

Matthew 13

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the parables of Matthew 13, highlighting the Lord's work, the kingdom's outward form, and the judgment on the wicked.

Scripture: Matthew 13:1

Topics: "The Kingdom of Heaven", "The Sower and the Seed"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Matthew 13, emphasizing that the Lord's ministry as a Sower is focused on sowing the word of God in hearts rather than seeking fruit from Israel. He highlights the different responses to the word, illustrating how understanding and connection with God are essential for producing fruit. The parables presented reveal the nature of the kingdom during Christ's absence, showing the mingling of good and evil and the eventual judgment that will separate them. Darby stresses that the true children of the kingdom are those born of the word, and the ultimate purpose of Christ's sacrifice is to redeem His people, the treasure hidden in the field. The sermon concludes with the assurance of God's judgment and the glory that awaits the righteous.

Transcript

The Lord was no longer seeking fruit in His vine. It had been requisite according to God's relations with Israel that He should seek this fruit; but His true service, He well knew, was to bring that which could produce fruit, and not to find any in men.

It is important to remark here, that the Lord speaks of the visible and outward effect of His work as a Sower. The only occasion here on which He expresses His judgment as to the inward cause is, when He says, "They had no root"; and even here it is a matter of fact. The doctrines respecting the divine operation needed for the production of fruit are not here spoken of. It is the Sower who is displayed, and the result of His sowing, not that which causes the seed to germinate in the earth. In each case, except the first, a certain effect is produced.

The Lord is then here presented as commencing a work which is independent of all former relation between God and men, bearing with Him the seed of the word, which He sows in the heart by His ministry. Where it abides, where it is understood, where it is neither choked nor dried up, it produces fruit to His glory, and to the happiness and profit of the man who bears it.

In verse 11 the Lord shews the reason why He speaks enigmatically to the multitude. A distinction is now definitely made between the remnant and the nation: the latter was under the judgment of blindness pronounced by the prophet Isaiah. Blessed were the eyes of the disciples which saw the Emmanuel, the Messiah, the object of the hopes and desires of so many prophets and righteous men. All this marks judgment, and a called and spared remnant. [See Footnote #33]

I would now make a few remarks on the character of the persons of whom the Lord speaks in the parable.

When the word is sown in a heart that does not understand it, when it produces no relation of intelligence, of feeling, or of conscience between the heart and God, the enemy takes it away: it does not remain in the heart. He who heard it is not the less guilty: that which was sown in his heart was adapted to every need, to the nature and to the condition of man.

The immediate reception of the word with joy, in the next case, tends rather to prove that the heart will not retain it; for it is scarcely probable in such a case that the conscience was reached. A conscience touched by the word makes a man serious; he sees himself in the presence of God, which is always a serious thing whatever may be the attraction of His grace, or the hope inspired by His goodness. If the conscience has not been reached, there is no root. The word was received for the joy it imparted; when it brings tribulation, it is given up. When the conscience has been already exercised, the gospel brings at once joy; but when not, it awakens the conscience where there is a real work. In the first case it is the answer to and meets the wants already there. In the second it creates those wants.

Every day's history is, alas! the sad and best explanation of the third class. There is no ill-will, there is barrenness.

That the word was understood is only affirmed of those who bear fruit. The true understanding of the word brings a soul into connection with God, because the word reveals God-expresses what He is. If I understand it, I know Him; and the true knowledge of God (that is, of the Father and of His Son Jesus Christ) is eternal life. Now, whatever may be the degree of light, it is always God thus revealed who is made known by the word that Jesus sows. Thus, being begotten of the word, we shall produce, in diverse measures, the fruits of the life of God in this world. For the subject here is the effect, in this world, of the reception of the truth brought by Jesus (not heaven, nor that which God does in the heart to make the seed bear fruit).

This parable does not speak, as a similitude, of the kingdom, though the word sown was the word of the kingdom, but of the great elementary principle of the service of Christ in the universality of its application, and as it was realised in His own Person and service while on the earth, and after He was gone, though fuller subjects of grace might then be brought out.

In the six following parables we find similitudes of the kingdom. We must remember that it is the kingdom established during the rejection of the King, [See Footnote #34] and which consequently has a peculiar character. That is to say, it is characterised by the absence of the King, adding to this, in the explanation of the first parable, the effect of His return.

The first three of these six parables present the kingdom in its outward forms in the world. They are addressed to the multitude. The last three present the kingdom according to the estimate of the Holy Ghost, according to the reality of its character as seen by God-the mind and counsel of God in it. They are addressed consequently to the disciples alone. The public establishment of the kingdom in the

righteousness and power of God is also announced to the latter, in the explanation of the parables of the tares.

Let us consider first the exterior of the kingdom publicly announced to the multitude-the outward form which the kingdom would assume.

We must remember that the King, that is, the Lord Jesus, was rejected on earth; that the Jews, in rejecting Him, had condemned themselves; that, the word of God being used to accomplish the work of Him whom the Father had sent, the Lord thus made it known that He established the kingdom, not by His power exercised in righteousness and in judgment, but by bearing testimony to the hearts of men; and that the kingdom now assumed a character connected with man's responsibility, and with the result of the word of light being sown in the earth, addressed to the hearts of men, and left as a system of truth to the faithfulness and the care of men (God, however, still holding good His sovereign right for the preservation of His children and of the truth itself). This latter part is not the subject of these parables. I have introduced it here, because it might otherwise have been supposed that everything depended absolutely on man. Had it been so, alas! all would have been lost.

The parable of the tares is the first. It gives us a general idea of the effect of these sowings as to the kingdom; or rather, the result of having for the moment committed the kingdom here below to the hands of men.

The result was that the kingdom here below no longer presented as a whole the appearance of the Lord's own work. He sows not tares. Through the carelessness and the infirmity of men, the enemy found means to sow these tares. Observe that this does not apply to the heathen or to the Jews, but to the evil done among Christians by Satan through bad doctrines, bad teachers and their adherents. The Lord Jesus sowed. Satan, while men slept, sowed also. There were judaisers, philosophers, heretics who held with both the former on the one hand, or on the other opposed the truth of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless Christ had only sown good seed. Must the tares then be rooted out? Clearly the condition of the kingdom during the absence of Christ depends on the answer to this question; and it throws light also upon that condition. But there was still less power to bring in a remedy than there had been to prevent the evil. All must remain unremedied until the King's interposition at the time of harvest. The kingdom of heaven on earth, such as it is in the hands of men, must remain a mingled system. Heretics, false brethren, will be there, as well as the fruit of the Lord's word, testifying, in this last dealing of God with him, man's inability to maintain that which is good and pure in its pristine state. So it has ever been. [See Footnote #35]

At the time of harvest (a phrase that designates a certain space of time during which the events connected with the harvest will take place)-"at the time of harvest" the Lord will deal first, in His providence, with the tares. I say, "in His providence," because He employs the angels. The tares shall be bound in bundles ready to be burnt.

We must observe that outward things in the world are the subject here-acts which root out corruption-corruption that has grown up in the midst of Christianity.

The servants are not capable of doing this. The intermingling (caused by their weakness and carelessness) is such, that in gathering out the tares they would root up the wheat also. Not only discernment, but the practical power of separation would be wanting to carry out their purpose. When

once the tares are there, the servants have nothing to do with them as to their presence in this world, in Christendom. Their service is with the good. The work of purging Christendom from them was not in their province. It is a work of judgment on that which is not of God, belonging to Him who can execute it according to the perfection of a knowledge that embraces everything, and a power that nothing escapes; which, if two men are in one bed, knows how to take the one and leave the other. The execution of judgment on the wicked in this world does not belong to the servants of Christ. [See Footnote #36] He will accomplish it by the angels of His power, to whom He commits the execution of this work.

After the binding of the tares He gathers the wheat into His garner. There is no binding the wheat in bundles; He takes it all to Himself. Such is the end of that which concerns the outward appearance of the kingdom here below. This is not all that the parable can teach us, but it ends the subject of which this part of the chapter speaks. During the absence of Jesus the result of His sowing will be marred, as a whole down here, by the work of the enemy. At the close He will bind all the enemy's work in bundles; that is, He will prepare them in this world for judgment. He will then take away the church. It is evident that this terminates the scene below which goes on during His absence. The judgment is not yet executed. Before speaking of it the Lord gives other pictures of the forms which the kingdom will assume during His absence.

That which had been sown as a grain of mustard-seed becomes a great tree; a symbol that represents a great power in the earth. The Assyrian, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, are set before us in the word as great trees. Such would be the form of the kingdom, which began in littleness through the word sown by the Lord, and afterwards by His disciples. That which this seed produced would gradually assume the form of a great power, making itself prominent on the earth, so that others would shelter themselves under it, as birds under the branches of a tree. This has, indeed, been the case.

We next find that it would not only be a great tree in the earth, but that the kingdom would be characterised as a system of doctrine, which would diffuse itself-a profession, which would enclose all it reached within its sphere of influence. The whole of the three measures would be leavened. I need not dwell here on the fact that the word leaven is always used in a bad sense by the sacred writers; but the Holy Ghost gives us to understand that it is not the regenerative power of the word in the heart of an individual, bringing him back to God; neither is it simply a power acting by outward strength, such as Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and the other great trees of scripture. But it is a system of doctrine that should characterise the mass, pervading it throughout. It is not faith properly so called, nor is it life. It is a religion; it is Christendom. A profession of doctrine, in hearts which will bear neither the truth nor God, connects itself always with corruption in the doctrine itself.

This parable of the leaven concludes His instructions to the multitude. All was now addressed to them in parables, for they did not receive Him their King, and He spoke of things that supposed His rejection, and an aspect of the kingdom unknown to the revelations of the Old Testament, which have in view either the kingdom in power, or a little remnant receiving, amid sufferings, the word of the Prophet-King who had been rejected.

After this parable Jesus no longer remains by the seaside with the multitude-a place suited to the position in which He stood towards the people after the testimony borne at the end of chapter 12, and whither He had repaired on quitting the house. He now re-enters the house with His disciples; and there, in secluded intimacy with them, He reveals the true character-the object-of the kingdom of heaven, the result of that which was done in it, and the means which should be taken to cleanse everything on earth, when the

outward history of the kingdom during His absence should have terminated. That is to say, we find here that which characterises the kingdom to the spiritual man, that which he understands as the true mind of God with regard to the kingdom, and the judgment which should purge out from it all that was contrary to Him-the exercise of power which should render it outwardly in accordance with the heart of God.

We have seen its outward history ending with this, the wheat hidden in the garner, and the tares left in bundles on the earth ready to be burnt. The explanation of this parable resumes the history of the kingdom at that period; only it gives us to understand and distinguish the different parts of the intermixture, ascribing each part to its true author. The field is the world; [See Footnote #37] there the word was sown for the establishment, in this manner, of the kingdom. The good seed were the children of the kingdom; they belonged to it really according to God; they are its heirs. The Jews were no longer so, and it was no longer the privilege of natural birth. The children of the kingdom were born of the word. But among these, in order to spoil the Lord's work, the enemy introduced all sorts of people, the fruit of the doctrines which he had sown among those who were born of the truth. This is the work of Satan in the place where the doctrine of Christ had been planted. The harvest is the end of the age. [See Footnote #38] The reapers are the angels. It will be remarked here that the Lord does not explain historically that which took place, but the terms used to bring in the issue when the harvest is come. The fulfilment of that which is historical in the parable is supposed; and He passes on to give the great result outside that which was the kingdom during His absence on high. The wheat (that is, the church) is in the barn, and the tares in bundles on the earth. But He takes all that constitutes these bundles, all that as evil offends God in the kingdom, and casts it into the furnace of fire, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. After this judgment the righteous shall shine forth like Himself, the true Sun of that day of glory-of the age to come, in the kingdom of their Father. Christ will have received the kingdom from the Father whose children they were; and they shall shine forth in it with Him according to that character.

Thus we find for the multitude, the results on earth of the divine sowing, and the machinations of the enemy-the kingdom presented under this form; afterwards the confederacies of the wicked among themselves apart from their natural order as growing in the field; and the taking away of the church. For His own disciples, the Lord explains all that was necessary to make them fully understand the language of the parable. We then find the judgment executed by the Son of man upon the wicked, who are cast into the fire; and the manifestation of the righteous in glory (these last events taking place after the Lord had risen up and put an end to the outward form of the kingdom of heaven upon earth, the wicked being gathered in companies, and the saints taken up to heaven). [See Footnote #39]

And now, having explained the public history and its results in judgment and in glory for the full instruction of His disciples, the Lord communicates to them the thoughts of God with respect to what was going on upon earth, while the outward and earthly events of the kingdom were being developed-that which the spiritual man should discern in them. To him, to one who understood the purpose of God, the kingdom of heaven was like a treasure hidden in a field. A man finds the treasure, and buys the field in order to possess it. The field was not his object, but the treasure that was in it. Thus Christ has purchased the world. He possesses it by right. His object is the treasure hidden in it, His own people, all the glory of the redemption connected with it; in a word, the church looked at,-not in its moral and in a certain sense divine beauty, but as the special object of the desires and of the sacrifice of the Lord-that which His heart had found in this world according to the counsels and the mind of God.

In this parable it is the powerful attraction of this "new thing," which induces the one who has found it to purchase the whole place, that he may obtain possession of it.

The Jews were nothing new; the world had no attraction; but this new treasure induced the One who had discovered it to sell all He had that He might gain it. In fact Christ forsook everything. He not only emptied Himself to redeem us, but He renounced all that belonged to Him as man, as the Messiah on earth, the promises, His royal rights, His life, to take possession of the world which contained in it this treasure, the people whom He loved.

In the parable of the pearl of great price we have again the same idea, but it is modified by others. A man was seeking goodly pearls. He knew what he was about. He had taste, discernment, knowledge, as to that which he sought. It was the well-known beauty of the thing that caused his research. He knows when he has found one corresponding to his ideas, that it is worth while to sell all that he may acquire it. It is worth this in the eyes of one who can estimate its value. And he buys nothing else along with it. Thus Christ has found in the church by itself a beauty and (because of this beauty) a value, which made Him give up all to obtain it. It is just so with regard to the kingdom. Considering the state of man, of the Jews even, the glory of God required that all should be given up in order to have this new thing; for there was nothing in man that He could take to Himself. Not only He was content to give up all for the possession of this new thing, but that which His heart seeks for, that which He finds nowhere else, He finds in that which God has given Him in the kingdom. He bought no other pearls. Until He found this pearl, He had no inducement to sell all that He had. As soon as He sees it, His mind is made up; He forsakes all for it. Its value decides Him, for He knows how to judge, and He seeks with discernment.

I do not say that the children of the kingdom are not actuated by the same principle. When we have learnt what it is to be a child of the kingdom, we forsake all that we may enjoy it, that we may be of the pearl of great price. But we do not buy that which is not the treasure, in order to obtain it; and we are very far from seeking goodly pearls before we have found the one of great price. In their full force these parables only apply to Christ. The intention in these parables is to bring out that which was then doing, in contrast with all that had taken place before-with the Lord's relations to the Jews.

There remains yet one of the seven-that of the net cast into the sea. In this parable there is no change in the persons employed, that is to say, in the parable itself. The same persons who cast the net draw it to shore, and make the separation by gathering the good fish into vessels, taking no further notice of the bad. Securing the good fish is the work of those who draw the net to shore. It is only when landed that this is done. The sorting is their work, doubtless; but they have only to do with the good fish. They know them. This is their business, the object of their fishing. Others indeed come, and are found in the net together with the good; but these are not good. No other judgment is needed. The fishermen know the good. These are not such. They leave them. This forms a part of the history of the kingdom of heaven. The judgment of the wicked is not found here. The bad are left on the shore, when the fishermen gather the good into vessels. The final destiny of either good or bad is not given here. It does not take place on the shore with respect to the good; nor as to the bad by simply leaving them there. It is subsequent to the action of the parable; and, with respect to the bad, it does not take place merely by their separation from the good with whom they had been intermingled, but by their destruction. Neither in this parable, nor in that of the tares and wheat, does the execution of judgment form part of the parable itself. There the tares are bound and left on the field, here they are cast away out of the netful.

Thus the gospel net has been cast into the sea of the nations, and has enclosed of all kinds. After this general gathering, which has filled the net, the agents of the Lord, having to do with the good, gather them together, separating them from the bad. Remark here that this is a similitude of the kingdom. It is the character which the kingdom assumes when the gospel has assembled together a mass of good and bad.

At the end, when the net has been drawn so that all kinds are enclosed in it, the good are set apart because they are precious, the others are left. The good are gathered into divers vessels. The saints are gathered, not by the angels, but by the work of those who have laboured in the name of the Lord. The distinction is not made by judgment, but by the servants occupied with the good.

The execution of the judgment is another matter. The labourers have nothing to do with that. At the end of the age, the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just, not the just from among the rest as the fisherman did, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire, where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Here nothing is said of their being occupied about the just. Gathering them into vessels was not the angels' work, but that of the fishermen. The angels are in both parables occupied with the wicked. The public result had been given, whether during the period of the kingdom of heaven, or afterwards, in the parable of the tares. It is not repeated here. The work to be done with regard to the righteous when the net is full is added here. The destiny of the wicked is repeated to distinguish the work done with respect to them from that wrought by means of the fishermen, who gather the good into divers vessels. Still it is presented under another aspect; and the just are left where they were. In the parable of the tares the judgment of the wicked is declared as in this. They are cast out into weeping and gnashing of teeth, but there the general state of the kingdom is revealed, and we have the righteous shining forth as the sun-the higher part of the kingdom. Here it is only what the intelligent understand, what the spiritual mind sees; the just are put into vessels. There is a separation by spiritual power before judgment, which there was not in the general public state of the kingdom, but only what providence did publicly in the field, and the good grain received above. Here the separation is by dealings with the good. This was the main point for spiritual intelligence. Public display is not the point; only judgment will be executed on the wicked, in fact; then the just will be left there. [See Footnote #40]

In the explanation of the second parable, it is absolute judgment in the case of the tares, destroying and consuming that which remains on the field, already collected together and separated providentially from the wheat. The angels are sent at the end, not to separate the tares from the wheat (that was done) but to cast the tares into the fire, thus cleansing the kingdom. In the explanation of the parable of the fish (v. 49) the sorting itself takes place. There will be just ones on the earth, and the wicked will be separated from among them. The practical instruction of this parable is the separation of the good from the wicked, and the gathering together in companies of many of the former; this is done more than once, many others of the same being gathered elsewhere into one also. The servants of the Lord are the instruments employed in what takes place in the parable itself.

These parables contain things new and old. The doctrine of the kingdom, for instance, was a well-known doctrine. That the kingdom should take the forms described by the Lord, that it should embrace the whole world without distinction, the people of God drawing their existence not from Abraham but from the word-all this was quite new. All was of God. The scribe had knowledge of the kingdom, but was entirely ignorant of the character it would assume, as the kingdom of heaven planted in this world by means of the word, on which all here depends.

The Lord resumes His work among the Jews. [See Footnote #41] To them He was only "the carpenter's son." They knew His family after the flesh. The kingdom of heaven was nothing in their eyes. The revelation of this kingdom was carried on elsewhere, and there the knowledge of divine things was communicated. The former saw nothing beyond those things which the natural heart could perceive. The blessing of the Lord was arrested by their unbelief: He was rejected as prophet, as well as king, by Israel.

Footnotes for Matthew 13

- 33: Compare Mark 4: 33, 34. It was adapted to all if they had ears to hear, but was darkness to the wilful.
- 34: Remark here, that chapter 12 having brought before us the judgment of the Jewish people, we have now the kingdom as It is in the absence of the king, chapter 13; the assembly as built by Christ, chapter 16; and the kingdom in glory, chapter 17.
- 35: It is a solemn thought that the first act of man has been to spoil what God has set up good. So with Adam, so with Noah, so with the law, so with the priesthood of Aaron, so with the son of David, so even Nebuchadnezzar, so the church. In Paul's days all sought their own, not the things of Jesus Christ. All is made good, better, and stable in the Messiah.
- 36: I speak here of those who will have been His servants on earth during His absence. For angels are also His servants, as well as the saints of the age to come.
- 37: Manifestly it was not in the church that the Lord began to sow: it did not then exist. But He distinguishes Israel here from the world, and speaks of the latter. He looked for fruit in Israel; He sows in the world, because Israel after all His culture brought forth no fruit.
- 38: Not merely the instant that terminates it, but the acts that accomplish the purpose of God in terminating it.
- 39: Remark too here that the kingdom of heaven is parcelled out into two parts, the kingdom of the Son of man, and the kingdom of our Father: the objects of judgment in what is subjected to Christ, and a place like His before the Father for sons.
- 40: In all symbolical prophecies and parables, the explanation goes beyond the parable and adds facts; because the judgment executed publicly testifies of that which in the time of the parable can only be discerned spiritually. This latter may be spiritually understood. The result is, judgment will publicly declare it, so that we are always to go beyond the parable in the explanation. Judgment explains publicly what is only understood spiritually before, and brings in a new order of things (compare Dan. 7).
- 41: The chapters which follow are striking in their character. Christ's Person as the Jehovah of Psalm 132 is brought out, but Israel sent away, the disciples left alone, while He prays on high. He returns, rejoins the disciples, and the Gadarene world owns Him. Then we have in chapter 15 the full moral description of the ground on which Israel stood actually, and ought to stand, but carried much farther out into what man's heart is; and then what God is, revealed in grace to faith, even if in a Gentile. Historically He still owns Israel, but in divine perfection, and now in human administrative power; and then (chap. 16) the church is brought in prophetically; and in chapter 17 the kingdom of glory in vision. In chapter 16 they are forbidden to say He is the Christ. This is over.

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