

THE EARLY PARABLES OF JESUS

Message 1

Passage:

Words: 5818

INTRODUCTION TO THE EARLY PARABLES:

-The groupings of the parables

Many years ago I did a number of messages on a number of parables Jesus gave that I believe speak prophetically of the Church age. Most of them are found in Matthew 13. Then I began to see that Jesus' later parables form a group as well. And I did a number of messages on what I called the latter parables. Having done those two groups of parables I began to see that the early parables form a group as well. So there are three groups of parables, and all three groups were prophetic at the time they were given.

Now the early parables that we are going to look at indicate that a change is coming. Today we are in an age of change to such an extent that we are much more used to change. But back then, Judaism had been in existence for a long, long time, and change would be very difficult for them to take. And this change would be a very huge change. Israel, for the next 2,000 years would no longer be God's primary work. Well the time after that change that would come is described in the second set of parables. It speaks of the time we know as the Church age, and we have now been in that time for some 2,000 years.

The third and the last group of parables tells the Jews that they will no longer be the people that God would work through. And what was even more unthinkable for them is that God would work through another people, the Gentiles, whom they called dogs. The kingdom will be taken from them, their city will be destroyed, and the kingdom will go to another people. So I might call these three groups of parables; the early parables which foretell of a change coming. The next set of parables are the middle parables and they speak of the time after the change has come. The last set of parables I call the latter parables, speak of what will happen to the nation of Israel. The Lord indicates that the kingdom will be taken from them and given to another nation.

So having studied the middle parables and the latter parables, I then realized there was a third group. It is this group of parables I want to deal with in the next while. There are individual parables not related to these groups and they are meant to throw light on subjects not related to these three groups of parables. But let me give in brief what I see as these three groups. Here is the main message of the first grouping of parables. In the first group, the group we want to look at, the Jewish believers are told that a change is coming. Jesus, the long promised and long awaited Messiah had come. After 4,000 long years He finally arrived. And by His life He would give to mankind a picture of what God is like. It was a costly work. My understanding is that He ministered just over two brief years, and man could no longer put up with such a perfect picture of God.

Jesus, realized early what would happen and that after His ministry was over, big changes would come. And in this first grouping of parables He explains what the life of the Christian, the one who receives Him as Lord and Savior, will be like. And then as He nears the time to give the second group of parables, He begins to prepare them for change. You see, they had a way of life that they had lived for a long, long time. They had had a temple and a city, a central place where they learned and practiced their faith. And now a change would be coming. It would no longer be like that. And a thought, unthinkable to any Jew, is that the kingdom would be taken away from them, and God would make of Jew and Gentile one new work. And more unthinkable yet, this kingdom would be mostly made up of Gentiles. I can hardly describe to you how beyond comprehension such a thought would have been to the Jew.

And so, in this first set of parables Jesus will show them the true character and function of the true Christian that will, not too long from now, move away from Jerusalem and move into the entire world. It will reach every corner of the earth. And in this set of parables the Lord will begin to prepare those who truly followed Him as Messiah for this change to a new age.

The second group of parables will then show what the next 2,000 plus years will be like, after the change has come. It is the Church age. These are most fascinating parables because they are given without a context. A good number of years ago I did a series of messages on the parables of Matthew 13. These parables, as I understand them, are prophetic in nature as well.

The parables of Matthew 13 are most interesting, because they are what I would call 'context-less parables'. Parables are generally understandable only by the context in which they are found.

Let me give you an example of a context-less parable. If I said, "Being a Christian is like swimming upstream." We call that a metaphor, of which a parable is but an extension. Now the rule of interpretation is that you have only interpreted correctly when you have in your mind what the speaker had in his mind when he gave the words you are interpreting. One could draw a lot of conclusions from the words, "Christianity is like swimming upstream." But you would only have interpreted correctly when you have in your mind what I had in my mind when I said those words.

But without a context, you would only be guessing at what I meant. So let me give you some context for those words. Let us say I was preaching and I said, "The true Christian will receive opposition. And if you live right, and you stand for truth, you will receive opposition. The Bible is clear on that. Christianity is like swimming upstream. That is because the Christian is always going against the flow of sinful humanity." Now, with that bit of context, you can interpret the parable that Christianity is like swimming upstream. But when you don't have a context, you have no ground but your own imagination to interpret from. For example, if I say, "That is just like a nail which holds a board in place." If that is all you are told, you can only guess at what I meant. And that is how the parables of Matthew 13 are given. They are given without a context.

Now there is a very good reason why the Lord spoke like that in Matthew 13. Turn to Matthew 13. Jesus is speaking here of what the Church age would be like, but the Church age was a mystery to the OT and to the followers of truth in Jesus day. So He revealed what was to come in parables that have no context. But He then gave the disciples the key to interpreting those parables, but the rest did not know how to interpret what He had taught in those parables. We begin in verse 1:

1 On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea.

2 And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

3 Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying:
"Behold, a sower went out to sow.

4 "And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them.

5 "Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth.

6 "But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away.

7 "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them.

8 "But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

9 "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

But, here is the question, how can you hear a parable without a context and understand it?

Now look at verse 10:

10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

Now look at Jesus' answer:

11 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

12 "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

13 *"Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.*

14 *"And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive;*

15 *For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'*

16 *"But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;*

17 *"for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

The disciples came to talk to Jesus and He spoke with them without the crowds overhearing their question and His answer. In these context-less parables Jesus revealed to the disciples that which He would not reveal to these hard hearted Jews. Jesus then explained the parable to them. So look at it a little further beginning in verse 18:

18 *"Therefore hear the parable of the sower:*

19 *"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.*

20 *"But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;*

21 *"yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.*

22 *"Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.*

23 *"But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*

And so, from that explanation they were able to understand that parable and the other parables as well.

The first and last grouping of parables are parables we understand by their context. So let me give a word on interpreting parables.

-The interpretation of parables

Let me first explain what a parable is and then how they are to be interpreted. Let me quote from the messages I did on the latter parables. Here is what I said:

So, let us begin by considering what a parable is... The word for parable in the NT is parabolee. You can tell we get our word 'parable' from that. This word occurs 48 times in the NT and 11 of those are in this chapter. This word is made up of two words, para, meaning alongside or beside and ballo, to cast or throw. It means to throw alongside.

Can someone tell me, what is a common explanation of what a parable is? Probably the most often repeated definition of a parable is, "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." In Scripture, generally, an earthly story is laid alongside some heavenly or spiritual truth. It is a figurative way of teaching truth.

C.H Dodd says, "A parable at its simplest is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to rouse it into active thought." I mentioned to you in the last message that Bullinger said it was like traveling by train and the monotony of the clickity clack clack is putting you to sleep, and then when the brakes squeal and the train begins to slow down, all of a sudden your attention is up.

Don Schwagar, in an internet article asks, "What is a parable?" Then he writes, "A parable is a word-picture which uses an image or story to illustrate a truth or lesson. It creates a mini-drama in picture language that describes the reality being

illustrated. It shows a likeness between the image of an illustration and the object being portrayed. It defines the unknown by using the known. It helps the listener to discover the deeper meaning and underlying truth of the reality being portrayed. It can be a figure of speech or comparison, such as "the kingdom of God ..is like a mustard seed ..or like yeast" (Luke 13:19, 21). More commonly it is a short story told to bring out a lesson or moral. Jesus used simple stories or images to convey important truths about God and his kingdom, and lessons pertaining to the way of life and happiness which God has for us. They commonly feature examples or illustrations from daily life in ancient Palestine, such as mustard seeds and fig trees, wineskins and oil lamps, money and treasure, stewards, workers, judges, and homemakers, wedding parties and children's games. Jesus' audience would be very familiar with these illustrations from everyday life. Today we have to do some homework to understand the social customs described (Don Schwager; www.rc.net/wcc/parable1.htm)

Well, for some time I have been planning to speak on these parables. I wanted to accomplish this if possible, before my preaching days are over. And when we come to the sermon on the Mount we are at the beginning of the ministry of Christ. The spiritual situation in Israel is bad. They have degenerated to a time when God will have to step in. God will only let things get so bad, and then He steps in. He never forces man to repent, but when man refuses to repent, He sometimes steps in with destruction. We see this in Sodom and Gomorrah. We would have seen this in Nineveh, but they repented.

And in the time when Christ came to earth, mankind was once more in desperate shape. But instead of destruction, through the preaching of Christ, some salt was generated and it would generate more and preserve mankind for at least 2,000 more years. We have recently studied the seven churches of Asia. I take the view that the seven churches show seven progressive stages of the Church age, and the last Church age pictures a church full of unsaved people. That is what I see is meant by lukewarm. They do not hate Christ. They are not atheists. They say they love the Lord, but they are unsaved. The Lord said that if they did not repent, He would vomit them out. That clearly speaks of unsaved people.

And now we are nearing a time when God will have to step in again. He will do so by first of all removing the Church, and

then He will judge this wicked world and you can read all about that simply by reading what follows the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3.

Well, Christ came to earth. Here before Him on this mountain He had a group of people among whom were those who were the salt of the earth. They were the only hope for the earth, or the world. In them the hope of mankind was wrapped up.

I. THE SALT Matthew 5:13

1. The parable

So, we are ready to begin to look at the first of the early parables. It is found in Matthew 5:13. Jesus said to the people gathered before Him:

13 You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

Now our question is this: just what did Jesus mean by saying they are the salt of the earth? How could a group of Jews from northern Israel, and that from Galilee of the Gentiles, be the salt of the earth? And we have pointed out that to interpret a parable one needs to understand the setting, and so we want to look first at the setting.

2. The setting

We go back to Matthew 4:12-17:

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee.

At this time in Christ's ministry, John had already been put into prison. Turn to Matthew chapter 11. In my estimation, John the Baptist ministered for just over six months. You know what Jesus said of John. He said of those born of women, not a greater prophet had arisen than John the Baptist. Look at verse 11. Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the

Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Now if you would read this passage in Luke, Jesus is saying John is the greatest prophet of those born of women.

I have spoken of this to you before. What makes one prophet greater than another is his message. And all the prophets before John said, "The Messiah is coming. He will come some day." John, when He saw Jesus said, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." He did not say, "He is coming." He said, "He is here." And the amazing thing is that we have greater things to say about Christ than John did. We can say, "He was here. He was crucified." John couldn't say that. Then we can say, "He was buried, rose again, and is now in heaven. And then we can say He is coming back again!" Our message is greater than John's.

But what was so incredible about John's ministry? I would not have learned this, if I had not preached the series on, "Your First Day In Heaven." You may not agree with me, but here is what I see. The Jewish High Priest anointed the priests that were initiated into the ministry. This initiation took place when they were 30 years old, and it took place in the temple, at the laver. Jesus and John both entered the ministry when they were 30 years old, only John was six months older than Jesus.

And when Jesus came, as the Messiah, He would become the High Priest. We cannot here speak about the fact that He was not from the tribe of Levi, but when He was to become the High Priest, the Jewish High Priest was, as I see it, unfit to anoint Him. And Jesus went, not to the temple to be anointed, but He went to the Jordan River, where He was washed by John in the waters of baptism. And here, at His baptism, He was anointed with the Holy Spirit, by God Almighty Himself! John the Baptist had the incredible ministry of initiating Jesus into ministry. And he ministered so effectively that he only lived six months.

Well, Jesus was anointed, so we go on in verse 13:

13 *And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali,*

14 *that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying:*

15 *"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles:*

16 *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned."*

The time of the kingdom of heaven was at hand. In just 2 years, in my understanding, the 69th week of Daniel will be finished, and the 70th week was then to begin. But because the Jews will reject Christ, the 70th week will be put on hold, and on this earth, a brand new work of God will begin. It will be the work where a large number of people will be saved and they will become the bride of Christ. They will be known as the Church. And so, some very great changes will take place. And these early parables will prepare the believers of that time for this new age. We go on in verse 17:

17 *From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

There, in one word, we have the most important aspect of the Gospel, and it is negative. In our lukewarm age we do not like to start the Gospel like this. We like to begin in the positive like this: God has a wonderful plan for your life! If you start in the positive, somewhere you have to put in a big BUT. God has a wonderful plan for your life, BUT, the bad news is you are a sinner. You have horribly violated the character of God. You have slandered Him. And according to Scripture, you will burn in hell forever unless you repent. You must repent! You must change your mind. You must confess your sins and trust in Christ. That negative message is the one Christ began with and so

His message, and that of John the Baptist is wrapped up in one word, "Repent!"

We go on in verse 18:

18 And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.

19 Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

20 They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

21 Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them,

22 and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.

24 Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them.

Now let me fill in the blanks. We think that Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, saw some fishermen, and He called, and they left their livelihood and followed Him. But that is not what happened. They had already heard of John the Baptist. They had a very high regard for John. They have pondered John's message. Maybe some of them have even repented of their sins under John's preaching and their thoughts are filled with the things he has preached.

And then, some time ago, close to their own area they heard from very reliable sources that Jesus had turned

a lot of water into wine at a wedding. And they may have put together John's message and Jesus' actions, and they have begun to wonder if this is not in fact the Messiah. Then, right in their own area they had heard about the healing of the noble man's son. Then they heard about the healings that happened when Jesus was in Jerusalem, and they are beginning to be convinced that this is indeed the Messiah!

And now, when one are convinced that Jesus is the real Messiah, then one becomes willing to do what He calls one to do. And then, lo and behold, there He is, and He says, "Come and follow Me." Well, Jesus and Peter have already met in my understanding. It happened at Bethabara where John was preaching. And Andrew, Peter's brother said, "We have found the Messiah." And he brought Peter to Jesus, and Jesus said, "You are Simon, the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas."

When we come to Matthew 5 a number of events happen in the life of Christ that are not recorded in Matthew. Jesus has called all of His disciples by now. He has completed His first Galilean preaching tour. We saw this in verses 23-24. And fame of Him spread out into the outlying area. And so when Christ called, they were already ready to follow Him. And now Jesus is at Capernaum, and crowds of people from all over have heard of Him and their curiosity whether this is the Christ or not is so great that they come from far away and the find Him at Capernaum.

Consider now the people that are gathered before Him on the mountainside. We find them in verse 25:

25 Great multitudes followed Him—from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

So here we are in Galilee of the Gentiles, of all places, among a people who sat in great darkness, in the region and shadow of death. And our Lord will say, "You are the salt of the earth!" This is most astonishing! He should have been sitting by that magnificent temple in Jerusalem, and before Him should have been the Jewish leaders first, and then the

people. And He should have been saying this to them. But instead, he is speaking to nobodies, who are gathered to Him on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The Jewish leaders should have been told they were the salt of the earth, but they weren't. This news was not fit to be told at the temple in Jerusalem. And so, the Lord is side-stepping them and He is on a mountainside in Galilee of the Gentiles.

Look at where the crowd that was before Him was from. There were people from the Galilee area. Others were from Decapolis. The Decapolis means the ten cities built by Rome across the Jordan River from modern Jordan into Modern Syria. Then they came to Him from Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan. There were thousands of people there. And so in Matthew 5:1 it says, "And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him."

This brings us then to the beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 in Jesus' first major discourse and these verses are singularly important. For those who have not listened to our series on the beatitudes, let me recommend them to you. They are on sermonaudio on the internet. If you want to do even better, read D. Martyn Lloyd Jones book on the Sermon on the Mount.

So, it is this crowd of people Jesus is talking to in Matthew 5-7, that first and great discourse of Jesus. So we begin in 5:1:

1 And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.

2 Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.

6 *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.*

7 *Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.*

8 *Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.*

9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.*

10 *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*

These verses form the setting of the two parables that immediately follow. Lloyd Jones makes very insightful observations when he preaches. You see, what we have in those verses, in his words, is a contemplation of the character of the Christian. The character of those who are the salt of the earth, the hope of the entire world. And if these verses are correct, the largest part of those who say they believe the Bible are not saved. Salvation begins at the door of humility. Here in these verses we have the character of the true Christian expressed in words that cannot be exceeded for truth and beauty, as far as true Christianity is concerned. We have spoken of these beatitudes at length in other messages. So we move on from there and I will quote Lloyd Jones. He says: *We pass, therefore, from the contemplation of the character of the Christian to a consideration of the function and purpose of the Christian in this world in the mind and the purpose of God.*

What he is saying is that in the beatitudes we have described for us the character of the true Christian. This is what a Christian is like. It begins in humility and ends in persecution because of the strong adversity

of the world to righteousness. So in his estimation, when we come to verses 13 and 14, we are told what the function and purpose of God for the Christian is in the world.

This then is the setting of the parable before us. We go then to the interpretation.

3. The interpretation

To begin, look once more at verse 13. After giving the beatitudes Jesus said, *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.*

So we must stop there at the first word, the pronoun 'you'. Who is 'you'? Well, I see three possibilities. The disciples are sitting before Him. He may be saying to them, "You are the salt of the earth." Or He might be looking at that great crowd of people, and saying, "You are the salt of the earth." Or yet again, He might be referring to those of whom He spoke in the words He had just said in verses 11-12:

11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It is right after these words that He says, "You are the salt of the earth." I conclude that it is those who are described in the beatitudes who are the 'you' that He is referring to. The crowds that were gathered there are long gone. The disciples are long gone. Those who enter the path of the Christian through the gate of humility are still with us. They are still the salt of the earth.

Scripture teaches that 'all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). And Jesus said in John 3 that unless a person is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. And to be born again, the very

first thing that must happen to a person is that he becomes poor in spirit. Humility must set in and that is with regard to discovering oneself to be a sinner and in a lost condition. With that discovery, a time of mourning sets in before one is willing to deal with that sin. With the mourning and dealing with sin, meekness takes place and this in turn leads to hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

When a person hungers and thirsts for righteousness he becomes merciful which leads to a purification of heart. The heart is the mind and when the mind is purified, one becomes a peacemaker. It must be most carefully noted that this is not a peacekeeper but a peacemaker. When a person truly arrives at that point, it brings about persecution.

We now have a question before us that we do need to spend time on and that is, what does Jesus mean when He says, "You are the salt of the earth?" What is this salt that the true Christian is likened to?

There are two outstanding features in salt. First, salt preserves. This is an amazing aspect of salt. And second, it makes the unpalatable palatable. And we will have to take that up in the next message.

CONCL: So we conclude this first message on the early parables of Christ. There is something about the teaching of Christ that is different from all other teaching. There is something about it I can't describe. One can apply all principles of interpretation, and it helps. But still you have to ponder, and ponder again, and ponder yet again. And when in life you seek to stay with truth. And when studying the Bible you seek to stick with truth, and then as you live life, more and more emerges out of the words of Christ. In the past the Bible and the teaching of Christ laid hold of great minds, and they saw great things. Such were men like D. Martyn Lloyd Jones that I quote so much. But if you will give yourself to understanding the words of Christ, you will be amazed more and more at His teaching.

We have introduced the early parables of Christ, and we have looked at what I see as three great groupings of the parables of Christ. We have begun to look at the first parable. Jesus has given the character of the true Christian in the beatitudes, and

now He will give the function of the Christian in the world. You see, up until now, God had a nation through which He worked. One nation, and it was the nation of Israel. But what is going to happen is that they will reject Him. This is very clear from their hypocrisy and lack of true spirituality. And a great change is going to happen in the whole economy of things. Instead of one nation in the world, He will now have individual believers scattered all over the world, and they will be the salt of the earth. That is one of the main, if not the main function of the Christian in the world.