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# The Kingdom of heaven in a nutshell

## *An overview of Matthew 13*

*"The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way."*

Matthew 13:24-25

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### Introduction

When we speak of end-time mysteries, we are sadly also faced with the decay of the professing church over the centuries and the apostasy of the faith in the false church of the last days, Babylon the great (Rev. 17 and 18). As the perfect, spiritual body of Christ, the church is not subject to human failure, although it remains our individual and collective responsibility to truly hold fast to the Head (Col. 2:16-19). Only in this way can the truth of the one body be practically maintained. The body is not perfect in itself, but the Head is. And His work is perfect in that He forms the body in accordance with God's counsels and the work of the Holy Spirit.

So in connection with the truth of the body, we think first of all of the union of life of all His own with Christ, the Head of the body, which is indissoluble, while in the truth of the house of God our human responsibility is more important. The church has failed in its witness and the house of God has become like a great house, with vessels to honor but also to dishonor. In fact, evil teaching had already crept in at that time, for the apostle mentions some people who denied the truth of the resurrection. Such "vessels" were of no use to the Master of the house (2 Tim. 2:16-21).

Elsewhere Paul speaks of builders who had built with wood, hay and straw – that is, perishable and combustible material – on the firm foundation laid by the apostle himself (1 Cor. 3:9-17).

The Lord Himself already foretold these negative developments in the seven (actually: eight) parables of the Kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13). These are not merely parables, but secrets which can only be understood by true disciples of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:10-17; 34-35; 51-52). This is because the King has been rejected by His own people and a judgment of hardening has come upon the unbelieving nation until the restoration in the end-time (Rom. 11; 2 Cor. 3).

We find the turning point in Matthew 11 and 12. The Lord no longer recognizes the bond with natural Israel (Matt. 12:46-50). He henceforth acts as the Sower of the Word in the field of this world. In the parables of Matthew 13, He describes the results of His preaching, which He would later continue from heaven through His servants here on earth.<sup>1</sup>

## The parables of the Sower, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed and the leaven

The first four parables show that the Kingdom in its hidden form was going to be a mixture of good and evil in our day. Indeed, the evil one is also active and he snatches away the good seed (Matt. 13:19). Moreover, he also acts as a sower and he sows tares (or: weeds) in the midst of the wheat. Thus there is a mix of true believers and nominal believers, which will continue until the harvest time, i.e., the time of Christ's return.

In the third parable or mystery, we see that in this situation the Kingdom would become a great power here on earth, a tree providing room for the birds of the air. But the church should not covet earthly power, for that is contrary to its character as a people of strangers and pilgrims. Making room for the birds of the air is proof

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<sup>1</sup> A Dutch author, Johannes de Heer, once wrote a fine little book on the parables of Matthew 13, entitled "A bird's eye view of the Kingdom of heaven" (Het Zoeklicht, 1948). In it he explains, among other things, that leaven is never positively interpreted in Scripture (see above). Compare also W.E. Vine's "Expository Dictionary of New Testament words" under the keyword Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is usually identical with the Kingdom of heaven (of which only Matthew speaks), but the terms are not always interchangeable. Only true disciples can understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, which often has moral and spiritual features as well (Mark 4:10-12; Luke 17:20-21; John 3:3; Rom. 14:17).

of the activity of the evil one, who snatches away the seed of the Word (Matt. 13:31-32; cf. 13:4; Rev. 18:2).

The fourth parable shows that there would also be inward corruption (Matt. 13:33), and this occurs at the hands of a woman – the false prophetess in Thyatira according to Revelation 2:20. In the New Testament, leaven is always a picture of moral and doctrinal evil (see 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9). The three measures of meal speak of the pure revealed truth being corrupted by false doctrine. In the end-time, this leads to the appearance of the false church, the great harlot, Babylon the great (see Rev. 17 and 18).

### The hidden treasure, the pearl of great price and the dragnet

In the next three parables, we see more of the inner value of the Kingdom, namely the things that, despite its decay, would still be of lasting value to the King, who is now still hidden in the heavenly sanctuary ("hidden in God," says Col. 3:3-4). The treasure in the field and the pearl of great price speak respectively of the believing remnant from Israel that is still hidden, and of the church that has been gathered primarily from the nations but also from the Jewish people. Christ has purchased His own with the costly price of His life and blood.

The parable of the dragnet shows the result of the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom by the King's "brethren" during the time of the Great Tribulation (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 7:9-17). The fishermen, the evangelists, gather the good fish into vessels. In fact, this is also happening in our day, as true believers are gathered into local congregations through the preaching of the gospel of God's grace and nominal Christians are kept out. The gathering in vessels in this parable stands in contrast to the work of the angels, who at the end of the age will be concerned only with the removal of the wicked (Matt. 13:49-50).

### The parable of the householder

The brief parable of the householder, who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven, concludes this chapter. This is an addition to the series of seven mysteries related to the Kingdom, and it is an exhortation from Christ to continually bring out of our spiritual riches things new and old – which we possess in the Old and New Testament Scriptures (Matt. 13:51-52). The emphasis is on the new things revealed by the Lord and made known by the Spirit. In the Old Testament we often find illustrations of these truths.

