

Kingdom of God Parables in Matthew 13

Paul Green,
March 2013

Disruptive Kingdom

The question came directly after the shock that he had been supernaturally healed: “So how can heaven and earth be here together?” This was a great question coming from someone who had rejected religion but was willing to receive a quick prayer for back pain while waiting for a transatlantic flight. I explained that healing was to do with God and his kingdom breaking into our present reality. Fortunately he had seen movies about parallel realities such as ‘The Matrix’, ‘Avatar’ and ‘Minority Report’ so the idea quickly took root.

Probably Jesus would have used similar analogies if he were talking about the kingdom of heaven today. His themes reflected everyday life but the Jewish culture seemed unused to new concepts. To help, Jesus used parables to introduce his ‘disruptive kingdom’.

This phrase draws a contemporary analogy with ‘disruptive innovation’: taking what already exists but structuring something radical that changes both attitudes and the way we live.¹ Technology examples might include: horse – car; cash – credit card; string – adhesive tape. The old version does not disappear but the new is transformational.²

So how does Jesus introduce his disruptive kingdom in Matthew chapter 13?

Pivotal Parables

Matthew assembles eight kingdom parables almost centrally in his gospel, emphasizing their pivotal role in linking past events with future expectations.³ Each illuminates a different facet enabling a bigger picture to be visualised by combining different views. Rather than examining isolated parables this essay attempts a holistic exploration to catch a wider prophetic vision.

The parables provide pictures: sower, wheat and weeds, mustard seed, yeast, treasure, pearl, net and storeroom. Each includes:

- Representation of the kingdom involving: Jesus, God, people and evil
- Descriptive timeframes with apocalyptic significance and potential to influence the outcome
- Something that has been prepared in advance: seeds to sow, treasure hidden, pearl formed, yeast prepared, fish grown, truths stored.⁴
- Forward trajectory (although agriculture is cyclical the parables describe a single harvest)
- Active involvement from the ‘people’

¹ Clayton Christensen, Jeffrey Dyer, Hal Gregersen, *The Innovator's DNA: Mastering the Five Skills of*

² Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution, Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Wiley, 2012), 183-199

³ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1, (New Testament for Everyone)* [Kindle Edition], (London, SPCK, 2002), 156 and 176, Kindle 2955 and 3304

⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time, The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, (Translated by F.V. Filson), (London, SCM Press, 1957) 100

History Entwined with Language

Family and domain are dominant themes throughout the Old Testament. The Hebrew word 'seed', *sperma*, (σπέρμα) expresses the first theme because it represents the family line from Adam through to Jesus.⁵ Its multiple meanings include: germ of the plant, virile semen, family, tribe and the Holy Spirit's regenerative energy within the soul.⁶

The second theme, God's kingdom realm, *basileia*⁷, is redolent with meaning⁸ conveyed through key passages such as: Genesis 22:18, Exodus 15:18, 2 Sam 7:12-16 and Psalm 2.⁹ 1 Kings 4:25 captures the 'shalom' of the kingdom: 'During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and fig tree.'

Morphew succinctly encapsulates the story and the rabbis' concept of God's *malkuth* (kingdom): 'The Lord is King. The Lord will become King,'¹⁰ expressing present nearness to God plus the expectation of a potent future kingdom.¹¹ In the phrase 'the kingdom of heaven is like' (v24), Matthew uses 'heaven' as a periphrasis of 'God'¹² – his dimension of reality.¹³

Numerous prophets looked forward to the coming kingdom¹⁴, characterised by Isaiah as he strives for suitable images.¹⁵ Daniel, while in exile, provides images of hope that God will establish the 'son of man' with sovereignty over the earth distinctly contrasting the world's empires with God's kingdom, and 'lawless peoples' with the 'holy people' of God. (Daniel 7:14-27, generally chapters: 2, 7 and 12)¹⁶

The 'seed', within second-Temple Judaism, may be a metaphor for the 'remnant' people returning from exile, the true Israel, 'sown' in their land and vindicated by God.¹⁷ Would the new sowings be successful?¹⁸ Perhaps other birds, implying the gentiles, will benefit from the fruit of the 'tree of Israel's heritage'?¹⁹ Intriguingly, a seed-eating Arabian Babbler *spermologos*,²⁰ – 'gossiper' or 'sponger'²¹ – lives in shrubbery – including mustard trees.

End of Exile

Ruled by the Romans, the Jews still felt virtually in exile,²² so when Jesus described himself as 'son of man' with a kingdom message, it raised expectations that God's reign was coming and that national independence would be restored. Not a trivial thought and weighted with dangerous overtones. If Jesus were indeed the king of the Jews it would challenge the aspiration of Herod Antipas²³ and the

⁵ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, (Downers Grove Illinois, IVP Academic, 2003), 61, 86-87

⁶ Strong, *Strong's Greek Translation, Accordance 8 Bible Software* (Oaktree Software, 2010) ref 4690

⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future, The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974), 130

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God: v. 2 (Christian Origins & the Question of God)*, (London, SPCK, 1996), 203, Kindle 4466

⁹ Derek Morphew, *Breakthrough, Discovering the Kingdom*, (Capetown, Vineyard Publishing International, 2006), 24

¹⁰ Ibid, 13

¹¹ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 139

¹² Richard Baukham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in a Contemporary Context*, (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 159

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1*, 212, Kindle 3941

¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 64-75

¹⁵ Ibid, 70-75

¹⁶ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), 31-32

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 232f, 236, Kindle 5071

¹⁸ Ibid, 233, Kindle 5095

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 241, Kindle 5260

²⁰ Killian Mullarney, Lars Svensson, Dan Zetterstrom, Peter J Grant, *Collins Bird Guide*, (London, Harper Collins, 2001), 330 - 331

²¹ Strong, *Strong's Greek Translation*, ref 4691

²² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 234

²³ Ibid, 235

'authority of Caesar Augustus.²⁴ However, since 'divinity had become corrupted with political power, Rome was ripe for spiritual revolution'.²⁵

Jesus story

However Jesus' kingdom inauguration was not quite what was expected. Although apocalyptic, the parable of the sower focuses on seeding the kingdom rather than dramatic intervention. Furthermore, it seems that God's '*malkuth*', previously focused on Israel, might be extended to 'outsiders' revealed *wherever* God's rule is received.²⁶

For centuries prophetic 'Pearls' provided a foretaste²⁷ of God's kingdom but the Davidic model did not look quite like Matthew 13. Not surprising, therefore, that it would be difficult to recognise this kingdom as more valuable than all that has gone before.²⁸

Puzzlement

The significance quickly became apparent through Jesus' teaching and astonishing actions that demonstrated his vision for this world and the future.²⁹ The disciples expressed their puzzlement as such evident miraculous world-beating power (Matthew ch. 8-9) is restrained to planting seeds (Matt. 13:11-17). Nevertheless, the story of Israel now becomes the story of God's kingdom.³⁰ 'God is in the business of bringing a new world through Jesus, not of tinkering with the old.'³¹

The disciples clearly valued these parables because many are recorded in Mark and Luke with minimal disparity. They also found them puzzling (v36). Wenham submits that the interpretations are attributable to Jesus³² but Hultgren suggests it was most probably the gospel writers.³³

In Matthew and Luke's accounts parables are necessary to 'reveal mysteries' if you '...open your ears to what I am saying, for I will speak to you in a parable. I will teach you hidden lessons from our past' (Ps 78:1b-2),³⁴ (Matt. 13:10-17, 34-35; Luke 8:9-10). Mark controversially implies (Mark 4:10-12) that this singular 'mystery' may be 'concealed' from those that will not understand,³⁵ fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy:

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. (Matt. 13:15)

Confusing Times

In these parables, Jesus seems to speak from a future perspective looking backwards in time.³⁶ Several interwoven timeframes overlap:

- The treasure and pearl can be appropriated with immediate benefits³⁷

²⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2008), 66-67

²⁵ Andrew Marr, *History of the World*, (London, BBC TV series, DVD, 2012), episode 2

²⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 139

²⁷ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 1989), 207-208

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1*, 117, Kindle 3315

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy, Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*, (London, Harper Collins, 1998), 412-413

³⁰ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus, A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002), 297-298

³¹ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 209

³² *Ibid*, 65

³³ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 301 and 460-461

³⁴ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 239-242

³⁵ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 462-463

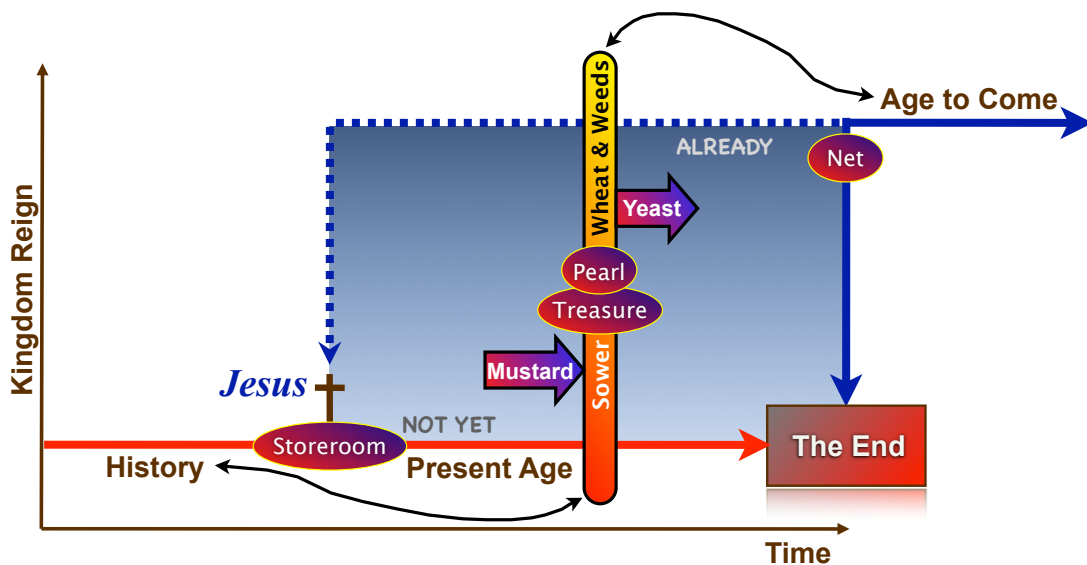
³⁶ Derek Morpheu, *Breakthrough*, 112

- The yeast is active throughout time
- Growth of fish, wheat and weeds is continuous
- Sorting and rewards occur at the end of the age

There is imminence of activity encompassing immediate, developing and future realities. The Kingdom is so near that freedom of action appears constrained to basic choices.³⁸ Maybe the choosing causes the kingdom reality to come into being, or the 'being' to come into kingdom reality.

Charting the Parables

A diagrammatic representation based on a frequently used picture of inaugurated eschatology may help our appreciation of the relationship between these parables (*It is assumed that the reader is familiar with the concept that rule and reign of God's kingdom is manifest by the simultaneous expression of the present and future age in current reality.*³⁹)



The Sower, Wheat and Weeds, Treasure and Pearl are associated with the vertical band representing the kingdom moving through time like a continuous present: every moment pregnant with the potential for heaven to be released yet simultaneously constrained by each individual as they choose to own or disregard its presence as valuable or worthlessly irrelevant. The spiritual environment between the Ages affects the message (seeds), influencing germination, growth and predation. Meanwhile, others grow unnoticed (mustard and fish).

Other parables illuminate the diagram:

- Mustard seed is propulsive, secretly growing huge compared with its seed⁴⁰ – always advancing the kingdom (Matt. 11:12)
- Yeast pulls the kingdom forward, infiltrating, reactive and unstoppable (Matt 16:18)⁴¹
- The storeroom holds past prophecies and eschatological hope
- The net eternally values good and rejects bad

³⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003), 443

³⁸ Derek Morphew, *Breakthrough*, 111

³⁹ For a straightforward understanding of this concept that rule and reign of the kingdom of God is manifest by the simultaneous expression of the present and future age in current reality – see Derek Morphew, *Breakthrough*, 57-68

⁴⁰ Richard Baukham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 162

⁴¹ Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 230

Inside Story

Together the parables combine sudden appropriation, growth, decline and eschatological fulfillment, an interwoven story within which Jesus associated himself with the farmer inaugurating the kingdom (v37). This implies no expectation of impending kingdom rule, as Borg suggests;⁴² however, his concept of ‘participatory eschatology’ is essential because mankind is not irrelevant to kingdom evolution but truly influences events and outcomes.⁴³ Certainly, as Bultmann suggests,⁴⁴ the renovation of our inner lives is a wonderful expression of kingdom reign as our self-understanding reflects the kingdom message; but is it more than this?

How would we recognise such participatory kingdom reign? When asked, Jesus answered: ‘But if I am casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you’ (Matt. 12:28). Jesus invites us to take part and delight in owning the story within ourselves.⁴⁵ ‘This story carries a revolutionary message: ordinary people matter. They are the arena of a cosmic struggle between good and evil.’⁴⁶

Yet, before engaging with the disruptive kingdom each person has the opportunity to evaluate the ‘pearl’. It may not be accredited with any worth so ‘Don’t throw your pearls to pigs!’ (Matt 7:6). Even if its value is recognised it may still be ignored as irrelevant. However, failure to choose is not an option.⁴⁷

Entangled hope

This struggle is pictured when Wheat and Weeds grow together as two realms implanted with contrasting DNA. Kingdom ‘wheat’ tangles with vigorous ‘weeds’. Those caught up by religion, politics, culture and, especially, occupations, friends and family. None bad in themselves, but nevertheless repurposing the nutrients provided to nurture the crop.

Untangling, a sensitive process requiring angelic skills, is held back until the end of the age. What damage would be caused to kingdom people if the people of evil were removed? Much as we might want God to root out major evils of the world the price would inevitably include every other ungodly pattern of behaviour, some of which we cling to within ourselves even while strive to be free.⁴⁸

Plant a Tree⁴⁹

Jesus embodies the heavenly reign and rule of God and extended authority to his followers who, under this sphere of influence, ‘enter the kingdom’ and enact its presence with spiritual power.⁵⁰ Similar evidence continues today as the Holy Spirit empowers believers with healing, prophetic and other gifts, but also growing in personal grace and wholeness through inner healing and heavenly significance as kingdom people.⁵¹

This is the new creation Paul talks about, for the individual and the kingdom. The treasure that man values is that which God values most; it will survive and shine in the new heaven.⁵² Clearly anything

⁴² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, 258

⁴³ Ibid, 259

⁴⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (London, SCM Press, 1964), 75

⁴⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 320

⁴⁶ Andrew Marr, *History of the World*, episode 2

⁴⁷ Derek Morphey, *Breakthrough*, 114

⁴⁸ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1*, 167-168, Kindle 3154-3172

⁴⁹ Martin Luther supposedly said that if the end of the world were to occur tomorrow he would plant a tree – because all that is good would survive and he would be able to eat the fruit in heaven. Otto Friedrich, *Living: Of Apple Trees and Roses*, (Article in Time Magazine Archive, 20 June, 1988)

⁵⁰ Richard Baukham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 160-161

⁵¹ Stuart Lees, *Transforming Life* (Eastbourne, Kingsway Communications, 2003), 27-32

⁵² Richard Baukham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 131-132

that is not of heavenly worth cannot inhabit this kingdom reality and is ultimately 'burnt up' (1 Cor 3:9-15).

Perhaps this explains why, when the kingdom became present, my colleague's back pain could not exist. This is the eschatological hope: just as yeast influences dough and Jesus brings contagious holiness, so proximity to kingdom rule will be similarly influential.⁵³

Seeding the Gospel

Might our church life provide the soil for kingdom seeds, where heavenly reign and rule are apparent? Can church offer an infectious kingdom or is it more likely to try extracting people from the world and perhaps cause root damage in the process? Sadly, as Tomlin says: 'we are called to be like God. And we settle for just being nice.'⁵⁴

Matthew 13 conveys a disruptive message to churches encouraging kingdom people see themselves afresh as seeding the gospel of a kingdom to be discovered that permeates every aspect of life. Yeast is most productive when it is heated, so might Christians grow within the pressures of other 'kingdoms' of business, government, finance, education and the 'normal' stuff of life. We dare to hope that the Christian community, enabled by the Holy Spirit, might infect the 'weeds' with the reality of the reign of God.

Viral Kingdom

These parables are not just an apocalyptic backward view, but also an apostolic vision of the future. The apostle is seeking a self-sustaining, self-replicating movement that will permeate, entangle and change the world as it repeatedly presents kingdom treasures, multiplying its effect like a virus. Pearls revealed to each person become the movement that grows into a tree considerably larger than its seed.

So is the kingdom of God bringing disruptive change today? Would Jesus say the kingdom of God is like a YouTube video or Internet message that has gone 'viral'? This seems a reasonable analogy because it is passed on one person at a time, some reject it but where it takes root it can quickly multiply, replicating 'thirty, sixty or even a hundred times' (v8).

Plant the Gospel

It seems unlikely that existing western church models could accommodate such a vision, embody the kingdom⁵⁵ or engage with contemporary society.⁵⁶ The disruptive kingdom needs to generate disruptive models of 'being' church.

Instead of planting churches we need to plant gospel movements.⁵⁷ There is good in the old but a growing kingdom continues reinventing itself, which requires an apostolic spirit of innovation⁵⁸ to seed the gospel in different cultural frameworks, infecting and replicating kingdom rule.⁵⁹ Stories are the seed of viral replication and the Gospels provide a perfect source that can be 'discovered' by all and become tangible reality when reinforced by evidential acts of kingdom reign.

⁵³ Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah Part 2, Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus, Vol 5.1* (London, Sage Publications, 2007), 64

⁵⁴ Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness, Christian Character In A Consumer Culture*, (London, Continuum, 2006), 86

⁵⁵ Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness*, 33

⁵⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 222-223

⁵⁷ Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 217

⁵⁸ Ibid, 183

⁵⁹ Ibid, 109

Disruptive Kingdom

The kingdom continues to be disruptive. Its rule was present as my coworker was healed. The message was indeed infectious because, unprompted, he described his experience to another colleague during breakfast. It was a Sunday and spontaneously, they both came to church. Sadly the seed was snatched away on returning home by corrosive scepticism from his wife.

As Tomlin puts it: 'Remember who you are: You are more than what you have become.'⁶⁰ As we grow and connect increasingly with heaven we become more like God. It is not enough to just grasp the pearl of salvation without fulfilling our purpose from the beginning of time: made in his image to bring God's creative rule to the world. Better still, we can take up this challenge and join the innovative kingdom movement to seed the gospel afresh.

⁶⁰ Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness*, 86

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