

RULES TO INTERPRET MATTHEW 13

Supplement to "The Kingdom Parables: Part 1"

**Pastor Andrew B. Pigott
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey
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For some of you, the sermon I will be preaching today will be controversial. Christians do not always agree on what the Bible says. That doesn't mean the Bible is wrong. It just means that men are imperfect. People can make mistakes in the way they interpret the Bible. Although the Bible is without error, it is possible for any one of us, including myself, to teach something that is wrong.

Today we will be looking at some parables taught by Jesus that are recorded in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. The way I will explain these parables will be different from the way some of you have heard them explained in the past. Thus, I believe it would be helpful for me to share with you the rules or guidelines I am using to interpret the meanings of these parables.

The first rule is that the simplest explanation is the best. Second, God's kingdom is eternal. The Church is eternal. However, the picture of the Church in the first four parables is not the way it is going to appear throughout eternity. After the Second Coming of Christ, things will change. But until the Second Coming of Christ, what we see in the first four parables is a true picture of the Church. The third rule that I would like to emphasize is that the symbols used in all these parables (as well as all the symbols of the Bible) are interrelated. What I mean is, for the most part, they are consistent in their meaning.

Let me mention these rules once again. First, the simplest explanation is the best. Christ's purpose in telling these stories is not to confuse us. He is not trying to put forth riddles; rather, He is trying to present truth in a way that people can understand and accept. For this reason, I believe that the simplest explanation is usually the best.

Second, the picture of the kingdom as portrayed through the first four parables is temporal. And to this, I only want to add one thing. That is, when this world as we know it comes to an end, the Church as seen through the naked eye will have an altogether different appearance. It will be a perfect Church.

In regard to the third rule, I must emphasize one principle; namely, the safest way to interpret scripture is through scripture. We must avoid taking things out of their context.

The symbols that are mentioned in the first four parables are many. They include a sower, the seed, birds, a field, the Lord of the field, the sun, weeds, fruit, the enemy, the harvesters, a tree, yeast, dough, and a woman. Although some of these symbols are used only once in these kingdom parables, we also find a lot of repetition. Unless there is a special explanation to the contrary, the symbols represent the same meaning from one parable to the next.

For example, in the story of the sower, the story of the weeds, and the story of the mustard seed—in these three parables—we find the symbol of a sower. In all three cases, the sower represents the Son of Man who is Jesus Christ. In these three parables, we also find the symbol of seed. In all cases, the seed is a picture of people who have received the Word of God in their hearts. The meaning is consistent in all three parables; however, in the case of the parable of the weeds, Jesus gives special explanation that there is another kind of seed; namely, the bad seed planted by the enemy. In the parable of the mustard seed, no such explanation is found, so we assume that the mustard seed also represents people who have received the word of God in their hearts.

In the parable of the sower we see birds. In the parable of the mustard seed we also see birds. If birds represent Satan or evil in the one parable, then they should have the same meaning in the next.

There are some symbols that are not repeated, neither are they explained. However, in other places in the Bible we can find the same symbols. For example, in other places in the Bible, large trees symbolize worldly power and yeast represents evil. In Matthew 13, these symbols have the same meaning.

I have tried to follow these rules as I have prepared for today's sermon. Try to keep them in mind as you listen.