

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 10

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS]

THE HOUSEHOLDER and THE LABOURERS AND THE HARVEST

“The parable of the householder” in Matthew 13:51-52
and the parable of “the labourers and the harvest” in Matthew 9:35-38 are parables about
WITNESSING IN GOD’S KINGDOM.

A. THE PARABLE OF THE HOUSEHOLDER

Read Matthew 13:51-52.

Jesus tells this parable in the form of *a statement*. The statement is about who are true teachers of the law.

During the time of Jesus, there were many teachers of the law (rabbis), who were trained by other teachers of the law. They especially concentrated on the ceremonial law and multiplied the explanations and applications of these laws many times. In this way “the tradition of the elders” came into existence (Matthew 15:2, see lesson 25). Such teachers of the law were not the true teachers of the law.

Jesus says that the true teachers of the law are those who have been instructed well in the matters concerning the kingdom of God! “To be instructed in the matters concerning the kingdom of God” literally means, “to have been made a disciple with respect to the kingdom of God”. “A disciple” is a follower and learner. “The kingdom” is God’s sovereign kingship or rule in the hearts and lives of people, resulting in their complete salvation, in their constitution as a Church and their influence in society in the present time and in the new heaven and new earth after the second coming.

A true teacher of the law is someone who is a follower, not of some teacher (of the law), theologian or church denomination, but of Jesus Christ. A true teacher of the law has received training, not in the traditions of the elders (earlier rabbi’s), but in everything related to the kingdom of God! A true teacher of the law personally acknowledges God’s sovereign kingship or rule over his own heart and life, follows Jesus Christ as his disciple and continually learns from Jesus Christ, especially about the matters concerning the kingdom of God.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The master of the house is the person who manages all the affairs and property of the owner of the house.

The storeroom in the house is the place where valuable possessions are kept. Of course, there will be old things as well as new things in the storeroom. When these things are needed, the master or manager of the house brings them out of the storeroom. These elements are easy to understand.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of “the story” of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of this parable is contained in Matthew chapter 13.

Matthew 13 contains eight parables of Jesus. Parables that are not understood remain “riddles” in the eyes of people (Matthew 13:11-15). That is why Jesus asks, “Have you understood all these things?” (Matthew 13:51).

(2) The story of this parable is contained in Matthew 13:52.

(3) The explanation or application of this parable is contained in the illustration itself.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes. Jesus does not explain any of the details of this parable. Therefore we must deduce the relevant details from the story or context.

The master or manager of the house. This is a relevant detail, because he represents every true teacher of the law, that is, every true teacher of the Bible or student of the Bible. The teachers of the law here represent disciples of Jesus Christ, especially those who come out of the circle of learned men in the Old Testament, that is, former teachers of the law or “rabbis”. Later, the apostle Paul was an example of such a teacher of the law.

The storeroom and its treasures. Although these elements are not explained, they are relevant and represent the inner being of a person together with all the spiritual treasures that he has accumulated throughout his lives. “The old things” are all the spiritual treasures he has accumulated from his study of the Old Testament. “The new things” are all the spiritual treasures he accumulated while being a disciple of Jesus Christ, things, which in the mean time has been recorded in the New Testament. There are many spiritual treasures in the Old Testament, like God’s faithfulness and love and righteousness. A true teacher of the law, that is, a true teacher or student of the Bible, will be able to bring out spiritual treasures contained in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. On the one hand he is a student of the Bible and on the other hand he is a teacher of the Bible who teaches these old and new spiritual treasures to other people.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (or central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the householder in Matthew 13:51-52 teaches about “discipleship in God’s kingdom” and about “witnessing in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable is the following. “The teachers in God’s kingdom have the duty and responsibility to study both the Old and New Testaments and bring out all its hidden spiritual treasures. They moreover have the duty and responsibility to apply these treasures to their own lives and to pass them on (to teach them) to others.”

Discipleship and witnessing are two basic characteristics of God’s kingdom. The teachers in God’s kingdom study the Bible and bring out of it all its old and new treasures. They should receive an adequate training, must faithfully hold on to the old eternal doctrines of the Bible, and be able to apply these eternal truths to the new situations they face. And they pass on to others what they have learned.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach, compare to what the parables teach?

Ezra 7:10. Ezra had devoted himself to three disciplines: First, he studied the Word of God. Second, he put the things he learned into practice in his own life. Third, he taught the things he learned to others. The order of these three disciplines is very significant for every teacher of the Bible!

Matthew 23:3-4. Jesus rebuked the Jewish teachers of the law and Pharisees, because they did not practice what they preached. This is a warning to every teacher of the Bible!

Acts 20:18-27. Paul lived a transparent life before people, serving the Lord with humility. He taught people the whole will of God, contained in both the Old and New Testaments. But he did not teach them things that would not be helpful to them.

1 Corinthians 4:6. He limited himself to what was recorded in the Bible.

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

Discuss. Summarise the main teaching or message of this parable: What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) The teachers in God's kingdom must receive an adequate training.

The text literally says, "Every teacher of the law who *once for all* (at a definite point in his life) has been trained to be a disciple of the kingdom of God." Every teacher (or shepherd or elder or worker) in the kingdom of God should be a disciple of the kingdom of God! He should personally acknowledge the sovereign kingship or rule of Jesus Christ over his own heart and life. While a Jewish teacher of the law was an acknowledged student of the Old Testament and especially of all the traditions which a long row of elders (rabbi's) between the exile and the time of Jesus Christ had superimposed upon the Old Testament, a Christian teacher of the Word of God must be trained in the matters regarding the kingdom of God, as is recorded in the New Testament and especially in the Sermon on the Mount and all the parables of Jesus Christ. He must be trained to know the character of the kingdom of God, how to enter into the kingdom of God, how to live in the kingdom of God and how to proclaim the kingdom of God to others in the world.

(2) The teachers in God's kingdom have the responsibility to provide for their households.

Jesus regards these teachers or workers, who have been trained in the matters of the kingdom of God, as masters or managers of households. They are very important people, because they have the responsibility to provide for their households, that is, for the people whom God has entrusted to their care. God has entrusted his very precious treasure to their care (Matthew 2:11; 6:19-21; 12:35; 13:44; 19:21). This treasure consists of the knowledge of the Bible, that is, knowledge of the Christian doctrine (teachings) and life. It is the Christian worker's duty and responsibility to impart this knowledge to other people, beginning with those who belong to his own household or family and his congregation.

(3) The teachers in God's kingdom have the ability to bring out of their storeroom new as well as old treasures.

Some of the differences between the Jewish teachers of the law and Jesus Christ were the following.

Jesus Christ spoke the truth (John 14:6; 18:37). The teachings of the Jewish teachers were marked by corrupt and evasive reasoning. They added many of their own opinions and decisions to the Law (God's Word), or completely ignored the spiritual significance of God's Word (Matthew 5:17-48).

Jesus Christ spoke about matters of great importance, of life and death, of eternal salvation and damnation (Matthew 25:46; cf. Paul in Acts 20:27,20). The Jewish teachers often wasted their time with trivial matters (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus Christ had system in his teaching (for example, the Sermon on the Mount and his other sermons). The Jewish teachers often rambled just as the Talmud proves.

Jesus Christ made the people curious by using parables (Matthew 13:3-51) and concrete examples (Matthew 5:21 - 6:24). The speeches of the Jewish teachers were often as dry as dust.

Jesus Christ spoke and acted (through his miracles) as the great Lover of people, One who was concerned with the present and eternal welfare of his listeners. The Jewish teachers had a great self-love, but lacked love for others as is evident from many passages in the Bible (Matthew 23:1-33).

Jesus Christ spoke and acted with authority, because his message and power came straight from the heart and mind of God the Father (and thus from his own divine Being) and from the Scriptures (Matthew 5:17-18; 7:28-29; 21:12-14; John 12:49-50). The Jewish teachers were constantly borrowing from fallible human sources, one teacher of the law quoting another teacher of the law who quoted yet another teacher of the law! Jesus drew from the Fountain of living waters, while they tried to draw water from broken cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13).

The teachers and workers of God's kingdom must continually drink from the waters that Jesus Christ himself gives (John 4:14; Revelation 22:1,17). By God's grace they must remain fresh in their approach all the time, applying the eternal old truths of the Bible to the new situations they face.

B. THE PARABLE OF THE LABOURERS AND THE HARVEST

Read Matthew 9:35-38.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The harvest. The harvest consists of the greatest field that exists, namely all the countries in the world! The growing grain needs constant attention in order to get it ready for the harvest. In the mean time there is very much to do (sowing, planting, giving water, pulling up weeds, protecting it against the sun, birds and thieves, etc.

The labourers. They are day-labourers who are hired every day to work on the field. However, in this story, there are too few labourers to do the work.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 9:35-36.

This is as it were a summary review of the Great Galilean ministry of Jesus Christ. This ministry is recorded in Matthew 4:12 to 15:20 and took place between December 27 A.D. and April 29 A.D. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). He said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). And he made disciples and said, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). The crowds responded with enthusiasm, but the Pharisees and teachers of the law opposed him with growing hatred.

“Jesus had compassion on the crowds, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:36-38).

Harassed. The word originally means “to flay or to skin”. It is used in the sense of the crowds of people of Israel, who were harassed, put under pressure, made weary, bewildered, abused (Matthew 11:28) by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These religious leaders of Israel continually burdening the people with 613 man-made laws about Sabbaths, religious festivals, wide phylacteries on their foreheads and forearms, long tassels on their clothes and prayer shawls on their heads, etc. (Matthew 23:4-5). These religious teachers were blind guides who misled the people (Matthew 15:14). In contrast, Jesus Christ put the emphasis on the weightier matters of the law, namely, justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

Helpless. The word originally means “cast down”, “lying helpless on the ground”, tired and lost, dejected and deserted!

Sheep without a shepherd. The crowds of people in Israel were like a great flock of sheep, untended, unprotected and unsought (Ezekiel 34). They were lying down, totally exhausted and exposed to ravenous beasts, wind and weather, hunger and thirst. What they needed was true guides and compassionate shepherds!

At this point, Jesus told the parable of the labourers and the harvest.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 9:37.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 9:38 and Matthew chapter 10.

In Matthew 9 Jesus exhorted his disciples to *pray* for a greater number of labourers.

In Matthew 10, he *trained* his disciples to become labourers.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning. Therefore the details need to be understood from the context.

The harvest. In the context, Jesus was looking at the crowds of people of Israel. “The harvest” represents all the lost people in Israel (Matthew 10:6). However, in its application, it may also refer to all the lost people in the world (Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20). This is thus a relevant detail.

Labourers. In the context, Jesus was referring to people whom God would send out to reach these lost people in both Israel and all the countries of the world (Matthew 10:5-7; 28:18-20). This is thus a relevant detail.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the labourers and the harvest in Matthew 9:35-38 teaches about “witnessing in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of this parable is the following, “There is a sharp contrast between the large number of people that constitute the harvest and the scarcity of the labourers who must gather them in.”

Witnessing is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom and witnessing is the special task of labourers. The genuine people of God’s kingdom should pray that God would send out more labourers into his harvest field. Jesus put

the emphasis on both the number of labourers and their quality. They should pray for many more labourers and they should pray for labourers who are sent out by God (in contrast to purely human institutions). Labourers (in the local church and in the worldwide Church) should not be self-appointed, but equipped, called and appointed by God (in accordance with what the Bible teaches). They must be people who love God and who have a compassion for the lost people in the world.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Read Isaiah 55:1-7; 61:1-3; John 3:16; Romans 10:12-13.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Notes. They all teach the important truth that God wants the good news to be proclaimed to sinners and that God himself delights in their conversion and salvation.

(See also 1 Kings 8:41-43; Psalm 72:8-15; Proverbs 11:30; Daniel 12:3; Micah 7:18-20; Malachi 1:11; Matthew 22:9; 23:37; 28:19-20; Luke 15; 19:10; John 10:16; Acts 4:12; 1 Corinthians 9:22; 2 Corinthians 5:20-21; 1 Timothy 1:15; Revelation 3:20).
