

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 13

The essential general points in this lesson are the reason why the Lord spoke in parables, the fact that heaven must be within us if we are to go to heaven when we die, and the fact that heaven is developed gradually within us as we receive and cultivate seeds of truth from the Word.

Doctrinal Points

The parables of the kingdom treat of the development of heavenly character.

Everyone receives enough truth for salvation.

Understanding of the Lord's truth comes through obeying it.

Notes for Parents

In our chapter for today we are told that the Lord always spoke in parables (verse 34), and the Lord Himself gives us the reason in verses 11 to 15. We have tried to give the children this reason in a form which they can understand. In the Lord's sight we are all children, very ignorant and often very willful and intentionally deaf to His clear teachings. So He tries to reach our minds with stories so simple and concrete that they will stay with us as stories until we wake up to our need of their lessons.

There are seven parables in our chapter—all about the kingdom of heaven—and if we read them thoughtfully, we shall see that they form a series showing us how this kingdom is developed. We are told in Luke 17:21 that the kingdom of heaven is within us. This means that if we are to live in heaven when we die, we must develop heavenly life within us while we are in this world.

The beginning of the heavenly kingdom within us is the sowing of the seed. We must learn the truths of the Word. Every seed of

truth that is sown in our minds is like the mustard seed which has within it the capacity of growing into a great sheltering tree, but we know well that all the seeds we take into our minds do not take root and grow. Sometimes our minds are hard, sometimes they are shallow, sometimes they are so full of selfish thoughts that the truth is choked out. And then there are the tares, false ideas we have which look like the truth to us and which take a long time to show their real character. And we need to be tried and purified by the experience of temptation, as yeast in our bread dough ferments and lightens the heavy mass.

All four of these parables the Lord spoke to the multitude, for they picture the first steps which everyone must take before he can become a true follower of the Lord. But afterward He took His disciples aside and gave them further parables. If we become disciples, we can understand more than the multitude. The worldly man cannot even think of heavenly knowledge as a treasure, or of the understanding and worship of the Lord as a pearl of great price worth the sacrifice of all his natural, selfish ambitions. And as the last parable in the chapter points out, it is this very choice of the Lord or self, made over and over again, day by day, which will determine our eternal happiness or unhappiness. The choice is not something we can safely put off. We should know that the phrase “end of the world” which we find in this chapter [KJV] is not a correct translation of the original Greek. The phrase should read “consummation of the age.” Our judgment is not put off to some future destruction of this material world, but comes when our individual life here is finished.

The last few verses of our chapter are more closely knit to the series of parables than we might at first think. The people of Nazareth did not benefit by the Lord’s presence among them because they persisted in thinking of Him as just a man like themselves. Many think of Him so today, refusing to consider all the testimony of the Scriptures and of history to the fact that He was no finite man, but Emmanuel—“God with us.” The pearl of great price is really the acknowledgment that Christ is God Himself. This makes

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His every word the truth itself and obedience to His commands the one sure way to heaven.



Primary

The meaning of the sower, the seed, and the different kinds of ground can be understood at this age, and this is a good opportunity to tell the children that the whole Word is a parable. Touch on the other parables in the chapter as showing us how the good seed develops in our minds and some of the things that hinder its development.

Our story today is one of the parables which the Lord told the people. Do you remember what a parable is? It is a story with another meaning inside of it. Our chapter tells us that the Lord always spoke to the people in parables.

You know that when your mother tells you that you ought to do something or that something you are doing is wrong, sometimes you try hard not to listen because you don't want to hear and have to change your ways. But when she tells you or reads you a story, you like to listen because it is interesting to hear about other people and you don't think the story has anything to do with you and your behavior. Afterwards, however, you may get to thinking about the story and find that the little girl or boy in it is really very much like yourself and that what happened in the story might easily happen to you. And then you may decide all by yourself that you had better make some changes in your behavior.

Grown people are no different from you in this, and the Lord knew it. That is why He always spoke in parables. When you are older, you will find that the whole Word is a parable.

In our chapter for today there are some very well-known parables.

The first is called the parable of the sower.

Can you tell the story?

The Lord told His disciples what the story meant.

The Sower is the Lord.

The seed is truth from the Word.

What are the different kinds of ground?

Then the Lord told them some parables about the kingdom of heaven.

You know that heaven is where good people go when they die.

But the Lord said, “The kingdom of God is within you.”

This means that if we are to go to heaven, we have to become heavenly people.

The Lord came into the world to show us just how to become heavenly people.

Do we become heavenly all at once?

No. We learn little by little what is right, and if we try to do it—to live according to the truth we learn from the Word—gradually a heavenly character grows in us.

All these parables about the kingdom of heaven help us to understand this.

Junior

With this class the parables should be treated as a series. Take up in some detail the parable of the sower and the parable of the tares and the wheat, and then do as much with the others as you have time for.

What is a parable?

How many parables are there in our chapter for today?

What is the first one called?

Have you heard it before?

Is it easy to remember?

That was one reason why the Lord spoke in parables. People liked to hear these little stories, and could remember them. Then, when they were ready to understand the deeper meaning of them, it was easy to give it. We see how the closer disciples of the Lord were looking for the deeper meaning and ready to hear it. But the “multitude” were not ready, and so all the Lord gave them was the story.

What are all the parables in this chapter about?

We are likely to think of heaven just as a place where good people go when they die, but in the Gospel of Luke (17:21) the Lord tells us that it is within us. All these parables tell us something of how it is developed in us. First the seed must be sown. The sower in our first parable is the Lord, and the seed is “the word of the kingdom,” truth from the Word of God. Everyone, in the course of his life, hears truths from the Word either directly or indirectly. What happens to this seed in his life depends first on his willingness to hear divine truth and secondly on whether or not he accepts and obeys it. And from the parable of the mustard seed

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we learn that every little seed of truth has within it the possibility of growing in our lives into a great tree or principle. It is truth from the Word received into our minds and planted in our daily life from which the kingdom of heaven develops within us. But there are many things which hinder.

Do we always immediately know that a thing is right or wrong?

Tares were a kind of false wheat. As they were growing, they looked like wheat, but their grain was poisonous. Sometimes we do things without knowing they are wrong. And often we accept things as true which are not true. Everything that is good and true comes to us from the Lord. Everything that is evil and false comes to us from the hells. It is only gradually that we learn to see the difference, just as tares in the field could not be recognized easily until after they were grown. But in the end, we must destroy the tares. You remember that the Lord said, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Whenever we come to see that some way of life that we have thought was good actually leads to trouble and unhappiness, we may know that it is a “tare” and that we must get rid of it.

Study the other parables in this chapter and see how much you can understand of their inner meaning. They all lead up to the parable of the pearl of great price. This pearl is true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as our one God, which we have made our own by living according to His teachings. To sell all that we have is to give up our own ideas and selfish desires in order to possess the heavenly character which is based on this knowledge. The last parable in the chapter teaches us very plainly that when we go into the other world at death, we shall be in heaven if we are found to be good and in hell if we are found to be evil. We cannot change our lives after we die.

Intermediate

The importance of our daily choices, especially our choices as to thought and feeling, should be emphasized, and the need of receiving and cultivating seeds of truth from the Word and of rooting out thorns. Point out that in the Word

the sequence of events or of stories is never accidental.

Verse 34 of our chapter tells us that the Lord always taught in parables. A parable is a simple story easily understood and remembered. Like stored seed it can lie in the mind for a long time, and then when the right conditions are present, it can suddenly take root and develop. This is what the Word does in our minds. The longer we live and the deeper our experience, the more of it we understand and the more we can be helped by it.

The seven parables in our chapter form a series treating of the development of a heavenly character, for, as Luke 17:21 tells us, the kingdom of God is within us. We begin with the sowing of the seed, which is “the word of the kingdom.” The Lord is the sower, and He sees to it that everyone born into the world receives some truth from the Word either directly or indirectly. Whether the seed bears fruit or not depends on the degree to which we open our minds to it, cherish it, and give it room to grow. The disciples, who sought enlightenment from the Lord, could be given a deeper understanding of the parable. The multitude merely heard the story. Each one of us decides whether he will be a disciple or not.

The parable of the tares shows us why we cannot overcome all our evils at once. It takes time and experience for us to form clear judgments as to what is good and what is bad even in our own character.

The parable of the mustard seed teaches us the importance of studying the Word in all its detail, for there is no truth so small that it may not sometime become of great importance to us.

The parable of the leaven shows us the need of considering our problems long enough and deeply enough to be sure that selfishness is ruled out of our judgment of what we ought to do.

The next two parables point out the fact that a heavenly character is worth any price we have to pay for it. The pearl is a picture of a true understanding of the Lord achieved by a life according to His teachings.

Finally the parable of the net treats of the judgment in the other life, when our motives will be exposed and the good and bad

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finally separated. In this connection read Revelation 21:27.

From this whole series we learn that heaven is not something meted out arbitrarily by the Lord after we die, but a slow growth in our hearts and minds throughout this life. It must be founded on truth from the Word, which must be received voluntarily and can grow only as falsity and evil are put away. And it must become the thing we desire above all others. The Lord does not force us to learn of Him, to obey Him, or to love Him. We choose freely whether we will serve Him or not.

Basic Correspondences

- seed = truths from the Word
 - tares = falsities
 - pearls = a true understanding of the Lord
achieved by obedience to Him
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Senior

Discussion in this class should center on the importance of our inner life of thought and feeling. The reason why the Word is written in parable is also an essential point of instruction at this age, as this knowledge will keep young people, when they go to college, from taking into their minds without question much well-meant but mistaken instruction in regard to the Bible.

Perhaps no chapter in the Scriptures is so full of avowed parables as this one. Yet we know that the whole of Scripture is a parable. Verse 34 tells us, “without a parable spake he not unto them.” The reason for this is that the parable, a simple story of commonplace events, is easily heard and understood and stays in the mind. Those who are unwilling to learn of spiritual things see only the story, but those who are looking for a way of life can be shown its inner meaning.

We can see this in our own experience in reading the Bible. From our childhood up the literal story becomes familiar to us and gradually, as our experience grows and our spiritual needs increase, its meaning appears. Sometimes a passage of the Scriptures which we have heard again and again without much thought

“comes alive” suddenly in relation to some present problem or need.

Several things appear clearly from the wonderful series of parables in our chapter for today. First, heavenly life grows only from truths of the Word planted in the life. Second, this growth is not sudden or spectacular but little by little and almost imperceptible. Third, we may not be able at first to distinguish clearly between good and evil, truth and falsity, but in time we can recognize them by their fruits, separate them, and cast out the harmful. Finally, a heavenly character is the most precious of all possessions and worth any sacrifice, and it is the only thing which can insure our eternal happiness.

The last part of the chapter is particularly applicable to the state of the Christian world today. When the Lord went “into his own country,” that is, into Nazareth, He could do no great works because the people there thought of Him as merely human. The trend in some parts of the Protestant world today seems to be away from a belief in the deity of Christ. By this unbelief people cut themselves off from the source of spiritual power. Men look to themselves for guidance instead of to the Lord. Belief in the Lord and belief in the Word are the foundations of the Christian Church and the foundations of a heavenly character in the individual. They are the “good ground” in which alone the seed of truth can take root and flourish. The Lord alone through His Word gives power to do good.

Adult

Each parable in the chapter might furnish material for the whole discussion period, but it will be better to treat them all briefly, tying them together with the realization that they form a series on the development of heaven within us, from the first sowing of the seed to the final ingathering.

A parable is a story which has a lesson within it. When we talk to little children, we instinctively put things we wish to teach them in story form—we do not expect them to understand abstract

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statements. In the eyes of the Lord we are all children. The most logical and well-trained finite mind can grasp only a little of the Lord's truth. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts . . . saith the Lord." Yet the Lord's thoughts are expressed in language which we can grasp, for in the Word they are ultimated in the things of nature and of our daily life. He speaks to us constantly, as we speak to little children, in concrete forms which we can grasp because they are part of our experience. The Lord never leaves anyone without the means of salvation. The simple stories which He told to the multitude would remain in their minds. If the time ever came when they really wished to learn more of the Lord, the stories could be recalled from their memories and they could be given to see their meaning. So it is with each one of us. We learn stories of the Word in childhood when they are nothing but stories to us. But because in their external form they are easily understandable, they remain in our memories and later, when we develop a desire for spiritual understanding, the Lord can enlighten us through them.

The familiar parable of the sower is simple and striking in its outer form. The knowledge that in the Holy Land in the Lord's day seed was sown broadcast enables us to understand the details of the literal story. The wayside was not like our waysides, full of wild vegetation: it was the hard, trodden paths across the fields. The rocky ground was the ground where rock came almost to the surface, with only a thin covering of earth. The thorny places were corners which had been allowed to run wild. As the Lord sat in the boat looking at the multitude gathered before Him on the shore, He saw their hearts and minds with their varying conditions of receptivity, and He was speaking of Himself when He said, "Behold, a sower went forth to sow." The seed, as He later told His disciples, is "the word of the kingdom," the divine truth which He wished to plant in their minds. Every word which proceeded out of His mouth was like a seed, concealing within it a germ of living truth which, if rightly received and cared for, would grow into a plant bearing fruit "unto life eternal." He had told the tempter, "Man

shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” Later He would call Himself the “living bread which came down from heaven.” As He spoke to the multitude, He perceived the state of each one in it, saw the seed He was sowing broadcast falling into the minds of those before Him, and knew what would happen to it with each one. In the different kinds of ground in His parable, He was painting a picture of what He saw.

In our chapter there are seven parables, all about the kingdom of heaven. Why so many? Swedenborg tells us that the Lord’s purpose in creation was “a heaven from the human race.” It is essential, then, that men should know what heaven is and how to attain it. So from the beginning the Lord has told us about the kingdom of heaven in every way which could reach our understanding and appeal to our wills. It is not His fault if we are blind and deaf to His teachings. The seven parables present seven pictures which portray the beginning and the growth of the kingdom of heaven, which the Lord elsewhere tells us “is within you.”

We have seen that the parable of the sower teaches how the seed is sown and received. The next parable, that of the wheat and the tares, points out that good seed is not the only seed sown in our minds, that evil spirits seek to sow seeds of falsity while we “sleep” –in states when we are not awake to spiritual realities–and that we cannot always distinguish between good and evil in their beginnings. When we cannot, both truth and falsity must grow in us and bear fruit before we can be sure of their quality. “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

The parable of the mustard seed is one of encouragement. We need encouragement when we are trying to live a heavenly life, for as we go on, we see so many “tares” in ourselves, and so little “wheat”! But the Lord tells us that every little beginning we make has the power to grow and expand into a veritable tree. This parable is especially fulfilled when we come into the other world where all our beginnings of heavenly life are forever increased.

The fourth parable, that of the leaven, takes us another step in

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spiritual development. Leaven, which was a piece of old sour dough, is a symbol of falsity. The Lord told His disciples to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.” But leaven is made to serve a use. It sets up fermentation in bread dough which causes the bread to become light and digestible as the gases are expelled. So falsity is used by the Lord to set up a fermentation in our minds so that we may recognize and expel our evils and “digest” the truth. Spiritual combats or temptations are fermentations in the spiritual sense (AC 7906). To the church in Pergamos, whose danger was that they had there the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, the Lord said, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna.” (Revelation 2:12)

These first four parables the Lord spoke to the multitude. The last three He spoke to the disciples alone. They picture states of heavenly living which only those who have “continued” with the Lord in temptations are able to experience. The fifth pictures the kingdom of heaven as a treasure hid in a field. Those who have endured long enough to realize something of the genuine happiness of spiritual living become willing to give up their own ways for the sake of gaining the Lord’s way of life—the field—in which that treasure is hidden.

The sixth parable sums up this treasure in one “pearl of great price,” for which the merchant who discovered it was willing to sell everything else. Swedenborg tells us that pearls represent “knowledges of good and truth” (AE 1044) and that the one “pearl of great price” is “the acknowledgment and knowledge of the Lord” (AR 916). In the latter number he also tells us, “the knowledge of the Lord is the universal of all things of doctrine and thence of all things of the church.” The realization of this fact does not come early in our Christian experience. It is rather the culmination of a long life of effort to learn the Lord’s truth and to live the spiritual life. But when we do come to this realization, everything else will seem insignificant in comparison with it.

The final parable pictures the close of life when the net is full—when all the experiences, good and bad, of a lifetime are gathered

up and examined in the light of that final holy state of love to the Lord, and the bad are rejected and the good carried forward to be developed to eternity in the new life of heaven. We should note that “end of the world” [KJV] is a mistranslation. The Greek words mean “consummation of the age.” Nowhere does the Word speak of the destruction of the material universe.

The final incident of the chapter emphasizes the whole teaching that the prime essential for receiving heavenly blessings is acknowledgment that the Lord Jesus Christ was not a finite man but what He claimed to be, “Emmanuel, God with us.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 916: “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: each one of the gates was of one pearl, signifies that the acknowledgment and knowledge of the Lord, conjoins into one all the knowledges of truth and good, which are from the Word, and introduce into the church. . . . By ‘twelve pearls’ is also signified the knowledges of truth and good in a summary, hence it was that ‘the gates’ were ‘pearls’; the reason why ‘each of the gates was of one pearl’ is, because all the knowledges of good and truth, which are signified by ‘gates’ and by ‘pearls’ have relation to one knowledge, which is their containant, which one knowledge is the knowledge of the Lord. It is called one knowledge, although there are many which constitute that knowledge; for the knowledge of the Lord is the universal of all things of doctrine and thence of all things of the church. . . . That the acknowledgment and knowledge of Him is the pearl itself, is meant by these words of the Lord in Matthew . . . xiii, 45, 46.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What is a parable? *a story with an inner meaning*
- P. Why did the Lord always speak in parables? *His words always had a deeper meaning*
- J. What are all the parables in our chapter about? *the kingdom of heaven*
- P. What is the first parable in the chapter called? *the sower*
- P. Why could the Lord explain it to His disciples? *they were eager to learn*
- J. Who is the sower? *the Lord*
- J. What is the seed? *truth from the Word*
- P. What are the different kinds of ground? *different kinds of minds*

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- J. Where must the kingdom of heaven be if we are to live in it when we die?
within us
- J. How many parables of the kingdom of heaven are there in this chapter?
seven
- J. How many of them can you name?
- I. What does the parable of the tares teach us? *why we cannot overcome all our evils at once*
- I. What is the general lesson of the whole series of parables? *development of heavenly character*
- S. What is the pearl of great price? *knowledge and acknowledgment of the Lord*