

C I N E M A T I C T H E O L O G Y

MODERN
PARABLES[™]

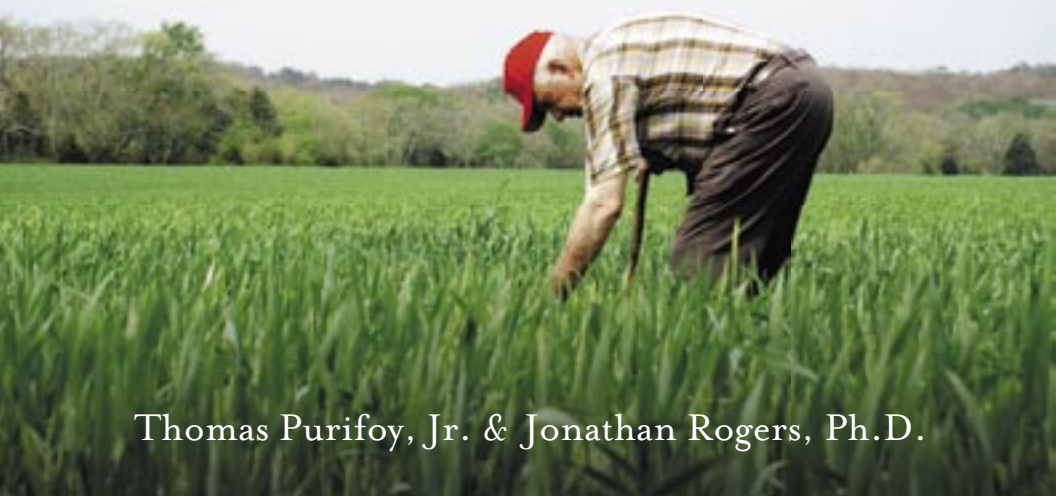
LIVING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

V O L U M E I


Student Book

S A M P L E : L E S S O N 1

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Matthew 13:44

LESSON ONE

Hidden Treasure

UNDERSTANDING THE PARABLE

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. MATT 13:44

Introduction:

There is a story about a major oil company that drilled some test wells in Florida's largely agricultural and rural Santa Rosa County in the 1970's. After the results came in, they announced that the wells were non-productive. The company then had agents go around inconspicuously and buy up land and oil rights from the farmers for very little money. One farmer, thought to be a bit crazy because of his eccentric ways, decided there really was oil under his land and decided to keep his farm and oil rights. He tried to convince others to do the same, but no one would listen to him.

After the oil company had bought up most of the rights for pennies on the dollar, they returned to the area and started extracting barrels upon barrels of oil from the land. The "crazy" farmer then sold his land and rights for a fortune and became a millionaire.¹

Stories about an underdog thinking quickly and making a fortune as a result are exciting to hear. Throughout history and across cultures, there are similar accounts of average people suddenly happening on a priceless find, having to act quickly and cleverly to secure the treasure, then changing their lives forever because of it.

Jesus understood this delight. In telling the parable of the Hidden Treasure, he played on the universal desire to see one's life suddenly transformed into something wonderful.

The Background of Hidden Treasure

The parable of the Hidden Treasure is one Jesus' shortest parables. Matthew records it for us in chapter 13 along with the other great parables explaining the Kingdom of God (e.g., the sower, the wheat & the tares, and the mustard seed, among others).

In providing the historical setting of the parable, Matthew tells us that "Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore." (Matt 13:1-2) Jesus would have been speaking to a crowd made up of some Pharisees (with whom he had argued earlier in the day) as well as many local peasants from the surrounding countryside. All of them had traveled to hear what this new teacher (or rabbi) had to say.

It was not unusual for Jewish rabbis to speak in parables. In fact, the Hebrew prophets and teachers of old had developed this particular form through their unique understanding of the way God had created the world. They recognized that some truths can best be explained in stories.² It's not hard to understand why: parables work in the familiar world of the everyday, taking abstract concepts such as loving God and loving one's neighbor, and putting flesh on them. This recognition that there *must* be a relationship between theology and reality is an important aspect of true, Biblical religion.

But if it wasn't unusual to hear rabbis speak in parables, it *was* unusual for a rabbi not to explain exactly what the parable meant after telling it. There were a few exceptions, but Jesus typically didn't explain Himself. In fact, during this particular preaching time, Matthew tells us that He spoke to this crowd only in parables and "did not say anything without using a parable." (Matt 13:34) Jesus' method concerned his disciples; they asked Him why it was that He spoke to the people in parables (Matt 13:10).

His answer was a bit surprising.

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

As we saw in the Introduction, the central theme of Jesus' teaching ministry was to explain the Kingdom of God. Although His teaching method was one with which His first-century listeners were familiar, there was more to the method than they realized. Jesus knew that the parable form perfectly emphasized what He wanted to teach: that is, how *the spiritual Kingdom of God is pressing into and transforming the natural world of the here and now*.³

To Jesus, the Kingdom of God was about how His redemptive action was going to affect the daily, individual lives of His followers both in the present and the future. The parables have that as their central concern.

Yet Jesus understood that spiritual things are often difficult to comprehend. What is the Kingdom really worth? What does it mean to receive God's grace? How does repentance work? What is love? By using the parables as comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms, Jesus was creating a series of doors through which His listeners could step and actually *enter into* new understanding about His Kingdom. As one writer has put it, the parables are nothing less than "spiritual discoveries" about the way God's creation truly works.⁴

But Jesus' parables had a catch to them.

In answering their question, Jesus explained to His disciples that, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” (Mark 4:10-12)

In other words, Jesus was saying, ‘I’m speaking in parables so they won’t easily understand.’”

Why did Jesus want the truth veiled from so many of His hearers? And what was the “secret” He was referring to?

It’s important to recognize that Jesus’ first-century Jewish audience already had strong opinions about the Kingdom of God. Just as Christians today hold very strong opinions about the second coming of Christ, so too did the first-century Jews about the coming of the Messiah. From their interpretation of the Old Testament, everyone expected a powerful Messiah to come suddenly, wipe out the Roman oppressors, then quickly set up a magnificent, visible kingdom here on earth. Luke reveals this popular mentality when he writes: “[Jesus] went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” (Luke 19:11)

The primary problem with this popular interpretation was that it was wrong. In complete disregard of everyone’s assumptions and expectations, God sent a suffering servant to establish a spiritual kingdom that would slowly grow to fill “the entire earth” (Dan 2:35). This true kingdom would certainly have physical manifestations – but not those assumed by Jesus’ audience.

That was the secret. *Unless one understood that Jesus and His unique ministry were what the parables were talking about, then one could not understand His parables.*⁵ The secret that had been revealed to the disciples was Jesus Himself and His unexpected method of redemption. As God prophesied in Isaiah (and was quoted by Paul in Romans), “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men

to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” (Romans 9:33/Isaiah 8:14) Many people of Jesus’ day stumbled and fell over what Jesus appeared to be: a gentle man, a humble man, a powerless man. Because so many people rejected Jesus as the Son of God, they were “ever seeing, but never understanding.”

This brings us to a final reason why Jesus taught in parables. Parables are the perfect method for sneaking past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God. By creating a world that we listeners willingly enter into, we check our preconceived notions at the door. Of course, once inside the world, we find ourselves interested and often convicted by the actions of the fictional characters. This can make hearers angry and push them to reject Jesus’ message entirely (as many Pharisees often did); it can leave people scratching their heads (as many peasants often did); or it can drive people to true change.

In sum, Jesus taught in parables because they:

- 1 Were familiar to His audience,
- 2 Could communicate the truth quickly and effectively,
- 3 Used the relationship between the natural and spiritual realms to make complex ideas easy to understand,
- 4 Veiled the truth from those who did not recognize His unique ministry, and
- 5 Created a fictional world that slipped past prejudices and misconceptions concerning the Kingdom of God.

We see all this happening perfectly in the parable of the hidden treasure.

Exploring Hidden Treasure

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. MATT 13:44

Names of the Kingdom

The kingdom of heaven...

We stated earlier that Jesus used the parables to teach about the Kingdom of God. But Matthew quotes Jesus as saying “kingdom of heaven,” not “kingdom of God.” There is only one Kingdom, but the gospel writers do not always use the same phrase when referring to it. Matthew primarily uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” (although he does use “kingdom of God” 4 times), whereas Mark and Luke always use the phrase “kingdom of God.” Why is this?

Since the gospels were all written in Greek, we can be sure that Jesus – who spoke Aramaic – used neither of these phrases exactly. Rather the writers of the gospel were interpreting the Aramaic phrase that Jesus used and translating it into Greek. Matthew was writing to a more Jewish audience who, in accordance with their religious history, avoided using the actual name of God. It was therefore more reverent to say “kingdom of heaven” with ‘heaven’ indirectly referring to God Himself. Since Mark and Luke were writing to predominantly non-Jewish audiences, they used the phrase that would be least confusing. For the sake of simplicity, this study will quote Matthew accurately but will always refer to God’s Kingdom as the Kingdom of God.

Comparing the Kingdom

...is like...

Jesus spent a lot of His ministry talking about the Kingdom. But at no time in any of the gospels did He define exactly what He meant by the Kingdom of God. Instead, He just took the well-used phrase and applied new comparisons and teachings to it. He clearly expected His followers to be able to figure out what He was talking about.

We said in the Introduction that parables *are comparisons between the natural and spiritual realms that Jesus uses to teach His followers different aspects of the Kingdom of God*. But how exactly do these comparisons work?

That's not easy to answer. In the only recorded instances when Jesus explained parables to His disciples (just three times), His method of comparison follows the lines of a simple allegory. An allegory is a type of story where the different characters and elements stand for things outside the world of the story. The most famous Christian allegory is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which includes characters named "Christian," "Mr. Worldly Wiseman," "Mr. Legality" and places named "Hill Difficulty" or "Doubting Castle." Bunyan did not leave much to the imagination to figure out what the characters and places were supposed to represent.

In the three recorded instances, Jesus is just as detailed about the parallels between the parable and the spiritual world. For instance, in explaining the parable of the Tares and the Weeds (Matt 13: 24-30) He said, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels." (Matt 13:37-39)

This is pretty detailed. It's also straightforward allegory. Does this mean that Jesus used allegory this detailed in all his parables? Again, that's hard to say. There is a long history of allegorical interpretation of the parables stretching back to the earliest centuries of the Christian era. The problem with most

of the interpretations is that on many details few people can seem to agree. For thousands of years the church has created complex comparisons that don't always last beyond that period of church history.

What does that mean for us? It's clear that Jesus was making comparisons with the parables and that they were usually simple comparisons. In light of that, keeping comparisons simple usually results in general agreement *and* seems to make better interpretational sense. But how do we find simplicity in stories that are so famously *not* straightforward? Thankfully the Gospel writers were usually straightforward in depicting the context in which Jesus told His parables—*where, to whom, why*. The context frequently yields important clues as to what Jesus meant to communicate.

For instance the parable of the Prodigal Son was told to a group of tax collectors and sinners together with a group of Pharisees. In light of that it makes sense that the points of comparison would be between the younger son as a sinner and the older son as a self-righteous law-abider. Often the gospel writers or Jesus will make hints as to how we should be interpreting the parables. Understanding the context is therefore most valuable to seeing how the comparisons work out.

Of course just “getting” the comparison does not mean that we understand the parable. In fact, linking the dots and just stopping there could be one of the worst things we could do. Rather Jesus wants us to enter into and engage the story itself. In most cases, one of the points of comparison should be to ourselves.

A Question of Value

...treasure hidden in a field.

Today, most people would consider a bank the safest place to store something valuable. But not so two thousand years ago. In the Middle East, where war was normally just over the horizon and invaders as regular as the spring rain, it was necessary to store one's treasures in places that were virtually impossible for others to locate. Even today there's nothing quite as unassuming and (at least before the advent of metal detectors) as inscrutable as a big field.

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, tells us in his *Antiquities* that the people of his day often used fields to hide their treasures before invaders arrived. But it was also possible for those same people to be killed in warfare and their secret to die with them. In fact, although it was probably rare, finding treasure in a field would have happened from time to time; at least often enough for Jesus' listeners to nod with understanding at His plot. After all, if the owner in the story didn't know about the treasure (and he would never had sold his property had he known about it), then the land had clearly changed hands a few times before coming into his possession.

But what was this treasure? Jesus didn't say but we can surmise it would have been precious metals and jewels, the things in that day and age that represented the best way to consolidate wealth as well as the easiest to hide. Whatever it was it was something that the finder knew instantly was of inestimable worth and that he had to have it.

This is the first point of comparison for the parable. As the context of Matthew 13 would show us, Jesus was making a direct comparison between the attributes of the Kingdom and those of a treasure; just as earlier He made exact comparisons between the kingdom and yeast, a net, a field, etc.. Following that comparison through, we can say that the Kingdom is valuable and priceless. But what is even more important is that because the Kingdom is so valuable, it *can transform the lives of those possessing it.*

This is where we pick up our film's main character, Jeff Smith. Jeff is just an average guy going about his business when he stumbles across oil bubbling up from the ground on the property he is showing. Just like the field in the parable, the ugly piece of property appears to be devoid of any value. It's the kind of property you'd pass by and think in your mind how worthless it appears. Although the original parable does not say the field appeared to be worthless, in that day and age, fields were literally everywhere. Yes, they were valuable – but only as valuable as what they could be used for. No field was going to change anyone's life.

That is, unless there was treasure buried under it. And for our point of comparison, there are few things worth more money in our day than large supplies of crude oil. Everyone knows that oil fields have made countless millionaires – and Jeff, though it takes him a moment to figure it out, is not slow to realize what it means to him. In Jesus' day there was a big gap between the rich and the poor. Treasure to a peasant would mean a radical change of lifestyle, a complete transformation into something previously impossible, a new world unexpectedly opening up to him.

Let's also talk about the idea of being "hidden." This treasure is not obvious, not there for all to see. In fact, nearly everyone would overlook it. What is Jesus telling us about the Kingdom with this? That it is not out in plain view for all to comprehend? That it could be missed by thousands? That it is somehow invisible? (Luke 17:20) And what does that mean for those not in the Kingdom?

Finders Keepers

When a man found it...

The first-century listener would immediately know the kind of man who spent time in fields. Not being an owner himself,

the man was likely a simple laborer who had been hired to work in that field. He would not have been a rich man; rich men didn't work in fields. And it would have been understood by the listeners that he was working since he *uncovers* the treasure. The kind of worker who uncovers things in a field is likely either plowing or digging: tough work by any measure. Moreover, it's work done by a man closer to the bottom of the economic scale.

This is where we find Jeff Smith. He's not a particularly successful real estate agent, but he works hard. He would be considered on the lower side of middle class: he has a family, a mortgage, and a car payment – with one job to support it all. When he's out trying to sell this piece of land, he's not expecting to get rich doing it.

And this is what is so interesting about this parable: it is seemingly accidental that the man stumbles upon the treasure. It almost reveals itself to him – he is doing nothing to look for it other than going about his daily routine.

Again, what is Jesus telling us about the Kingdom? Although it is hidden from many, it somehow reveals itself to certain people in their course of daily life. It appears that the Kingdom presents itself suddenly in front of unsuspecting eyes – and then requires an immediate, life-changing decision.

Quick Thinking

...he hid it again...

Here begins the crux of the parable. The man could potentially do any number of things after finding the treasure: he could tell the owner, he could ignore it, he could leave it uncovered. But he realizes what it means to him and hatches a plan to acquire it for himself. By choosing to hide it, he begins to take action to possess the treasure.

This is what the parable of the hidden treasure is all about: when an extraordinary treasure presents itself to someone, that person must choose to act to acquire the treasure. Passivity is useless here. According to Jesus, the Kingdom often reveals itself to people unexpectedly in their daily lives. And unless they take immediate action to acquire it for themselves, they cannot have it.

Of course a number of modern readers will think that the man is being unethical. 'Shouldn't he inform the owner of the field?' Yet here again we see an important difference between our culture and theirs: to the first-century middle-easterner, shrewdness was equated to wisdom. The man was doing nothing illegal. It was the owner's responsibility to know what was his.

Even more, it is expected that when the Kingdom reveals itself to someone, he will have the wisdom to recognize it and know what to do about it. The Bible consistently teaches that shrewdness is a valuable trait - not shrewdness that is outright deceptive, but a shrewdness that understands how to work a situation to one's advantage. After all, it is Jesus himself who tells us to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16). If this seems unusual to us, perhaps it's because we don't truly understand how Jesus wants us to act in the world. In the case of the hidden treasure, He clearly wants us to emulate the man who does everything in his power to take hold of the treasure in front of him.

The Right Reaction

...then in his joy...

The man's reaction shows us how we should react to the Kingdom. Think of Jeff's bursting elation at realizing what owning the field could mean to him. This joy - an exuberance that overflows boundaries - is what the Kingdom is really about. Most people remember watching Ed McMahon showing up

on someone's doorstep and announcing that they just won the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. People would scream, faint, jump up and down, hug Ed – they were bursting with joy at the prospect.

Why?

Because they immediately knew that their lives were going to be changed forever. This is the strong dynamic at the heart of the parable that we cannot overlook. Possessing the Kingdom is not like having a priceless ring or watch that we show off with pride. Rather, *possessing the kingdom is about radical life-change. The emotions that accompany it spring from the knowledge that everything is going to be better because of what the Kingdom makes possible.* The joy is not simply about the treasure, but about what the treasure represents: a completely new life.

Selling Everything

...went and sold all he had...

The man continues to act aggressively. It seems as if Jesus is implying that the kingdom does not sit idly by and wait; rather, it must be taken aggressively and by forceful action. He says as much when he tells us that "forceful men lay hold of it." (Matt 11:12) The Kingdom pushes people to make a decision; yet for those to whom the Kingdom has been revealed, it is an easy choice. In fact, they realize they would be foolish to do anything else.

Selling everything may seem foolhardy on the surface. Jeff runs up against this with his wife and his friends. We are assuming that the family and relations of the man in the parable thought he was crazy, perhaps even after they understood exactly what he was gaining; to those who haven't actually seen the treasure, it might seem very risky.

Please note that the original parable does not go into these details. Rather, they have been added into the film as

reflections on the story based on things Jesus tells us in other places about the influences of family and possessions on the decision to pursue the Kingdom (Luke 9:59-61; Mark 10:29-30).

After all, what is “all he had” a comparison to? In numerous places Jesus tells us that our worldly attachments have to be given up for us to acquire the Kingdom. Furthermore he says that if we do not give them up, they will actually keep us from entering the Kingdom: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:24-25) And “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33)

To press this further, it may superficially appear that the man is sacrificing everything to gain the Kingdom. And in one sense, that is true – but is it really a sacrifice? Or is he merely giving up what little he has to gain so much more? Although it may appear to the outside world that a disciple is giving up everything for a foolish dream, yet the disciple understands that what he is gaining is worth infinitely more than he is giving up.

This is an important point since some commentators debate whether this parable is about the value of the kingdom or the cost of discipleship. In our opinion, these categories do not completely capture the thrust of the parable, which is: *the disciple must take immediate action to sell everything to gain the Kingdom for himself, both in light of its value and in spite of its cost. It is the action of the man that must be the center of our thinking.*

The Kingdom may be of infinite value, and it may cost us all that we have, *but unless we take action to acquire it then its worth is irrelevant to us. Everything pivots on gaining the Kingdom.*

The Buy of a Lifetime

...and bought that field.

Once he has enough money in hand, he immediately moves to close the transaction. After all, until he owns the field the treasure is not his. It is interesting to think that while he knows about the treasure, he does not possess it. Knowledge is not enough for possession. Had Jeff not taking the forceful action of convincing his wife, of selling everything, and of purchasing the field in spite of the advice of his friends, his life would have remained unchanged.

Everything comes down to the purchase: we acquire the Kingdom by transaction, an act of choosing and taking hold. Without that action, the Kingdom will elude us.

Summary

We have seen that the parable of the Hidden Treasure is primarily about the immediate action of the person who finds the Kingdom to gain it for himself, both in light of its value and in spite of its cost. Although it may appear to be an unwise decision from the world's eyes, it is the utmost wisdom to give up what is nearly worthless for something absolutely priceless. Such a situation demands quick thinking and even quicker action on the part of the potential disciple. After all, unless action is taken, it is possible that the treasure might be lost forever.

PARALLELS

ORIGINAL PARABLE	PARABLE FILM
Treasure is riches and wealth in the form of gold, jewels or precious objects.	Treasure is riches and wealth in the form of a large oil reserve.
Treasure is hidden in a field so not easily seen by people passing by.	Oil is underground and hidden so not easily seen by people passing by.

The field is a common, not particularly noteworthy, place.	The old property is a common, not particularly noteworthy, place.
The man was likely a laborer and not wealthy.	Jeff is an unsuccessful real estate agent and not wealthy.
The man is not looking for treasure, and it surprises him to find it.	Jeff is not looking for oil, and it surprises him to find it.
The man hides it again so no one else will find it.	Jeff covers up his tracks so no one else will find it.
The man is joyful over his find because he understands how the treasure could change his life.	Jeff is thrilled over his find because he understands how the oil could change his life.
The man returns to his home to prepare to sell his things.	Jeff returns to his home to prepare to sell his things.
The man sells everything he owns to gather enough money to buy the field.	Jeff sells everything he owns to gather enough money to buy the field.
The man purchases the field.	Jeff purchases the field.

Endnotes

- 1 As recounted by Andrew Ivestor from stories his uncle told after having lived near that area of Florida.
- 2 Brad Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Hendrickson, 1998) 4.
- 3 Geerhadus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church* (Eerdmans, 1958) 45.
- 4 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1992) 355. This is what Matthew means when he says Psalm 72:2 was fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 13:35). Jesus understood that there is a direct relationship between the natural and spiritual realms. After all, He created the natural realm and all that is in it. Certain aspects of the world we live in (for instance: sheep, marriage, seeds) were created so that they would mirror certain aspects of the spiritual realm (respectively: believers, the relationship between Christ and the Church, spiritual growth). This is not a coincidence. Jesus knew that He could go to this ready-made set of images and use them to guide his listeners easily through profound - and potentially complex - teachings about God, and man's relationship to Him.
- 5 Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (P&R, 1962) 123.