

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 14 July 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **The Mysteries of the Kingdom**

### **Matthew 13:1-17**

In the year 1860, the British missionaries **Hudson and Maria Taylor** set sail from China to England, for the purpose of taking a furlough. Hudson had always battled chronic health problems; and his relentless ministry work in China had greatly compounded his health problems. For the better part of a decade, Hudson had done all in his power to reach the Chinese people for Christ. He had also used his medical skills to tend to the people's health needs. Day and night, Hudson and Maria were pouring themselves into people. Hudson was, quite literally, working himself to death in his endeavour to gather souls into God's Kingdom. Rest was now imperative, or else he would become an invalid. However, Taylor didn't rest for long. As soon as he was well enough to get up and about, he began to travel around England to preach in churches, and to urge Christians to consider whether God would have them leave home and country, and go to China as missionaries. In 1865, Hudson established the **China Inland Mission**, to assist churches in sending and supporting missionaries; and, little by little, God's people began to get involved.

Now, there was one evening when Taylor was scheduled to preach to an audience at the **Severn Street School** in Birmingham. However, there was a torrential downpour that evening. The storm was so fierce, that even his hostess advised Taylor to cancel. She figured that surely everyone would assume that the meeting was cancelled. However, Taylor wasn't having it. He told his hostess, "But was it not announced for tonight?...I must go, even if there is no one but the doorkeeper."<sup>1</sup> Well, as it turned out, only a dozen people showed up that evening. However, they were not discouraged. As Taylor preached, those twelve souls sensed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in an unusual way; and their lives were never the same again. Half of the people at that meeting either became missionaries, or else gave up their children as missionaries; and the other half faithfully supported the China Inland Mission from that day forward.<sup>2</sup>

Folks, God is not daunted by small numbers. Just as God was able to use those twelve people who were willing to brave the storm and attend that meeting in Birmingham, so the Lord Jesus was able to use twelve humble men who were willing to brave the "storms" of persecution and ridicule in order to follow Him, and learn from Him. Jesus came into this world to gather the people of Israel to Himself; but most of them refused to be gathered. Therefore, the Kingdom (which Jesus had been offering to them) had to be postponed, until the future day when Israel finally repents. (And we are still waiting for that day!) Yet, Jesus knew that His labour was not in vain. Though Israel refused to be gathered, Jesus knew that He would yet be "*glorious in the eyes of the LORD,*" and that God the Father would be His strength.

In our study of **Matthew**, we have come to the point, in Jesus' ministry, where Israel had "crossed a line" in their rejection of Jesus. Both the people and the religious leaders were digging in their heels in unbelief, and blaspheming the Holy Spirit; and thus, from this point onward, Jesus never again preached that "***The kingdom of heaven is at hand.***" (The Kingdom was no longer "***at hand,***" because it had been set aside on account of their unbelief.) Also, Jesus began to teach the people in a distinct new way. Because they refused to receive His plain words, He now began to teach them in **parables**. That is what we will be examining this morning, in this message which I've entitled ***The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.***

**Read Matthew 13:1-17.**

## **I. The "Kingdom Mysteries" parables (vv. 1-3)**

In **verse 1**, Matthew says that on "***the same day,***" Jesus went out of "***the house***" (Simon Peter's house, in Capernaum), and went down by the Sea of Galilee. What "***day***" is Matthew talking about? The same day that we were reading about back in **chapter 12!** It was the "***same day***" when the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out devils through the power of Satan! It was also the "***same day***" when Jesus' own brothers had tried to pull Him out of the crowd and whisk Him away, because they thought He had gone mad. It was on this *very same day* that Jesus began to speak many things to the people in "***parables.***"

Was there a reason why Jesus began to teach in parables on the "***same day***" when He faced all this rejection? Yes, there is: and in a few moments, we will see why. First, though, let's talk about what "parables" *are*. (**Read Matthew 13:3.**) What is a "parable"? The word "parable" comes from the Greek word *parabolé*; and it means "a **figure**, or a **comparison** between two things." In the Scriptures, a "parable" is a story from nature, or from everyday living, which is used to illustrate spiritual truth. (In this case, Jesus was telling a story about a man sowing seed in a field in order to illustrate spiritual truth.) As my Sunday School teachers always said, a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." From this point onward in Jesus' ministry, He used parables as His main tool of instruction.

Now, Jesus had been using **metaphors** and **word pictures** from the beginning of His ministry. For example, in the sermon on the Mount, Jesus had told His followers, "***Ye are the light of the world***"; and He had compared hiding one's testimony to hiding a light under a bushel. He had also warned His disciples not to try to pull the "***mote***" out of your brother's eye, when there is a "***beam***" in your own eye. These were simple illustrations, which anyone could grasp; and just in case anyone *didn't* get it, Jesus gave the explanation right along with the illustration. However, Jesus now began to use not just word pictures, but *parables* (actual stories); and as He told these little stories, *He did not always give an explanation* of the

stories. In the seven parables that Jesus told here in **Matthew 13**, He didn't give any explanation at all—at least, not to the public. He simply told the story, and then wrapped it up by saying, “***Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.***” In other words, “Whoever *really* wants to hear—whoever *really* wants to learn the truth, and heed my words—let him do so.”

You see, these “parables” were designed to do two things. To those who had ***received Jesus*** as their Messiah, and who truly had believing and listening ears, the parables ***revealed truth***. But to those who ***were rejecting Jesus***, and who did *not* truly desire to understand His words, the parables were designed to ***hide the truth!*** *Why* does God hide the truth from people? Because they don't want it! God will not force His truth upon those who refuse to receive it.

Now, the tragic fact is that *all of us*, in our natural, sinful state, are oblivious to God's truth. We *all* enter this world in a state of spiritual darkness. God's truths are like a strange, foreign language, which sinners do not know. The only way that a sinner can begin to understand God's truth is through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. As a sinner reads God's Word, or hears it preached, the Holy Spirit speaks to that sinner's heart, and begins to open truth to him; and *if* the sinner will respond to that little bit of truth *even a little*, and sincerely seek for more, the Holy Spirit will reveal *more* truth to him, until he finally believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, and is saved. From that point onward, this new believer has a *new* mind, which is able to comprehend spiritual things. On the other hand, those who have not received God's gift of salvation are still in spiritual darkness; and they are *not* able to discern spiritual things.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 2:9-16.**

After the religious leaders, and even Jesus' own brothers, publicly repudiated Him, and blasphemed the Holy Spirit, Jesus embarked on a new phase of His teaching ministry. Truth about the Kingdom of Heaven would now be *concealed* to those who didn't really want it. Jesus now got into a boat (probably Peter's), sat down in it, and began to preach to the multitudes that had gathered along the shore; but He didn't speak in plain, open words, as He had done before. He now spoke in parables. By the way, the spot where Jesus preached this sermon is still known to this day (it is called “the Cove of the Sower”); and from this vantage point along the shoreline, it is not hard to hear someone speaking. The hillside that rises gently from the shore forms a natural “amphitheatre,” from which thousands of people could have easily heard Jesus' voice. The people didn't have any trouble *hearing* Jesus' parables with their *physical* ears; but for most of them, their *spiritual* ears were deaf to their meaning.

Now, in **Matthew 13**, Matthew records seven parables that Jesus told on that day. The first three of these parables were taught *publicly*, from Peter's boat. The last four were taught *privately*, in Peter's house, after the crowds were sent home. However, all these parables have

one thing in common: they all reveal truth about the **“mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”** Let’s read **verses 10 and 11** again. (Read **Matthew 13:10-11.**)

What are the **“mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”**? Well, the word **“mystery”** come from the Greek word *musterion*, which means “hidden.” In the Bible, a “mystery” is a truth that was *once hidden*, but which has now been revealed. Jesus was now revealing truths about the Kingdom which had not been known before. But what *are* the **“mysteries of the kingdom”**? They are revelations of what will happen during the period of time *leading up to* the establishment of the Kingdom. What do I mean by this? Well, remember, the Kingdom had just been postponed until further notice. Because Israel, as a nation, had rejected Jesus as their King, they had forfeited the privilege of seeing the Kingdom set up within their lifetimes. The Kingdom *will* come in the future, when Jesus *returns* to earth: but what is supposed to happen in the meantime? *That* is what these “Kingdom Mysteries” parables reveal!

Now, the Jewish people had been taught, by the rabbis, that the Kingdom of Messiah was coming on this earth; and Jesus never denied this. They were *right* to expect that a literal, visible Kingdom was coming, in which the Messiah will rule over the entire world from Jerusalem. However, what the people *didn’t* understand is that God was unfolding a new thing called **“the church,”** which would grow and expand mightily in the interim *before* the Kingdom is set up. Even Jesus’ followers did not yet understand that Israel was now temporarily set aside, and that Christ’s churches would preach the Gospel throughout the entire world before Christ returns to set up His Kingdom. They didn’t understand that during the church age (and also during the seven-year Tribulation period just before Christ’s return), there would be a great growth of apostasy, and that there would be many people who would *profess* Jesus’ name, who weren’t true followers of Jesus at all. They didn’t understand that during the period of time leading up the Kingdom, God would also call the *Gentiles* to believe on Him, and that multitudes of Gentiles would be saved. *These* are the kinds of things that the **“mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”** reveal. Now, in time, Jesus would develop these truths more fully. (He would also give much more revelation to the Apostles, *after* He returned to Heaven.) For now, though, Jesus was introducing them to some basic truths about the period of time *before* Christ sets up His Kingdom.

For 2,000 years now, the Lord has been preparing Israel, and the world, for His glorious 1,000-year Kingdom. For 2,000 years, Christ has been enlisting *citizens* to enter into that Kingdom, from all nations and tribes. The “seed” of the Gospel has been sown for many centuries; and when Christ returns to earth after the Tribulation, and sets up His glorious 1,000-year Kingdom, there will be a great “harvest” of souls to enter into the Kingdom!

## II. The recipients of the “Kingdom Mysteries” parables (vv. 3-17)

**(Read Matthew 13:3-12 again.)** The first “Kingdom Mystery” parable that Jesus told was this parable about a sower who went out to sow seed. Now, Jesus didn’t begin this parable with the words “*The kingdom of heaven is like,*” as He did with the other six parables to follow; yet, this is definitely one of the “Kingdom Mystery” parables. How do we know? Because when the disciples asked Jesus why He had spoken in parables, He said, “*Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus is describing the way things will be in the centuries between the time of Israel’s *rejection* of Him (during His first coming), and their *acceptance* of Him (at the time of His *second coming*). He is describing four different ways that people will respond to the “seed” of the Gospel during this church age, as well as during the seven-year Tribulation period, just before He returns to earth.

Now, next week, we will examine the *interpretation* of this parable. For now, though, we will focus on the *recipients* of the parables. Who *were* the recipients of this parable? Was *everyone* under the sound of Jesus’ voice that day a recipient? Well...yes and no! You see, Jesus made it clear that it is not given to *everyone* to know (or *understand*) the mysteries of the Kingdom. And why not? To answer that question, let’s look at **verses 11 and 12** again; and they we’ll get some insight from a parallel passage in **Mark**. **(Read Matthew 13:11-12.)**

#### **Read Mark 4:23-25.**

During Christ’s ministry, He constantly said, “*If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.*” Was Jesus saying that if you happen to be deaf, you’re out of luck? Of course not! Jesus loves deaf people, just as He loves the hearing. Jesus wasn’t talking about physical hearing: He was talking about “hearing” with your *heart*, and *taking in* His words, and believing them. Now, make no mistake about it: believing God’s words is not natural, or normal. The Bible says that sin has darkened our minds, so that we cannot understand or believe God’s words. Yet, God, in His mercy, will open people’s eyes to His truth *if* they will truly seek to understand it. Those who heed and cling to the little bit of truth that they have been given, and who seek for *more* truth, will have their request granted. On the other hand, those who do *not* care to hear God’s Word, and who neglect it, and despise it in their hearts, will have what little light of truth that they *did* have snuffed out, and taken away. Folks, that is a scary prospect!

However, that’s not all. Look at what Jesus said next! **(Read Matthew 13:13 again.)** Did you catch that? Jesus said that most people “hear,” yet “*hear not.*” In other words, the sound of Scripture may fall on their physical ears, and register in their ear drums, and in their brain; but they don’t understand it, and they don’t really *want* to understand it. Most of the people who heard Jesus’ preaching that day were just like the hard ground in Jesus’ parable. The seed of His Word had fallen on their hearts; but because their hearts were hard and unreceptive, the Word did not even begin to sink into their hearts. Instead, the fowls of the air (representing Satan and his demons) quickly snatched the seed away from their hearts.

By the way, there is an application of this truth for believers, as well. It's important to note that at this point, Jesus was preparing to explain the meaning of the parables to *the disciples*. This shows that even Jesus' *disciples*, who were saved men (with the exception of Judas) didn't always understand what Jesus said. However, the difference between Jesus' true disciples, and all the others who had heard Jesus preach that day, was this: the disciples *asked* Jesus to explain the parable to them! Because they *asked* for light and understanding, Jesus gave it to them. Because they were humble and teachable, Jesus said, "***Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear.***" Unlike lost people, saved people have spiritual "ears" that are *able* to understand God's truth. This means that Jesus' command, "***If any man have ears to hear, let him hear,***" applies *especially* to us who are saved! The very fact that Jesus must command believers (who *do* have ears to hear) to *continue* to hear His words, shows that it is possible for us *not* to hear! All kinds of worldly voices and fleshly distractions can harden our hearts, and keep us from "hearing" God's words all the time. Christian, don't let that happen! Keep your ears open to God's Word, and keep your heart soft and teachable!

Now, let's read on. (**Read verses 14-15 again.**) Jesus is now citing a Scripture from the book of **Isaiah**. Let's take a look at that Scripture; and then we will compare both **Isaiah** and **Matthew** to the book of **John**, where Jesus cited this same passage again.

**Read Isaiah 6:8-10.**

**Read John 12:37-41.**

As we compare **Isaiah 6**, **Matthew 13**, and **John 12**, there is a glaring question that stands out. The question is, "*Who did the hardening of hearts, and the blinding of the eyes?*" In **Isaiah**, God instructed *Isaiah* to cause the people to hear, yet not understand; to see, yet not perceive; and to make their hearts hard, and their eyes blinded. Yet, in **Matthew**, Jesus changes the verb conjugations, and states that *the people* had chosen to harden their own hearts, and to close their own ears, and to blind their own eyes. But then, in **John**, Christ alters the verbs once again, and says that *God* had directly blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts. So, which was it? Did the human *messenger* blind their eyes? Or did the *people* blind their *own* eyes? Or did *God* blind their eyes? The answer is: all of the above!

Now, perhaps you're thinking, "Pastor, this doesn't make any sense." Well, actually...it does! You see, the Scripture makes it clear that God does *not* delight in the death of the wicked: and He is "***not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.***" God desires (and *commands*) all men to be saved. Contrary to what the Calvinists say, God does *not* foreordain certain people to be unable to repent, so that He can damn them to hell. Why, then, did Jesus say, in that **John** passage, that "***He hath blinded their eyes***"? The answer is this: God (and His messengers, the prophets) harden people's hearts in the sense that God

*allows* them to continue to harden *their own* hearts! If they choose to harden their hearts, then God will help them along with it—because that is what they desired!

Take Moses' contest with Pharaoh, for example. In **Exodus 7 and 8**, we are told that God hardened Pharaoh's heart; yet, we are also told that Pharaoh *hardened his own heart*. So, who did the hardening—God, or Pharaoh? The answer is, “Both”! When a person hardens his heart to the Gospel again and again, he is inviting *the Lord* to harden his heart. And how does the Lord “harden” a person's heart? By *not softening* it! The same sun that melts wax hardens clay; but it isn't the sun's fault that the clay is hardened. It is the *composition* of the clay that makes it hard when it is exposed to the sun. Likewise, most sinners have already chosen to compose their hearts with the “clay” of sin and rebellion: and they refuse to depart from their sin. Therefore, God hardens the “clay” of their hearts by *not softening* it. God says, “All right. Sin is what you want: so sin is what you shall have. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still.” In **John 6:44**, Jesus said that no man can come to Him unless the Father “*draw*” that person to Him. Without the softening, convicting influence of the Holy Spirit, no sinner can repent. The bottom line, then, is this: those who refuse to embrace the light of the Gospel stand in danger of having the light taken away. God will not continue to give light to those who will not have it.

Jesus has said some sobering words about those who reject Him: but now, He has some *encouraging* words for His *disciples*. Let's read **verses 16 and 17** again. (**Read verses 16-17.**) The disciples did not yet understand all the truths that Jesus was trying to teach them. Yet, they did understand *some* things. Their spiritual eyes and ears were open; and they were sincerely seeking the truth. Therefore, Jesus called their eyes and ears “*blessed*.” Not only that, but He went on to say that they had been given a privilege that countless “*prophets and righteous men*” of past ages did *not* have. The Apostles were beholding, with their own eyes, the very things that the prophets had foretold about the Messiah; and they never got over the wonder of it. Let's take a look at what Peter said about this years later.

### **Read 1 Peter 1:7-12.**

The prophets “*searched diligently*” to understand *how* our salvation would be provided, and *when* it would be provided. They wanted to know how the Messiah would purchase salvation for mankind; and the Holy Spirit answered their questions to varying degrees. Some of the prophets were given a *great deal* of information about “*sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow*.” Take Abraham, for example. In **Galatians 3:8**, the Bible says that God “*preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed*.” Now, how could *that* be? Abraham lived and died about 2,000 years before Jesus was even born! In what sense did the LORD “*preach the Gospel*” to Abraham hundreds of years *before* the Gospel unfolded? Let's go back to the book of **Genesis** to find the answer.

### **Read Genesis 22:1-18.**

On this day on Mount Moriah, God illustrated the Gospel to Abraham. As Abraham went back down the mountain, his mind must have been spinning with what he had seen and heard. God had shown him that a Descendant of his would one day bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. Everything that had happened on Mount Moriah was a giant object lesson of that salvation. For one thing, God had shown Abraham that the Messiah was His own divine Son, who would willingly obey His heavenly Father, and offer up His life as a sacrifice (just as Isaac had willingly gotten up on the altar). God also had also shown Abraham that the Messiah would die in the place of sinners—just as the ram died in Isaac’s place. God had also shown Abraham that Messiah would *come back to life*. Just as Isaac (who was *supposed* to be appointed to death) arose up off the altar, so Jesus was *actually* appointed to death: and He *actually* rose back to life. In **Hebrews 11**, Paul said that Abraham received his son Isaac from the dead **“in a figure”** (literally, a “parable”). In other words, Isaac’s rising up from off the altar was a picture of Jesus’ future resurrection from the dead. Did Abraham really understand all these things? Paul indicates that he *did* understand it! To some degree or other, Abraham understood that the Messiah (who would be one of his descendants) would one day suffer and die in the place of sinners, and rise from the dead!

Many of the Old Testament prophets had a good deal of understanding of the Gospel. In **Acts 2**, Peter said that King David *understood* that he was writing about the Messiah’s resurrection when he wrote **Psalms 16**. **David, Isaiah, and Zechariah** prophesied of Christ’s betrayal; the price of His betrayal (30 pieces of silver); the piercing of His hands and feet; the gambling over His garments; the supernatural darkness that would descend over the earth while He was on the cross; the exact *day* of His death; and scores of other details of His suffering, death, and resurrection. Yet, the Old Testament prophets didn’t understand *everything* about the Gospel. God gave them many pieces of the puzzle; but none of them understood every aspect of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. In **1 Peter 1:12**, Peter says that the Gospel was **“revealed”** to the Old Testament prophets; yet, it was *not* revealed **“unto themselves.”** It was revealed to them: yet, it *wasn’t* revealed to them. What does Peter mean by this?

Well, the Greek word for “reveal” is *apokalupto*, which literally means “to take off the cover.” In a sense, the Old Testament prophets did have the “cover” of the Gospel removed—to an extent. God gave the Old Testament prophets enough pieces of the puzzle for them to have a *general idea* of how the Gospel would unfold. Yet, mixed in with the prophecies of Christ’s *sufferings* were the prophecies of His second coming, and of His glorious Kingdom. These prophecies weren’t put in chronological order, either. Thus, the Old Testament prophets couldn’t really see that there were to be *two* comings of the Messiah to earth—the first one for the purpose of suffering and dying for our sins, and the second one for the purpose of setting up the Kingdom. They didn’t get to witness the *full removal* of “the cover.” They didn’t get to see the appearance of the Son of God in human flesh. They didn’t get to see the Messiah’s life, sacrificial death, and resurrection. It was the *Apostles* who were given this privilege!

**Read 1 John 1:1-4.**

John testified that he and the other Apostles had seen, heard, and touched **“the Word of life.”** Sixty years after Christ returned to Heaven, John was still amazed that he had had the privilege of seeing, hearing, and touching the Son of God in human flesh! However, that wasn’t all that John had to say. In **verse 3**, John states the purpose of his letter. The purpose of his letter was **to declare this Word of Life to his readers.** John considered it a privilege to tell *others* about this Jesus whom he had known for six decades of his life! The Apostles couldn’t keep silent about the Gospel: they had to declare it to others. *We* shouldn’t keep silent, either! Jesus said, **“Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”**

**Conclusion:** As we close, I have a couple questions. First, I would ask Christians, “Do you delight in receiving the truth of God’s Word, as you once did? Or have your eyes grown dim, and your ears dull, to some extent?” It *is* possible for this to happen! Christian, don’t let *any* worthless trinket of this world steal your heart, and dull your spiritual senses! To those of you who aren’t saved, I would ask, **“What are you waiting for? Jesus wants to save you today!”** Perhaps you’d say, “Pastor, I’ve heard you say that I need to be saved; but I don’t understand it all.” If this be the case, *just ask* the Lord to open your eyes and heart! **“Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find.”** If you will respond to the light you already have, He will give you *more* light, until you are *able* to come to Him in repentance and faith. It doesn’t have to take very long, either. Christ will give you enough light to be saved, if you will earnestly seek Him! The Bible says, **“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”**

<sup>1</sup> PGCAG World Missions, December 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/pgcagworldmissions/posts/one-stormy-night-hudson-taylor-was-scheduled-to-speak-in-birmingham-england-at-t/1830078624048191/>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Morgan, *Preacher’s Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers), p. 704.