

Chapter 55: Discipled for the Kingdom

Matthew 13:51–58

As we come to the end of Matthew 13, Jesus is concluding his teaching on the kingdom of heaven through parables. Also, Matthew begins a new section of Jesus' life and ministry, where some will grow in their admiration for him, while others will grow in their hatred. There is an important connection between these two sections: namely, here we see the kingdom of God doing exactly what Jesus said would happen in his parables. For some, the kingdom of heaven will be snatched away immediately, while for others, the kingdom of heaven will take root and bear much fruit. For still others, the kingdom of heaven will seem to take root for a time, only to be scorched or choked out. Regardless, one thing will grow increasingly clear as Jesus moves forward: *there is no neutrality between kingdom disciples and kingdom despisers.*

Kingdom Disciples (Matt. 13:51–52)

Up to this point in Matthew 13, Jesus has given seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. Lenski is probably correct that Jesus' choice to tell seven parables is purposeful: "The fact that there are seven seems to be intentional, this sacred number symbolizing the kingdom....They picture the great work of the gospel-rule of Christ from start to finish, its success and the reason why it fails in some men."¹ After completing these seven kingdom parables, Jesus asks whether his disciples have understood what he has taught, and they respond in the affirmative (v. 51).

Jesus, however, is not satisfied with his disciples' private understanding of what he has taught: "And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old'" (v. 52). The word for "trained" (μαθητεύω; *mathēteuō*) is closely related to the word for "disciple" (μαθητής; *mathētēs*), so that we might best translate Jesus' words as referring to "every scribe who has been *discipled* for the kingdom of heaven." By asking whether they have "understood" what he is taught, Jesus is spotlighting the intellectual aspect of discipleship. Nevertheless, Jesus does not mean that discipleship is merely intellectual. Carson helpfully explains that "a discipled scribe has this understanding, not that understanding generates discipleship," so that faith and submission to the King "are necessary prerequisites to understanding and bringing out from oneself the rich treasures of the kingdom."² A disciple must know the facts about the kingdom; however, someone who merely knows about the kingdom without responding to the King in faith does not possess the kingdom, and, in fact, does not really understand the kingdom.

By the imagery of "bringing out" treasure, Jesus is explaining that the disciples then have a duty

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 550.

² Carson, "Matthew," 381.

to teach others what they themselves have learned.³ For these apostles in particular, Jesus intends that they should become teachers, and he is here preparing them to enter into that role after his death and resurrection (see Matt. 28:20). While certain aspects of what those first apostles did that were not repeatable by subsequent generations, the New Testament is clear that Christ continues to appoint some as officers to teach in his church (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:17). Calvin explains the meaning of this section well:

He says that teachers *are like householders*, who are not only careful about their own food, but have a store laid up for the nourishment of others; and who do not live at ease as to the passing day, but make provision for a future and distant period. The meaning, therefore, is, that the teachers of the Church ought to be prepared by long study for giving to the people, as out of a storehouse, a variety of instruction concerning the word of God, as the necessity of the case may require.⁴

Still, this principle is the same for all disciples within the church, since we are all called, at a minimum, to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). Nevertheless, this is especially true for the teaching officers of the church who receive this charge: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

In Jesus’ parable here, this right handling of the word of truth means bringing out treasure that is both new and old.⁵ By this, Jesus demonstrates once again that he has not come to replace the old (law) entirely (Matt. 5:17). Nevertheless, he also demonstrates that he has not come to maintain the status quo, but to bring a newness to the old revelation. The newness is found in Christ himself, who is the fulfillment and the final interpreter of the law: “Thus the OT promises of Messiah and kingdom, as well as OT law and piety, have found their fulfillment in Jesus’ person, teaching, and kingdom, and the scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom now brings out of himself deep understanding of these things and their transformed perspective affecting all of life.”⁶ Whereas “the Jewish teachers of the law could bring forth only the old,” Jesus is commissioning his disciples to bring forth new and old as consistent with their discipleship in the kingdom.⁷

Kingdom Despisers (Matt. 13:53–58)

In v. 53, we come across the word ἐγένετο (*egeneto*), which Matthew uses to “mark the conclusion of major blocks of teaching in the Gospel” at five major points (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).⁸ Specifically, Matthew marks the conclusion of the “parables”—that is, the parables about

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 579.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:134.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 402.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 381.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 382.

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 572.

the kingdom of heaven. Carson notes that this new section will show “a progressive polarization along several axes.”⁹ Jesus’ disciples will grow, while the religious leaders will increase in their hatred and opposition against Jesus. Up to this point, the crowds gathered to listen to Jesus neutrally; however, in the coming chapters, people within those crowds will be forced to choose sides to follow Jesus or to oppose him.

This section’s theme is vividly portrayed in the astonishment and unbelief of the crowds in Jesus’ own hometown. On the one hand, after Jesus teaches in their synagogue, they are astonished by Jesus’ wisdom and mighty works (v. 54). Blomberg notes that this is the third and final instance of the word “wisdom” in the Gospel of Matthew (see also Matt. 11:19; 12:42).¹⁰ Significantly, then, the people clearly perceive something extraordinary about Jesus, especially in light of his background as a “carpenter’s son” (v. 55). France writes, “*Tektōn*, traditionally translated ‘carpenter,’ is a general term for a ‘constructor,’ and probably denotes general building work including masonry as well as woodwork; he was a skilled craftsman, probably also dealing with agricultural and other implements.”¹¹ This kind of work was hardly the kind of elite training that rabbinical teachers would have received, so that the crowd struggles to explain the source of Jesus’ wisdom. Sadly, their astonishment at Jesus’ wisdom and mighty works do not lead them to faith. As Calvin notes, “In this miracle they ought to have perceived the hand of God; but their ingratitude made them cover themselves with darkness.”¹²

Another reason for their stumbling is traced to the fact that they know the family of Jesus: “Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” (vv. 55–56). These names seem ordinary enough, but, as France notes, they are quite significant in the context of the larger New Testament:

The mention of the brothers’ names may simply be a way of making the story more concrete, but by the time Matthew wrote certainly James (who was leader of the Jerusalem church until his martyrdom in A.D. 62) and probably the other brothers (See Acts 1:14; 1 Cor 9:5) were well-known members of the Christian community. James and Judas are traditionally the authors of the two NT letters of those names.¹³

Rather than honoring him as a hometown hero, “they took offense at him” (v. 57a). Thus, Jesus concludes that “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household” (v. 57b). While the unbelief of the people prevented Jesus from doing more mighty works in Nazareth (v. 58), this does not mean that the unbelief rendered Jesus powerless: “Note, however, that he did some.”¹⁴ Jesus did not cast his pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6).

What a privilege it was that the King of the heavenly kingdom should make his home in Nazareth! Also,

⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 383.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 227.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 549.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:213–14.

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 549–50.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 553.

what foolishness it was that the people of Nazareth did not recognize him. In these two sections, we see the contrast that Jesus spoke about at the beginning of the chapter: “For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 13:12). Disciples of the kingdom will increasingly grow in their knowledge of the kingdom, while those who despise the kingdom will lose even the access that they have.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a “scribe” (v. 52)? What does it mean to be “trained for the kingdom of heaven” (v. 52)? What does a “master of a house” do, according to the parable in v. 52? What does Jesus mean when he talks about what is new and what is old in the treasures of a kingdom disciple? How does this parable shape our understanding of the purpose of learning in the kingdom? Why is Jesus not satisfied if we learn for our own sake only?
2. How are you equipped to teach others about what you have learned of the kingdom? Who has played a role in discipling you up to this point? How competent do you feel to teach others? Whom has God put in your life for you to lead spiritually in some sense? How well are you stewarding the opportunities that he has given you to teach and lead others? What is one way that you could take a step forward in obedience as a kingdom disciple?
3. What astonished the people of Nazareth, where he was teaching in the synagogue (v. 54)? Why did the people bring up his trade? Why did people bring up his family? How might those facts have enhanced their wonder and adoration at the wisdom and mighty works of Jesus? How instead did they cite those facts in order to despise him and to reject the kingdom about which he was preaching?
4. Is there anything about Jesus’ humility that leads you to despise his kingdom? Do you wish that his kingdom could be more outwardly impressive, especially in the eyes of his enemies? Do you wish that he would more forcefully compel his enemies to submit now? Is there anything about Jesus’ church that leads you to despise his kingdom? Is there any way that you disdain the company of those whom Jesus came to save?