

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 4 – Putting Together the Word Pictures in Matthew 13, Part 2¹

INTRODUCTION - BEFORE WE BEGIN

As we work our way through Matthew, we come to chapter 13, which occurs *immediately* after Jesus pronounces judgment upon that generation of Israel. His purpose here is to *clarify* the “mysteries of the kingdom” which had not been disclosed prior to His rejection by Israel. He accomplishes this through a *series* of 7 parables, put together so that His *meaning* could be seen *across the 7*. If we look within the chapter at the 3 parables which He explains, this will help us get a head start on how to understand the other 4. Before we start, there are two things that I’d like you to keep in mind.

First, when interpreting parables like these, we should understand that Jesus is not telling us to compare the “kingdom of heaven” to only the first element/part of the parable. That should be clear from the 1st parable, which doesn’t even contain the simile; there is no introduction (“The kingdom of heaven is like...”) at the start of the “sower” parable. Instead, we should understand Jesus to mean, “The kingdom of heaven is like X,” where “X” is the parable *as a whole*. Jesus is *drawing a picture* using *all* of the elements of each parable. Dr. Keener explains it this way when discussing Matthew 13:24:

“The kingdom is like someone who ...” does *not* mean that the kingdom is compared only to the person. Rabbinic parables often began with, “To what may such and such be compared?” or, “Such and such is like ...” In these parables, the phrase meant that the subject was being explained by *the whole analogy* that followed, *not* just by the next word. Thus, the kingdom here is compared not with the person alone, but with *the entire situation* Jesus goes on to describe.²

Second, we need to ask this question: WHY would Jesus refer to “the kingdom of heaven” and say *negative* things about it? While our prior lesson partially answers this question in terms of “the mysteries of the kingdom,” there is more to say here. In Matthew 13, Jesus is still speaking in terms of a place that belongs to God. At the same time, we can see in our present experience that this world *that belongs to God* has been usurped by His enemy! The Rightful King has not yet returned to claim His territory (as “the owner of the field”), so at present, believers are “aliens” and “strangers”. While Jesus’ parables refer to believers as “sons of the kingdom,” that does not mean that we are *seeing* the kingdom... We belong to the King, and so are part of His kingdom, but we won’t *see* (experience the fulness of) the kingdom until Christ returns to claim what is His! Let me say it another way: we have a King Who is ruling *in absentia*, but one day will return to rule the earth from the throne of David.³

Thankfully, the 1st parable is one of the parables which He explains. Let’s take a look at the parable and Jesus’ interpretation without the intervening material:

¹ This material has been adapted from earlier work I’ve done on the Gospel of Matthew.

² Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Print. (*italics mine.*)

³ If the “kingdom of heaven” is merely a spiritual kingdom with the emphasis on “heaven” (as many try to argue), then we have no way to make sense of the parables *as a series*, as will be made clear when we walk through them in this lesson. The parables become *incoherent*, and Jesus is effectively confusing his hearers!

PARABLE #1 - THE SOWER

- **Matthew 13:3-8:** *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.*
- **Matthew 13:18-23:** *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."*

We can see the meaning of several of the elements from His explanation. **First**, what is "sown" (the "seed") is "the word of the kingdom." That means that "sowing" involves communicating/speaking. **Second**, we can see that the "birds" are equated with "the wicked one" (the devil). **Third**, while there are several different kinds of "environments" (usually we speak of them as "soils"), each of them represents a human "heart," as seen in verse 19. While we may think of "heart" as the center of emotion, the Jewish idea around "heart" was a bit different:

The Hebrews thought of the whole human being and personality with all its physical, intellectual, and psychological attributes when they used "heart." It was considered the governing center for all of these. It is the heart (the core) which makes and identifies the person (Prov. 4:23). Character, personality, will, and mind are modern terms which all reflect something of the meaning of "heart" in its biblical usage.⁴

So now that we have a few of the pieces of the puzzle put together, let's take a look at the other two parables that Jesus explains, and after doing so come back and examine the others.

PARABLE #2 - THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

- **Matthew 13:24-30:** *24 Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. 26 But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. 27 So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"*

⁴ Walker, Larry L. "Heart." Ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* 2000: 563. Print.

- **Matthew 13:36-43:** 36 *Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.”* 37 *He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.* 38 *The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one.* 39 *The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.* 40 *Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age.* 41 *The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness,* 42 *and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.* 43 *Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*

This one is spelled out very clearly, wouldn't you say?! Beyond Jesus telling us what the “parts” mean, however, this parable also tells us the boundaries of time to which these parables apply. Jesus is revealing the “mysteries” surrounding the postponement of the kingdom, during which time (with the kingdom “away”) the *sphere of Christian profession* would contain both good and bad, true and false. They exist together while “the sons of the kingdom” wait for their inheritance (when the kingdom is established on earth at Jesus’ 2nd Coming). All of this would have been new and unexpected information to Jesus’ disciples.

There is, however, one element within the parable which requires further discussion. Now that Jesus has identified the wheat and the tares, what makes them different? What concerns the owner’s servants is that they are in the field together... If the difference was so obvious, why should it be a concern? The problem was that they looked the same; the difference was what was inside. We would say that the difference was in the DNA; the wheat’s DNA is different than the DNA of the tares. The result, of course, is that wheat produces something of value, while tares do not, even though what they produce looks the same! By way of analogy, only the Holy Spirit (within the believer in Christ) can produce anything of eternal value, even though someone’s works may be very “good” and “impressive.” It is that same Holy Spirit who indwells the believer, gives them new life and makes them a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Said another way, when someone trusts Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, they are given “new DNA.”

Before we go to the 3rd parable in the series (the mustard seed), let’s take a quick look at the last parable which Jesus explains, the parable of the dragnet:

PARABLE #7 - THE DRAGNET

- **Matthew 13:47-50:** 47 *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind,* 48 *which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.* 49 *So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just,* 50 *and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”*

Here in Jesus’ last parable in the series, He compares the end of the age to a dragnet gathering fish. The fish represent both good and bad people (the “just” and the “unjust”), while the dragnet represents the angels. Both here and in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the angels represent God’s “reapers” or “gatherers” in preparation for Christ’s 2nd Coming. Read Revelation 19 to see the results of their “harvest...”

At this point, let’s review what we know, remembering that Jesus’ goal is *to clarify, not confuse*, what this period of time will look like. In order to do so, He must have *coherence* across the 7 parables. Here are the parts Jesus has explained within chapter 13:

- **Sower = Man** = Owner of the field = **Jesus** (so **Sowing = teaching/proclaiming**)
- **Seed** (what is *sown*) = **the word of the kingdom** (the message)
- **Birds = the wicked one** (Satan/the devil)
- **Soils** = different conditions of the human **heart**
- **Field** = the **world** (of which Jesus is the rightful Owner!)
- **Wheat** = what is produced by the good (true) seed, **sons of the kingdom** (believers)
- **Tares** = what is produced by the bad (false) seed, **sons of the wicked one** (false professors)
- **Reapers/Dragnet** = (God's) **Angels**
- **Harvest** = **the end of this age** (Christ's 2nd Coming)
- **Every Kind (of Fish)** = **both believers** (good fish/the "just") and **unbelievers** (bad fish/the "unjust")

We should already be able to see that Jesus is using metaphors that line up in a *consistent* way. And across those three parables, we have quite a few of those "parts" clearly defined. With that knowledge, let's move on to parable number 3, the mustard seed. When doing so, let's pay attention to the details of Jesus' words:

PARABLE #3 - THE MUSTARD SEED

- **Matthew 13:31-32:** *31 Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, 32 which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."*

From the discussion above, we already know how many of the parts of this parable fit together. Jesus' (the man) message (the seed) was proclaimed (sown) in the world (the field). But after that, it becomes a bit more difficult... Most interpreters, perhaps because of their assumption that the church will grow more and more and become better and better (amillennialism and/or postmillennialism), view the "tree" as the church, and assume it is "all good." There are, however, *several* problems with this view.

1st, this view does not line up with the two major Old Testament allusions that Jesus' words would have brought to mind. The idea of a large tree with birds nesting in its branches is used in prophecies by both Ezekiel⁵ and Daniel. In **Ezekiel 31**, the prophet speaks to the pharaoh of Egypt and compares Assyria (as a "kingdom") to a great tree. *"All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs"* (v. 6). In the illustration (= parable!), Ezekiel speaks of how great Assyria was, but because of their *pride in their political power and greatness*, their FALL was also great! In other words, being a grand tree was their downfall...

In **Daniel 4:10-33**, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream about a large tree in which the *"birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches"* (v. 12). Again, the tree ends up being cut down. In Daniel's interpretation, he tells King Nebuchadnezzar that the tree is the king himself (and therefore his "great kingdom" by way of extension). The tree will be cut down because of the king's *pride* and rejection of God's authority (his *independence, self-sufficiency, power*).

⁵ While I recognize that Ezekiel also uses the "tree" parable/illustration in Ezekiel 17:22-24 to speak of Israel as something *good*, the emphasis in that passage is on their exaltation *because* they were a "low tree" (humble) and the "good" is presented as a "young and tender *twig*." This doesn't fit with either of the other two Old Testament instances *or* Matthew 13... The "tree" in Matthew 13 turned into something which did *NOT* represent what God had planted.

From both of these Old Testament allusions, we find that being a “great tree” is not necessarily a good thing! And given the fact that this parable comes after the first two (which mention the mixture of good and bad), it is difficult to see why Jesus would be painting a bright picture of “good things to come”! But before we conclude what Jesus had in mind, let’s look at more evidence.

2nd (and this is something we should already know), “birds” in this context are *NOT* good... Jesus has already told us in this context what “birds” represent! And while the “tree” was planted with a good seed (Jesus’ message), what it grew into represents an earthly kingdom or government (as seen from the Old Testament “tree” allusions), and therefore must be a “tree” where the devil is comfortable and is given “refuge.” Is this really the picture of a “pure and beautiful” church? It is becoming more and more difficult as we move through these parables to see the “good” parts (if we are trying to be consistent and let Jesus *clarify*, at least...).

3rd (and this is perhaps the most interesting point to me), notice that the seed is a *mustard seed*, and then *becomes a tree*. If we consider a mustard seed, we would know that it is a seasonal *herb* which grows into a *large bush* (typically 6-12 feet high, but with *no trunk*). It *never* looks anything like a *tree*. This has led some (more liberal) writers to say that here Jesus “makes a mistake”! Those who try to maintain the integrity of scriptural truth usually try to defend it by saying Jesus is using hyperbole, simply trying to show that the church would “outgrow its expectations.” But this is not only unnecessary, it is inconsistent with the other pieces of the “puzzle” that we have so far. Jesus has already told us that between His pronouncement of these parables and His 2nd Coming, His message would only be received by a percentage of His hearers (in The Sower). He has also told us that believers (wheat) and those who profess to be believers (tares) would co-exist until “the end of the age” (in The Wheat and The Tares). *Neither* of those parables were as optimistic as the disciples would have hoped! (After we talk about the leaven in the next parable, you will see that Jesus’ picture of the future until His return is not a pretty one...)

In any case, I would argue that Jesus is not trying to say something “good” here. For a mustard seed to *become* a tree involves *mutation*. It is supposed to be a bush, but turns into *something else!* *This is not a good thing*. If Jesus is simply being consistent with His use of “birds” and with the Old Testament allusions, then He is saying that during the time between Matthew 13 and His 2nd Coming, the “church” will become a “proud kingdom,” independent of God’s rule and happy to allow Satan refuge. Among other things, that would definitely have been a “mystery” to the disciples! If you’re wondering if the tree (“professing” Christianity) gets cut down (just like Assyria and Babylon), read Revelation 17 and 18! An earthly (and often *political*) “church” that does not place itself under God’s authority, but establishes its own, may have great power and authority, but that is NOT what it is supposed to look like. A mustard seed is not supposed to become a tree! This is a picture of a *distortion*, a *mutation*, and it involves *power* and *pride*. Those should not be characteristics of Christianity, but if we look through history, guess what we see?! While Jesus “planted” His message in the world in order to produce something, it should look like what He planted! Within the “sphere of profession,” many will *mutate* what He would have them *believe*, *look like* and *produce*.

From this parable and the others so far, we see that Jesus is truly telling them things that would *not* line up with their expectations. As a result, it makes more and more sense that He would try to explain those things across a series of parables, right?

PARABLE #4 - THE LEAVEN

- **Matthew 13:33:** *33 Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”*

In Jesus’ series of 7 parables, there are several noteworthy shifts which are used to highlight distinctions. The parable of the leaven is one of them. The typical interpretation of this parable, in order to try to keep things on a “positive and encouraging note”, is that the meal is the world, and that the leaven represents the kingdom (i.e. the reception of the gospel message). According to this view, things would get better and better... This interpretation fails on several counts; in order to show that, let me talk about it from both a biblical and a linguistic perspective.

From a linguistic perspective, Jesus incorporates several “shifts” in this parable to “mark” that it is categorically different in some way. The first shift involves the *primary agent of action* within the parable. This is easy to see if we simply mention the primary agent across the 1st six parables: (1) Sower/he, (2) A man, (3) A man, (4) A woman, (5) A man, (6) A man. Notice anything unusual? In the case of the parable of the leaven, Jesus makes His *only* departure from the norm. This should tell us something. He is “marking” this parable as significantly different from the others somehow.

But that is not the only shift within the parable. In order to show how significantly different this parable is, take a look at its 3 major shifts compared to the prior parables:

Primary Agent:	Action:	Object:	Where:
(1) Sower/he (Jesus)	sowed (openly)	seed (the message)	in a field (the world)
(2) A man (Jesus)	sowed (openly)	seed (the message)	in a field (the world)
(3) A man (Jesus)	sowed (openly)	seed (the message)	in a field (the world)
(4) A woman (?)	hid (secretly)	leaven (?)	in dough (?)

Why the departure from a consistent message if Jesus is simply trying to repeat Himself? This does not make sense. The leaven parable is a dramatic departure on several counts, and it would be unfair to say that Jesus didn’t have a reason. He wants His hearers to know that He is *contrasting* what is happening here with what is taking place in the other parables.

But just what is Jesus trying to communicate here? We have seen that, within the 1st three parables, He has been painting a more and more negative picture of what will happen between that time and His 2nd Coming. We should expect this parable to somehow *cohere*/make sense with the other three. If Jesus is trying to tell us about the “pervasive (positive) influence of the gospel,” it does not... It does not fit the context (it actually would present us with a contradiction!), and it does not account for the dramatic contrast of the “parts” or elements of the parable. I would argue that it also does not fit with the reality of our world and even what we see when we read the later letters written in the New Testament. So let’s take a look at the parable from a biblical perspective.

While the controversy over this parable revolves around the use of the term “leaven,” I would argue that we also need to look at the “three measures of dough” (unleavened flour) and its significance. Any serious Bible student would know that, from a Jewish perspective, “leaven” is NOT a good thing. In Exodus 12, the Israelites were commanded to purge “*all* leaven” from their homes at the time of Passover (a picture of the gospel/“salvation”). Exodus 34:25 tells that “leaven” was to be excluded from any offering of blood (a picture of Christ’s payment for

our salvation). From these two examples alone, to *morph* “leaven” into “the gospel” would not only be a contradiction in biblical usage, it would also serve to *confuse* the disciples, *not clarify* Jesus’ meaning. Beyond that, if we speak about the usage of the ideas of “leavened” and “unleavened” in the New Testament, take a look at its consistent use:

- **Jesus in Matthew 16:6-12:** *6 Then Jesus said to them, “Take heed and **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.**” 7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have taken no bread.” 8 But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? 9 Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? 10 Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? 11 How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? —but to **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**” 12 Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the **leaven** of bread, but of the **doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.***
- **Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8:** *6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that **a little leaven leavens the whole lump?** 7 Therefore **purge out the old leaven**, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are **unleavened**. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, **not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.***
- **Paul in Galatians 5:6-9:** *6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. 7 You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? 8 This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. 9 **A little leaven leavens the whole lump.***

From these several examples (including Jesus within the gospel of Matthew!), it can be seen that “unleavened” is related to *purity, integrity (sincerity) and truth*. “Leavened” is related to *corruption, deception, falsehood, evil and sin*! Consistently, across both testaments, “leaven” is used to speak of a *corrupting influence*, which begins with *false doctrine* and results in faulty practice (sin)... Another way to say that? “Leaven” is that which *corrupts* our *faith and practice*.

And now to go back to the parable. If we see “leaven” as “corrupt/false doctrine” (that affects our practice), that would explain the reason for it being “hidden” (secretly/deceptively) in the *unleavened* dough. So, what is the dough (three measures of meal)? If “leaven” represents false doctrine, then unleavened dough would represent pure or true doctrine (Jesus’ message). While some try to say that the “meal” represents people, where else in the Bible do we see *that* metaphor used *that way*? What would lead Jesus’ hearers to conclude that “meal” equals “people”? The simple fact is that *unleavened* “meal” is *not* used that way; it *is* used as a metaphor for *purity, sincerity and truth*. Beyond that, in terms of coherence, where does *unleavened dough* come from? *Good seed*! There is a connection, but the dough (“meal”) is what is related to the “seed” in the other parables, NOT the leaven... The “seed” is the pure message, and the dough is pure doctrine.

But why “three measures” of meal? Is this irrelevant or meaningful? I would be content to simply think that Jesus meant “the right amount”. It is interesting, however, that there is another place that refers to “three measures of meal,” interesting primarily because of its context. In Genesis 18:1-15, the pre-incarnate Christ (with two angels) appears to Abraham and promises Abraham that he will have a son. In the story, when Abraham realizes who he is seeing, he asks Sarah to prepare (you guessed it) “three measures of meal” for the **LORD** and his messengers. Is it a mere coincidence that this story about Abraham, Christ and the promise of

a son is the *only other place in the Bible* that refers to “three measures of meal”? I don’t think so... Jesus’ was there to give Abraham a *message*, and He and the others were offered *unleavened bread* while He delivered that message; “three measures”! Jesus is pointing to that *three measures* to point to *Himself* and *truth* about *Him*.

So now we that we have considered most of the “parts” of the parable, what’s missing? The only part we haven’t touched on is the “woman”. While we have already shown that this is the *only* departure in the 1st six parables from a “man,” we have yet to see why Jesus would do that. Let’s look at the pieces as we have seen them so far. If “leaven” is effectively *false doctrine* that is *hidden* (deceptively/secretly) in the *pure doctrine of Christ* so that Christian doctrine becomes (very quickly) a mixture of true and false, who is that person who would do such a thing? The answer is obvious, right? The “woman” is the devil. The devil is the deceiver who is sneaky and wants to hide his *distortion* of the *truth*. He mixes up, distorts and confuses! While some at this point might accuse me (and Jesus) of being sexist, I think that would be a tragic misunderstanding. Jesus at *many* points in His ministry dignified/honored women in ways that His culture would not have. Christianity elevated women in ways that other surrounding religions certainly did not. To try to say that Jesus is somehow denigrating women *here* would be inconsistent with what we see *elsewhere* both in Jesus’ life and in the New Testament. That doesn’t work for me; I simply do *not* think Jesus was making any kind of comment about “men *versus* women” here.

I would argue that Jesus, as a master communicator, switches from “man” to “woman” for at least two reasons (neither of which make him a sexist!). First, and most simply, this was the *easiest* way to say that in this parable He was *NOT* referring to Himself. In other words, He wanted His hearers to understand the parables like this: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, *NOT* Jesus. If “man” in the 1st three parables refer to Jesus, doesn’t it make sense that He would switch to a “woman” in order to say, “I’m talking about *somebody else!*” In this way, He marked a *switch*.

Beyond that, however, there is another (also fairly obvious) reason why I think Jesus uses a woman in this parable. Within Jesus’ culture, who would have been the “maker and baker” of bread? In that culture, it would have been a *woman*. You simply would not assume that a man would be the one working with dough, baking bread, etc. That just wasn’t part of their culture. For that parable to “work,” the “baker” would most naturally be a woman.

If we zoom back out to look at the parable as a whole, there is one more question I’d like to ask of those who try to see this parable as “the positive influence of the gospel.” If the gospel (and therefore the kingdom) would have such great influence so as to affect the whole world, how would that be “new information” to the disciples? In other words, *what* about that would be a “mystery” to them? The disciples would be expecting (in line with Old Testament prophecies) for the kingdom to be so “pervasive” that it would remove any opposition and be the only influence in the world. If the “leaven is good” view is correct, how would that conflict with their expectations? *It would not*. Only if we see the “leaven” in its normal usage do we see something that would be “off the radar” of the disciples, contrary to their expectations.

Having finished looking at all the elements/parts of this parable, we can see a “trend,” and it’s *not* a good one... The more that Jesus explains what will happen until His 2nd Coming, the more messed up it becomes. “Professing Christianity” becomes more and more mixed up, and even the message of Christ becomes distorted, twisted and full of errors. But here’s my question: if you study the history of Christianity, *what do you see from early on?*! Is there any hope?

After Jesus finishes the parable of the leaven, He sends the multitudes away, goes into a house and His disciples continue to question Him. It is in this context that Jesus carefully and fully explains the elements/parts of the wheat and the tares. From that, the disciples would not only have to do a lot more mental processing, they would be reeling from the knowledge that they would have enemies (who looked *good!*) *among* those who claimed the name *Jesus*. This would have been distressing; your enemies should be clear, wear different uniforms and stuff, right?! If you are going to have enemies, at least make them easy to spot! What were the disciples to do? Was there any good news that Jesus would give them? I think that you will find Jesus' answers in the next 3 parables. Notice that Matthew tells us that Jesus gives these parables to His disciples after sending away the multitudes; there is a reason! *And* there is a reason why these last 3 parables exist ONLY in Matthew...

PARABLE #5 - THE TREASURE IN THE FIELD

- **Matthew 13:44:** 44 *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”*

Before we look at this parable as a part of the series, let's consider what has become the typical and traditional interpretation. The typical view of this parable is that the man is an unbeliever who wants to go to heaven so much that he is willing to give up everything. I heard this many times growing up, but have become more and more convinced that it is a theological interpretation that has absolutely nothing to do with reality or the planet earth... We can hypothesize concerning why theology interprets the passage that way, but let's do that after we compare it to the series. The typical interpretation lines up the “parts” this way:

- Treasure = the Gospel of salvation/heaven
- Field = the Scriptures
- Man = an “enlightened” unbeliever
- Sells = surrenders his/her life, gives up everything, etc.
- Buys = obtains salvation

If the typical interpretation is about an unbeliever seeking salvation, let me ask a few questions (if Jesus is allowed to be *consistent*):

- (1) Where else in the New Testament do we see an exhortation to “buy heaven?” Isn't eternal life a *gift*? Wouldn't we be saying that heaven has a *price* which needs to be paid?
- (2) If we are trying to be consistent, and Jesus has JUST told us that the “field” is “the world” (v. 38), should an unbeliever seek to buy the world in order to get into heaven? (Nonsense!)
- (3) And if Jesus is changing the meaning of “field,” how would that help His disciples to interpret the parables? The idea of “field” would have two completely unrelated ideas...
- (4) If the treasure is the Gospel, why would a new believer hide it again? What could that possibly mean, especially in light of Christ's command to “Go into all the world and preach”? How does a *proclamation* relate to *hiding*? (It's nonsense!)

Trying to answer even one of the above questions should make it obvious that the typical interpretation doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense if taken on its own, and it makes even less sense if we're trying to see how it lines up with the other parables and their parts.

Well, let's go back to the parable and start with what we know from the other parables. Jesus has already told us that the field is the world, so that's a safe assumption. We have also seen that in the prior parables, when a “man” has been mentioned, Jesus has been speaking about Himself. If we start with those two pieces, we now have *Jesus* finding a “treasure” in the *world*,

and then *Jesus* “sells all that He has” in order to “buy” the *world*. It will help you to know that while the Greek word for “buy” is translated that way in order to fit the parable, in most other places in the New Testament it is translated “redeem”! And wasn’t *Jesus* the One Who *redeemed* the world with His own *blood* (the price of purchase)? Seen this way, the parable is consistent with the elements in the other parables AND lines up with what we see in the New Testament concerning *redemption*.

But what of the *treasure*, and why *hide it again*? Given that we are talking about a parable that is ONLY in Matthew, would Old Testament ideas help us here? Yes! In the Old Testament, *Israel* is often referred to as God’s *special treasure* (see Exodus 19:3-6, Deuteronomy 14:2 and 32:8-11, Psalm 135:4). Beyond that, *nowhere* in the New Testament is the Church called a treasure. With the *nation of Israel* as the “treasure,” we only need to explain why Jesus would say it was hidden again. Remembering that this series of parables was meant to explain the time period between Israel’s rejection of Jesus and His return to set up the Messianic kingdom, where would Israel be in the meantime? Hidden... And so they are, dispersed throughout the world until Messiah comes back to claim His “treasure”. A.W. Pink writes about the Treasure parable this way:

First, we have the treasure hidden in the field: that takes us back to the beginning of Israel’s history as a nation. Second, we have the Man finding that treasure; that is Christ coming to this earth and confining His message to the Jews in Palestine. Third, we have the Man hiding the treasure; that is Christ’s judgment upon Israel because of their rejection of Him, referring to their dispersion abroad throughout the earth. Fourth, we have the Man purchasing the treasure and the whole field in which it was found, referring to the death of Christ. Now, have you noticed there is a fifth point omitted? –the logical completion of the parable would be the Man actually *possessing* the treasure that He purchased. He hid it, then He purchased it. Logically, the parable needs this to complete it—the Man owning and possessing the treasure. Why is that left out? Because *it lies outside the scope of Matthew 13*. This chapter, dealing with the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” has to do with the *history of Christendom*. It describes the cause of Christ on this earth during the period of His absence, and therefore there is nothing in this parable about the restoration of Israel and the Lord possessing His earthly treasure, because that comes after this dispensation is over, after the history of Christendom has been wound up, after the new age has been inaugurated, namely, the Millennium! How perfect is Scripture in its omissions! For passages treating of Christ’s recovery and possession of the treasure see Amos 9:14, 15; Acts 15:17. In due time the Jews *shall be manifested* as God’s peculiar “treasure” on “earth”—see Isaiah 62:1–4.⁶

PARABLE #6 - THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE⁷

- **Matthew 13:45-46:** 45 “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, 46 who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*”

⁶ Pink, Arthur Walkington. *The Prophetic Parables of Matthew Thirteen*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005. Print.

⁷ Since we’ve already discussed the 7th parable, this will be the last piece of our discussion. For an overview of how they all fit together (and how the “cohesive” interpretation compares to traditional/replacement theology views, please see the addendum to this lesson.

After our discussion of the parable of the Treasure, this parable should actually be quite easy! It is often confused and misinterpreted, however, because people misinterpret the Treasure and then try to make the Pearl parable simply a reiteration. Once we understand that:

- the Merchant, as with all the *men* across these parables, is JESUS, and that
 - Jesus is trying to explain the time period between Israel's rejection and His 2nd Coming,
- we can see that Jesus is here speaking about a *different thing* than national Israel. Jesus was seeking *something* precious in the marketplace (again, the *world*), and He *gave* His life (the price) in order to *redeem* (buy) _____. The only way we can reasonably fill in that blank is with believers of the present age: *the church*.

Understood this way, the parable "parts" line up with all the other parables, making the series a consistent and *coherent* whole. Beyond that, the Pearl and Treasure parables *point to JESUS as the Savior of the world*, as they should!

But let's not miss a couple other things that we can see from this discussion. First, from the Pearl and Treasure parables (once properly understood) we see Jesus *prophesying His own death*. While He is more direct in speaking about it in other places, this is a clear picture of His death for our redemption, and also what motivated Him to be willing to die for all of us. In fact, giving His life for His "pearl" should speak to us about just how precious we are in His eyes. If we really understand that, it won't lead us to pride, it will lead us to gratitude and love!

ONE LAST NOTE ABOUT THE LAST PARABLE

We know that the dragnet is actually the last parable in this series, but we've already discussed it as the last of the three "explained" parables up above. The focus there, however, was on the internal context. But why should the Dragnet be the last of the 7 parables? After Jesus explains (*only* to His disciples) the redemption of Israel (in the Treasure parable) and the redemption of the Church (in the Pearl parable), Jesus brings the series to a close with the Dragnet. This parable represents the clearest *punishment and end* of those who would give believers trouble, whether they are unbelievers or those who *claim to be* believers. It gives closure to those who have just learned that with the King *in absentia* (so to speak), good and evil will not only continue, but appear to get more and more mucky, unclear and confusing. But there *will* be an end, and Jesus will straighten it out! Messiah Jesus will come and reign as King over what is rightfully His.

WHAT ABOUT THE "EIGHTH PARABLE"?

- **Matthew 13:51-52:** *51 Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." 52 Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."*

While technically this IS a parable, it really isn't part of "the set of 7" because it isn't describing the kingdom of heaven. Here Jesus is describing *those who have been "instructed concerning the kingdom"*. He compares them to a "householder" (someone who manages a household) who would *show* "new and old" things, with the idea that the householder could explain those things to others. So why "new and old"? These parables contain a lot of *new* information, *the mysteries*, along with MANY ideas borrowed from the Old Testament, which would have been easily understood by a Jewish audience. The parables, therefore, contain both *new* ideas and *old*... When we put together those *new* and *old* ideas, we can see a very clear picture of the time period between Christ's rejection by national Israel and His 2nd Coming.