

Keys to the Secrets of the Kingdom - Matthew 13ff.

(An excerpt from my self-study course on Matthew)

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1. A new method. Matthew 13 took place on “that same day” of rejection (v. 1) as Matthew 12:22–50. On that day Jesus began to teach by the new method of parables (Matt. 13:3, 10). Although parables can be used as illustrations to make the truth plainer to all, that was not His purpose. Instead, in part His purpose was to hide truth (vv. 9–17). “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” His disciples asked. “He replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them’” (vv. 10–11). This new method of teaching was, therefore, a deliberate judgment, a method that would reveal truth to some but hide it from others. Only those with spiritual ears would really hear (vv. 9, 13, 15, 16); others would go their way uninformed. This was a main teaching of the first parable.

2. New truths about the kingdom. “Secrets” (KJV “mysteries”) were truths not revealed before (Rom. 16:25–26). These new truths had to do with the kingdom. But remember that the Lord had not defined the kingdom; He had announced it as something already known. And what definition had the Jews acquired from the prophecies? That the kingdom would be the rule of David restored. The “former dominion” (Micah 4:8) would come back to Jerusalem, far more glorious than before. The stone would drop down from heaven and become an earth-filling mountain (Dan. 2:34–35, 44–45). This kingdom was being announced as having “drawn near”; in fact, in the Person and works of Jesus it had touched upon the earth. And His miracles showed that the kingdom would be all that the prophets had said. Yet the people refused to repent and believe. Therefore Messiah revealed the secrets. There are eight such parables in Matthew 13 and several in later chapters (see below).

3. A new kingdom? Did these newly revealed secrets change the meaning of the kingdom or introduce a new form of it? In other words, did Israel’s rejection of the King cause the kingdom itself to be transformed? Our answer to this will affect our interpretation of a great many passages to the end of the New Testament.

The simplest answer is one that harmonizes with all the facts: The kingdom was not changed at all but simply—from man’s point of view—“postponed.” God was revealing for the first time that there would be an interval between Messiah’s sufferings and Messiah’s glory. The unforeseen interval is the age in which we live, since He began to build the church. Why then, if He was revealing an interim age, did He call such revelations “secrets of the kingdom”? For the simple reason that the new age was part of His kingdom plan. All He would do in the present age would be bound up with the future coming of the kingdom.

This explains why He calls the seed He sows “the message about the kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). Was such seed sown only during His earthly life? Did He not preach the same message through His apostles (Acts 20:25; 28:23, 31; cf. Matt. 24:14)? This is why He calls the wheat “the sons of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:38). Because even believers today will be heirs of the promised kingdom (James 2:5)—as the Jews assumed they were (Matt. 8:12).

In other words, there is no need to believe that the “secrets of the kingdom” reveal a new form of the kingdom. Instead, they refer to the new age that is intimately bound to the same expected kingdom and leads to it. Can this interpretation be substantiated in the parables? Yes, it can.

4. The kingdom clearly future in some parables. Sometimes the Lord’s parables leave no doubt that the kingdom is still future. Look, for example, at the parable of The Talents (Matt. 25:14–30). There it is not until the “master” **returns from his journey**, that he puts his faithful servants “in charge of many things” (vv. 21, 23). That refers to authority in the future kingdom after the Lord’s second coming, an interpretation verified in the parallel Parable of the Ten Minas in Luke 19:11–27. There the master “went to a distant country **to have himself appointed king** and then to return” (19:12). After “**he was made king...and returned home**” (v. 15), he put his faithful servants in charge of cities (vv. 17, 19).

That return of the master is the setting for the next passage in Matthew (Matt. 25:31–46). In it the nations are compared to sheep and goats, so it is sometimes wrongly called a parable. Instead, it presents sober reality. It tells of the Lord’s future coming “in his glory, and all the angels with him, [to] sit on his throne in heavenly glory” (v. 31). As King He invites “those on his right” (compared to “sheep”) into their “inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you” (v. 34), which is the same as “eternal life” (v. 46). Thus, the kingdom (and eternal life) is clearly future, at the Lord’s Second Coming. Notice that He mentions the same elements in Matthew 19:28–29.

5. The kingdom can be future in all parables. What about the parable of The Wheat and the Weeds, which the Lord Himself interprets? In Matthew 13:37–39 He identifies seven items of this parable. For example, the sown field is “the world” (v. 38), and the wheat (“the good seed”) are “the sons of the kingdom” (v. 38). But He identifies none of these seven things as the kingdom itself. He first mentions the kingdom as being present in connection with the harvest at “the end of the age” (v. 39): at that time the angels “will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling-blocks, and those who commit lawlessness” (v. 41, NASB). When this separation has been made, “then the righteous [earlier called the “sons of the kingdom”] will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43).

It is true that the words “gather out of His kingdom” could be understood to imply that the kingdom had existed previously. But more likely they mean that His first step in inaugurating the kingdom is to purge undesirable elements from it. This would agree with everything else in the parable and the fact that the age to come is the age of the kingdom (cf. Matt. 12:32; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 2:5).

Put yourself in the disciples’ place. The Lord had not told them that the kingdom would assume a new form. Therefore, in this parable they would look for a kingdom like the one that had been prophesied. They would find it where it was first mentioned as being present, at the time of the harvest. In other words, since Jesus said nothing to make them redefine the kingdom, they would understand it as they had before.

The same rule should be followed in all the parables of the kingdom. Look for the kingdom where the disciples would: in the grand climax. Thus, it is not in the dragnet being pulled

through the water, but after it is drawn to shore (13:47–50); not in the mustard seed when sown, but after it becomes a tree (13:31–32); not in the process of inviting to the wedding of the king’s son, but in the wedding itself (22:1–14); not while the virgins wait, but when the groom arrives (25:1–12).

6. “The kingdom is like.” Many of the “secrets” parables are introduced by the expression “the kingdom of heaven is like.” This follows a common Jewish method of introducing parables, and means, “Here is a parable about the kingdom.” Normally, the first thing mentioned after this introduction cannot be the kingdom. For example, no one thinks that the “man” in 13:24, 45; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:14; or the “ten virgins” in 25:1; represent the kingdom. If the kingdom is not usually the first thing mentioned, where, then, do we find it? Each person will use the same method the disciples used in finding it—namely, where his prior definition leads him. If he begins with the right definition, he will end right, seeing the kingdom in the grand climax.

7. Each parable was understandable to the disciples at that time. At least they understood the main points. Suggested under keys 5 and 6, this key was clearly stated in Matthew 13:51–52:

- (a) The Lord asked, “Have you understood all these things?”
- (b) They replied, “Yes.”
- (c) His response, beginning with “Therefore,” accepted their reply as correct.

Accordingly, no interpretation is likely unless the disciples could have understood it at that stage. This rule disqualifies some of the interpretations given nowadays, such as, the treasure being the church or the pearl being Israel. The disciples’ preconceptions about the kingdom also make it unlikely that they would understand the mustard tree (v. 32) or the fully leavened dough (v. 33) as “bad.” Both figures were quite capable of “good” meanings. For example, Ezekiel 17:22–24 used a similar description of a tree symbolizing a good kingdom. And yeast, though it sometimes symbolized evil (1 Cor. 5:6–8), could simply picture the permeating quality of teaching.¹ That seemed to be the point of the Lord’s warning about “the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:6, 12) and His description of His own teaching here. The disciples had no reason to think that the kingdom would be contaminated. Instead, they pictured it as still future and glorious, similar to the tree and the fully leavened dough. Test the “good” interpretations for these two parables in Luke 13:18–21. The context for them there makes a negative meaning even less likely.

In conclusion, what was Jesus revealing in the “secrets” of the kingdom? Neither a transformed kingdom nor a different form of it. Instead, a previously unannounced period of waiting for the same future and glorious kingdom already predicted. Starting with these secrets, it became ever more obvious that Messiah would come not once but twice! Like the writers of the New Testament, we are still waiting for Him and His kingdom.

¹ Yeast was normally used in daily bread. Though generally excluded from sacrifices, it was actually required in some cases (Lev. 7:13–14; 23:17–18). Its exclusion from the original Passover was due to haste and hardship, rather than evil meaning (Exod. 12:39).