

The Parable of ... What's Goin' On?

In 2006, the movie *Bella* was released and, IMHO, it is a phenomenal movie. Warning: Spoilers ahead.



The movie is set in New York City and is about the events of one day and the impact on the characters' lives. The main male character is José, who works in his brother's Mexican restaurant. Nina the waitress arrives late and is fired on the spot. When asked why she was late, she tells José she is pregnant and was ill from morning sickness. He offers her a stroll around the city, which she accepts. José takes Nina to another restaurant known to him to recommend her for a waitressing position. While they dine to wait for the response, Nina tells José she does not intend to proceed with her pregnancy and is seriously considering an abortion, partly because the father is uninterested in supporting her and she is broke.

Nina and José spend the day together. She even meets his family. As the movie concludes, José offers to accompany Nina to the abortion clinic. The movie then fast forwards a few years and we discover José adopted Nina's child, named Bella, and his family helps care for the girl with her mother.

The lengths José and his family go to show love to Nina and her daughter is unexpected, extraordinary and abundant. What's goin' on?

It turns out the writer and director of the movie, Alejandro Gomez Monteverde, is a friend of Jesus who wanted to demonstrate the life and light and love of placing one's faith in Jesus and the fruits thereof.

The movie is a modern parable and it like the parables of Jesus which often undermined preconceived ideas of how God must work to bring in the Kingdom. Even Christians may be scandalised by how God works in the world to reveal himself. The key is for the friend of Jesus to find the treasure he offers and to then value it scandalously in his or her lifestyle.

Explanation

The 13th chapter of *The Gospel According to Matthew* presents a variety of parables used by Jesus to teach about the kingdom of God. Over the last two weeks, we have reflected on the relatively easy parables of The Sower and The Wheat and the Weeds. The remaining parables are shorter, but surprisingly more complicated.

What's goin' on? Let us find out.

A Mustard Seed

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed... (Matthew 13:31–32)¹

According to Matthew, Jesus told a parable with a mustard seed as the main image. The mustard seed is an exceptionally small seed —not really the smallest of all, but small enough that if it were to grow taller than other garden plants to become a tree, THAT would be truly exceptional!

Commentators tell us “a mustard plant is an annual herb, whose proverbially small seeds (cf. Mt 17:20) can indeed produce a plant normally from [a half to just under two meters] in height, (in extraordinary cases, [up to three meters]), but it does not produce a tree of any kind”.² The mustard seed of Jesus’ parable extraordinarily becomes a tree, but not just any old tree. When we take into account other scriptures that come to the minds of those who read the Bible in depth, Jesus’ parable of a mustard seed alludes to it becoming an imperial tree, as well as being a prophetic image of the coming kingdom of God.³

You do not have to do a deep dive into the Bible to get the point of this parable.

The mustard seed is a small seed—you have likely noticed them in your takeaway curry or even have them in your pantry—it is a small seed that—your imagination will guess—produces an ordinary plant—you may have seen them as you drove by a field in Central or Northwest NSW—but Jesus likens the growth of a mustard seed to the Kingdom because it would be entirely surprising and imagination-stretching to watch a mustard seed grow into a tree that blesses the birds and the animals. So too it is hard to imagine how even a little faith, whether of an individual or a local church, can grow into something that, beyond all expectation, fulfils God’s purpose to bless the nations.



Yeast

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Matthew 13:33)

The next parable is similar, but do not be distracted by the leaven, which is more commonly known today as yeast. The focus of the parable is actually on what the woman does.

Yeast is normally a symbol of corruption. Even Jesus used it this way, for Matthew wrote, “Jesus told them, ‘Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees’” (Mt 16:6).



In this parable however, Jesus used yeast in a positive way, to indicate the shockling result of a woman hiding yeast in flour.

Notice the woman of this parable does not mix the yeast nor knead the flour—despite the English word provided by our chosen translation of the Bible, this woman “hides” or “conceals” the yeast in the flour, rather than mix it in.

And not just a little flour, but fifty pounds or about 40 litres in metric volume. Can you imagine how much bread that would produce? The woman certainly did! She not only expected this yeast to do its work to produce an abundance, but expected it would require very little help from her to feed a multitude.

This woman wanted and hoped to feed not only her own family but many more people beyond.

Hope is not a crutch, an opiate of the masses. Placing faith in Jesus has hope as a benefit, hope that is based on the certainty of his resurrection and his power to make good on his promises. And even a little hope can fill a person’s heart, but it does not stop there! It provides blessing and abundance, both spiritual and material, far beyond our imaginations or what we could accomplish ourselves or even together.

Hidden Treasure and a Pearl

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure ... like a merchant in search of fine pearls... (Matthew 13:44–46)

Matthew then presents two more parables of Jesus, in rapid succession. They are so much like each other that he clearly meant for them to be considered together.

In the combined parables of hidden treasure and a priceless pearl, the kingdom of God is compared to a man finding something of great value. What he does, after finding the treasure, is extraordinary and perhaps even a little beyond what was necessary.

In these parables, the main character is filled with joy at finding a treasure or THE pearl. He is so pure in heart (cf. Mt 5:8) that he does not hesitate to sell everything he has for the joy of owning what he has found.



But isn't it true, "finders keepers; losers weepers"? Not for this character. He will bear with no claims against his own. He would sell his possessions to buy this field, so that no one can take away what is priceless to him.⁴



Not so the rich young ruler, who asked Jesus what good he needed to do to have eternal life. When Jesus gave him his answer, that he must sell all his possessions and then follow him, the rich young ruler went away sad, for he owned many things (Mt 16–22).



In the combined parables of our scripture focus, notice the farmer happens upon the treasure unexpectedly, in the course of his normal work. The merchant, however, is looking for valuable items, yet finds something priceless, beyond his dreams.

This is unexpected for those who want to prescribe or dictate a rule or instruction for others to follow, then to proscribe or forbid other methods or entry points as harmful or unlawful. Who is to say how the Holy Spirit and who the Holy Spirit will lead to place their faith in Jesus and so become his friend?

With these parables, Jesus wants his friends to understand the kingdom of God can be found by a person through either movement, whether they are seeking or not. Once found and claimed, no one else need understand why the treasure or the pearl or the kingdom is valuable to the one who claims it. That it is valuable should be obvious and evident in the one who claims it.

The Net

The kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea... (Matthew 13:47–50)

The parable of the net repeats the teaching of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, describing how fish and people will be collected for the coming Judgment.

When confronted with this parable, some will be surprised at the designation of fish as "worthless", rotten or foul, and they are shocked these fish are then sent into the blazing furnace rather than tossed back into the sea to live unmolested.

The astute Bible reader will notice the Greek word translated here as “worthless” is the same word translated as “bad”, and is used by Matthew more appropriately elsewhere to refer to bad fruit or works.⁵ This allusion tells us they are like fish that either do not taste good, are too small to provide nourishment, or are just not edible at all. They are like plants that do not produce fruit. Worthless to anyone and everyone.

Similarly, notice the fishermen doing the sorting “sit”, which is also an allusion to Jesus, the Son of Man, sitting on his throne at the Day of the Lord (Mt 19:28; 25:31), where every one is sorted and judged.

Despite our opinions and preferences, the kingdom of God is neither for everyone nor will it include everyone. Those who chose to disrespect or ignore God should not be surprised when they are not included in the glory to come.

The Treasure Storeroom

Every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom treasures new and old. (Matthew 13:51–52)

In verse 53, Matthew indicated that the rest of this chapter has contained parables; however, whether verses 51–52 constitute a parable is debatable.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ concluding statement here is worth reflecting on, for he described understanding his parables as like bringing out treasure from one’s storeroom. The “storeroom” to which he referred is the collective knowledge of a people and a culture.

The images and phrases Jesus used in his parables were relevant to his contemporary audience because they drew on contemporary issues and idioms. Similarly, my illustrations from pop culture are relevant to you all because you listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and read the same news reports as me because you are all discriminating consumers of low-brow culture. The same was true for Jesus and the crowds who followed him.

Jesus’ parables also draw on historical issues and idioms. The crowds were themselves brought up with instruction on the Bible’s contents, so they understood the allusions Jesus made to those contents. The more you and I read the Bible and understand those historical issues and idioms, the better we are able to dive as deeply into the riches of the Bible as the Holy Spirit invites us to.

Understanding those historical issues and idioms is akin to drawing out “old treasures”. Applying those “old treasures” to contemporary issues and idioms yields “new treasure”, which is wisdom for our day and age.

Jesus said this was especially true of the “teachers of the law who become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven” because they had the resources and the luxury to read and study the Bible. In our day and age, we have far more access and time to reflect on and study the Bible deeply; therefore, we have no excuse for not generating our own treasure trove of wisdom and then teaching it to others.

Application

Reflecting on all the parables of Matthew 13, we learn the kingdom of God is found among those who love, trust, and obey Jesus. If your heart is open to the good news about Jesus—good soil, in other words—then the seed of your faith can produce a harvest at least 30 times, if not 60 or 100 times more than the fruit normally expected. It can become like a tree that shelters birds above and animals below. It can produce an abundance that feeds your family and your whole neighbourhood. It is more valuable and precious than anything you presently own, and will keep proving its value as it provides further wisdom for living the free, full and forever life Jesus promised to his friends.

The fruit of that wisdom is unexpected, extraordinary and abundant. History proves the case:

Care for Women and the Sick

The faith of those living in the Kingdom uplifted women, affording them leadership in the first Christian communities. Those communities promoted chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage, as well as protected discarded and exposed babies in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. The commitment of the first Christians, to look after widows, orphans and the sick, even during times of plague and pandemic, formed the foundation, in the Middle Ages, for religious institutions to play a significant role in providing medical care.



Egalitarianism



Historian Tom Holland argues that the famous verse in the apostle Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*—"There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28)—he argues this verse created a foundation for the idea there should be no discrimination between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, nor based on gender, nor based on class. This is an idea which

remains foundational for the radical egalitarianism and liberalism of our day.

Rescuing the Defenseless

The faith of those living in the Kingdom channeled the violent tendencies of men and aristocrats in the Middle Ages toward the cause of freeing the Holy Land from the oppression and slavery of Muslim invaders.



Yes, atrocities were committed by some during the Crusades; however, the intent of the Crusades was admirable. The crusaders were inspired by their Christian faith to come to the aid of the defenseless in the Holy Land.

Sheltering The Homeless

The first homeless shelter was established in 1829 by a devout Christian named John Pounds in Portsmouth, England. Pounds grew up in poverty and did not receive a formal education. Despite his own circumstances, Pounds had



a deep sense of compassion and empathy for others who were less fortunate.

A carpenter by trade, Pounds worked during the day and used his evenings to teach children who were too poor to attend school. He would gather them in his small workshop, provide them with basic education and teaching them practical skills.

Recognising the dire situation of the homeless and impoverished individuals in his community, Pounds opened his home as a shelter in 1829. This humble establishment became known as the first homeless shelter.

John Pounds' efforts to help the homeless and educate underprivileged children had a lasting impact on his community. His work inspired others to follow in his footsteps, leading to the establishment of more shelters and educational initiatives for the marginalized.

A Listening Ear for the Suicidal

In 1953, in a bombed out London church called Saint Stephen's Wallbrook, an Anglican minister named Chad Vera and his secretary started the first suicide prevention hotline.⁶

Vera had for a long time been aware of suicide and suicidality, and was preoccupied by the pain that suicide brought into communities, not to mention, of course, the loss of individuals. At the time, for the Church, suicide was considered a sin, and for the police, it was considered a crime. Who then would listen to and prevent isolated people from taking their own lives and how to do listen to them?



Vera understood that, by then, people had become conditioned to reaching for a telephone and that they would talk more freely on the telephone. The 999 emergency number had already been established in the UK. With this in mind, Vera imagined a kind of telephone church, with no physical congregation, just phones. He and his secretary, Vivian Prosser, offered counselling twenty four hours a day to people contemplating suicide. The telephone enabled private conversation and anonymity, a connection to someone when you needed them most.

Belief in a Creator

Finally, let me describe for you how the faith of those living in the Kingdom provided the foundational ideas for Western science.

Christianity teaches that God created the world in an orderly and rational manner. This belief encourages the pursuit of scientific knowledge to uncover the laws and principles that govern the natural world.

Christianity teaches that humans are stewards of the Earth and have a responsibility to explore and understand the world around them. This encourages scientific inquiry and curiosity about the natural world.

Christianity emphasizes the pursuit of truth and knowledge. This value aligns with the scientific method, which seeks to uncover truth through observation, experimentation, and evidence-based reasoning.

Christianity teaches that humans are stewards of the Earth and have a responsibility to explore and understand the world around them. This encourages scientific inquiry and curiosity about the natural world.

Such a foundation led to the founding of the Royal Society, which is the National academy of sciences for the UK and the first scientific society in history, having been chartered in 1662. The initial membership of the Society was overwhelmingly made up of active Christians, with their interest in God's creation.⁷



Care for women and the sick, egalitarianism, rescuing the defenseless, sheltering the homeless, a listening ear for the suicidal, belief in a Creator. These are ideas and initiatives that have arisen from the faith of individuals and communities, they are ideas and initiatives that have flourished far beyond expectation to impact the world in powerful and transformative ways, thus demonstrating how the fruit of faith in Jesus and trust in his wisdom is unexpected, extraordinary and abundant.

Of course, you might argue these are not ideas that require religious faith, but look at the catastrophic results when governments and ideologues have taken over these ideas and initiatives.

Conclusion

What's goin' on? Placing your faith in Jesus just may lead to unexpected, extraordinary and abundant results, for it has done so very often in the past. Jesus taught this using the method of parables, where asking, "What's goin' on?", leads us to reflect deeply on the words of the Bible and the transforming power revealed therein.

Claiming the wisdom of Jesus is like a storeroom of treasure, both new and old. Have you understood all these things?

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew", *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 309.
- 3 Cf. Ps 104:12; Dan 4:10–12, 18; Ezek 17:23; 31:6).
- 4 "The disposition of buried treasure found on someone else's property was widely discussed in Roman legal discourse. Some of Matthew's readers may have expected a law-abiding plowman to have reported his find to the owner of the field rather than cashing in on it himself. Sensitive contemporary readers may wonder about the ethics of cheating the owner of the field out of his treasure, even if it was perfectly legal. The story does not legitimize the man's actions. Jesus was certainly able to use questionable actions of characters in his parables to picture the urgency of acting to gain the kingdom while the opportunity is there (cf. Matt 12:29's use of breaking-and-entering imagery, and more subtly, Luke 16:1–13)." —ibid, pg 313.
- 5 See Matthew 7:17–18; 12:33.
- 6 Ben Nanna Affrey, "Callings", *The Last Archive podcast*, 20-Jul-2023, <https://replug.link/8312f300> (accessed 29-Jul-2023).
- 7 Dan Graves, "Scientists of Faith Found Royal Society", *Christianity.com*, 3-May-2010, <https://replug.link/44997ab0> (accessed 29-Jul-2023).