



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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22. Jesus And His Teaching

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him... ³² They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. (Luke 4:14-15, 32)

By having two studies, one on Jesus' ministry (what he *did*) and one on his teaching (what he *said*) we may think that these two things are distinct and somewhat unrelated. Especially we may think that in our day where words are a dime a dozen and "when all is said and done, more is said than done." However as Hank Schoemaker said in last week's study:

In Jesus we see God-in-action. His words accomplish things.

The study tonight is focussed on the things that Jesus taught in his ministry, but we must have clearly in mind that he wasn't simply giving people ideas to think about. As Jesus taught, power was at work, and men and women were confronted with the reality of the kingdom of God: his message brought either blessing through faith or judgement in the face of unbelief. Just as his actions (accomplished by word) were characterised by authority, so also his message. Again, as Hank said last week:

His teaching challenges men and women to choose between believing in him or rejecting him. In Jesus we are confronted by the Kingship of God in action, and we must decide for or against him.

Matthew and Luke both preface their account of the public ministry of Jesus with a summary of his preaching:

¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—¹⁴ to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the way to the sea, along the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people living in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matt. 4:13-17)

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written.

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

These two passages indicate the whole thrust of Jesus' teaching ministry, namely *the kingdom of God*. That kingdom is the fulfilment of all that has been promised in the Old

Testament, and those promises are now in full effect in the person of Jesus Christ. Those promises are saving promises, gracious promises, promises that are great and wonderful to those who know that they have been in darkness for a long time. And this message could not simply be assimilated into the religious situation of Israel at the time: Jesus didn't simply want to be well thought of by the establishment, for they, just as much as anyone, were in need of the salvation he was bringing and announcing (Luke 4:22-30.)

Jesus's Use of Parables

Jesus' public proclamation was primarily *parabolic* (Matt. 13:34; Mark 4:34), and for this reason somewhat mysterious. Matthew 13 records a number of these parables of the kingdom, and also in it Jesus discusses just *why* he spoke in parables. Some think of the parables as "everyday illustrations from a well-known world used to enable people to grasp more difficult ideas about the kingdom of God." If that were the case, then the disciples would not have asked him (Matt. 13:10) why he taught the crowds in parables. Their question implies that it is an *unusual* tactic, that it seems to be producing counterproductive results. Rather than understanding him it seems that the parables led people to *not* understand him. Jesus' answer acknowledges this:

¹¹ He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

'You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

¹⁵ For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt. 13:11-17)

Through the use of parables, Jesus was working to expose the utter ignorance of the matter of the kingdom of God amongst those who claimed to be "the kingdom people". His parables, which *were* illustrative of the kingdom of God, its manner and working, were incomprehensible to those who, though outside the kingdom, proudly thought themselves inside it. Through the parables Jesus was "bringing down" in order to "lift up" (Psa. 107:33-42). What is remarkable is those who heard him and understood. As we have seen throughout the whole of salvation history, it was the least expected. It was sinners and tax-collectors, prostitutes and the demon-possessed (see Luke 15:1-2). Revelation is needed to understand the kingdom of God, but this revelation actually only operates in the sphere of grace. To those who know no need of grace, this revelation is unable to be received.

Very often Jesus' kingdom parables offer a surprising and unexpected picture. Because we are separate from the world in which Jesus spoke these things, we may not realise just how foolish or surprising the things he said were. We are used to the account, for example, of the sower scattering seed (Matt. 13:3-9). It sounds normal to us, but to the listeners of Jesus' day, the idea of a person being so careless with seed was unthinkable, and the idea of such a crop being produced by the seed in good soil was much more than ever could have been imagined. God's unimagined grace was being worked out in Jesus

Christ. His kingdom grace wasn't being locked up in a careful storehouse to be eked out only where it could be certain of success. Rather grace was spilling out everywhere, and somehow a mighty crop of saved men and women was being produced.

Likewise, how bizarre—from a human perspective—is the story of the man who takes a single mustard seed and plants it in a field (Matt. 13:31-32). Surely you would load the whole field with seed! Not this man! He places all his hope on this one possibility, which is buried in the earth and then miraculously grows not into a mustard bush, but rather an enormous tree where birds from all over the place can take roost. (A number of Jesus's kingdom parables have this idea of burial and growth, or burial and retrieval (Matt. 13:44-45).) In the kingdom God has placed all his "hope" on the action of Jesus Christ, the lone seed in the field of the world. He will be buried, but there is an unstated, but implied, resurrection and from that will come the growth of a great kingdom large enough for all the peoples of the world to be welcomed and sheltered.

A common theme in many of Jesus' parables is that of future judgment, that the events of now have implications for the day of judgment (see Matt. 13:24-30; 47-50). Everything then hangs on how people respond to Jesus now. The parable of the tenants (Matt. 21:33-46) is perhaps the most pointed and direct of these parables. Told in the last week of Jesus' ministry before the Cross, the story exposed the sinful failure of Israel to recognise the gift to them of the Son of God. Jesus as good as accused the listening chief priests and Pharisees (who, interestingly, were on opposite sides of the political and religious divide in Israel—the kingdom of God can be aligned with no politics of man) of rejecting him and seeking to kill him. For those who reject the kingdom of God there can only be judgment. What the next parable tells, that of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14), is that despite this the intention of God will not be thwarted and many of those who would have been considered "out" will be "in", and *vice versa*.

Jesus Teaches His Disciples

It was in private that Jesus often explained his parables to the disciples. This was because the secret of the kingdom had been given to them (Matt. 13:11). Because the grace of God in Jesus Christ had done its work in them, they were in the position of being able to hear and understand the parables, even though they often didn't "get it" immediately and needed to ask. Constantly we find that the manner and modes of the kingdom run contrary to what we automatically think; the effect of sin on our minds is deep and seems to leave a long-lasting (but it's not permanent!) scar.

In Matthew 5 – 7, perhaps the most famous of all Jesus' passages of teaching, called by us the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not really addressing the crowds primarily but rather his disciples (Matt. 5:1-2). This is a kind of "new Sinai", a teaching of the law of the kingdom of God. It is a law for those who that know the grace of God in Jesus Christ is what grants us entrance into the kingdom; the law is about life within the kingdom, not about "how to enter it". It is also not a social programme that could be implemented in the world more generally where there is no trust in Jesus Christ.

Essentially there is one great matter at the heart of this law. It could be stated as "The sons of the kingdom are called to share in the nature and action of the Father." The Fatherhood of God towards the sons of the kingdom runs as the golden theme through the whole sermon (5:9, 16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, **9-13**, 18, 26, 32; 7:11, 21.) Clearly in the sermon Jesus expects that his disciples are going to suffer, and in later teaching we find that this is a sharing in Christ's own suffering. In this context the sons and daughters of the kingdom are to live in the grace and mercy of God in the world. They are to live

their lives as before the Father, with an eye to His pleasure; not before the world and seeking its approval.

Jesus taught very little directly about the meaning of his coming arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection. The fact and necessity of these coming events he made very clear, repeatedly, to his disciples (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:32). These things *must* happen he said, meaning not just inevitably, but prophetically and indispensably for the action of the kingdom. All is to fulfil the long line of promise. The fact that he spoke so reticently about these things may well be due to the fact that he had to accomplish first what could be spoken about later. Certainly after his resurrection he insisted now that the apostles and disciples take this message to the ends of the earth!

Jesus also taught on the end of all things. Mark 13, Matthew 23-25 and Luke 21 all contain accounts of Jesus' teaching about the coming end events. Primarily these events flow from the greatest end time event of all, the death and resurrection of Christ. That event is the end of the old order and the beginning of the new. In history the fruit of that great event is worked out through the proclamation of the gospel until the final consummation of all things at the return of Christ. Much of the thrust of these sections is to prepare the church for her participation in Christ's sufferings and to encourage them and exhort them to faithfulness to Christ through it all.