why not?

**Verses 51-52. Scribes trained in the kingdom of God.** This very interesting saying compares Jesus’ disciples to the scribes. The scribes were experts in the Law, who commented on it, explained it, interpreted it anew. Jesus also says that the disciples are like the master of the household who sorts treasure according to what is new and old. He keeps some of the old and some of the new. Apparently, he also discards some of each. What does this tell you about being a disciple of Jesus? How are we like scribes when it comes to the Law, the Bible?

**Verses 53-58. Jesus’ reception in his hometown.** In a word the reception is very poor: “They took offense at him.” Why were they offended? How did their reaction affect Jesus’ ministry?

### **Questions to ponder:**

1. Of all the parables, which ones stand out for you? Why?
2. Is there a parable that proclaims good news to you, that helps you see yourself/your community/your world in a new light?

3. Do any of the parables disturb or shock you? Is there anything that causes you to ask questions of Jesus or of Matthew? If so, what are your questions?

**Prayer for the week:**

O crucified and risen Savior, you have called us to be your disciples. Teach us to share good news with those who will receive it and those who will not. Teach us to leave the judgment of others to you. Teach us to let nothing stand in the way of our relationship with you. Fill us with confidence that your kingdom is here now and surely will be come to completion. Fill us with the joy of life in your grace and hope this week. Amen.