

The Kingdom in Parables

Matthew 13 · A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Matthew

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover the third great discourse: seven parables that answer the question chapters 11–12 raised. If the King has come, why is his kingdom resistible, small, hidden, and mixed? Because in its present season the kingdom grows like seed, hides like leaven, and gathers weeds with wheat until a harvest that belongs to God alone. They also discover why Jesus teaches in parables at all, and what the kingdom is worth to the one who finds it.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church as the kingdom's present, mixed form: a field of wheat and weeds, a net of every kind of fish, holy in her Lord while clasping sinners to her bosom. Tonight's steelman meets the "invisible church of the truly saved" head on, from Jesus' own parables.

What You Need to Know

Matthew 13 is the hinge of the Gospel. After the mounting rejection of chapters 11–12, Jesus changes his teaching method: "that same day" he sits in a boat and speaks to the crowds only in parables. When the disciples ask why, his answer (13:10–17, quoting Isaiah 6:9–10) is sobering: parables both reveal and conceal. To the open they give the secrets of the kingdom in unforgettable images; to the closed they are riddles that pass through without landing. A parable is a mirror and a judgment at once: what you hear in it reveals what your heart has become. Jesus ends the Isaiah quotation with a beatitude for the disciples' eyes and ears, and Matthew adds his own fulfillment citation at 13:35, from Psalm 78:2: I will open my mouth in parables.

The sower comes first and is the key to all the rest; Jesus says as much in Mark's parallel. The seed is the word of the kingdom, and the variable is never the seed but the soil: the hard path, the shallow rock, the thorny heart choked by cares and riches, and the good soil that hears, understands, and bears fruit at thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. It quietly answers chapter 11–12's scandal: the word really was preached and really was rejected, and the fault lay in soils, not in the Sower.

The weeds among the wheat (13:24–30, interpreted at 13:36–43) is tonight's doctrinal center. An enemy sows weeds, likely darnel, which mimics wheat until the heads form, through a field the master planted. The servants' instinct is ours: pull them up now. The master forbids it: uprooting now would tear out wheat with the weeds, and sorting belongs to the harvesters at the close of the age. Jesus' interpretation makes the field the world and the kingdom in its present form a mixed reality, purified only at the end. The dragnet (13:47–50) says the same in one image: the net gathers fish of every kind, and the sorting happens on the shore, at the end, by angels. Twice in one chapter Jesus describes the kingdom's present season as mixed, a mixture the King permits until the harvest, and reserves the separating to God.

The mustard seed and the leaven form a pair about scale and visibility: the smallest of seeds becomes a tree where birds nest, an image drawn from Ezekiel's great cedar sheltering the birds of every wing, and a pinch of leaven silently works through three measures of flour, enough dough to feed a village. Small

beginnings, unstoppable growth, hidden operation. The treasure and the pearl form a second pair about worth: the finder of each sells everything he has, and the treasure-finder does it “in his joy.” The kingdom does not extract a sacrifice; it reveals a bargain.

The chapter closes with the scribe “trained for the kingdom of heaven,” who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (13:52), as close to a self-portrait as Matthew ever paints, and a fair description of what this study does every week, reading the new Gospel with the old Scriptures open beside it. Then Nazareth takes offense at the carpenter’s son, and “he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.” The parable of the soils walks straight out of the story and into his hometown.

A housekeeping note that matters: end tonight by telling the group to bring their sealed Take-Home Sheet 1 next week, without explaining why. Build the anticipation; next session is Caesarea Philippi.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Isaiah 6:9–10.** The hardening commission given to Isaiah, quoted in full at 13:14–15: hearing without understanding. Parables enact this judgment while still holding the door open.
- **Psalm 78:2.** “I will open my mouth in parables”: Matthew’s fulfillment citation at 13:35. Psalm 78 retells Israel’s whole story as a parable; Jesus does the same for the kingdom.
- **Ezekiel 17:22–24; 31:6.** The great tree in whose branches the birds of every sort nest: the backdrop of the mustard seed, where Israel’s prophetic image of a kingdom sheltering the nations is claimed for a garden herb grown large.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Augustine (Sermons on the Gospels)

Preaching on the weeds against the Donatists, who demanded a Church of the pure, Augustine counsels patience with the mixed field: those who are weeds today may be wheat tomorrow, and the reckless uprooter destroys what God is still growing. The separation is certain, but it belongs to the harvest and the Harvester, not to us.

Voices of the Church: St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Matthew)

Chrysostom points to the mustard seed and the leaven as prophecies the Church itself now proves: from twelve obscure men the faith has filled the world, as quietly and irresistibly as leaven works through dough. The smallness of the beginning, he says, is the demonstration of the power.

Voices of the Church: St. Gregory the Great (Forty Gospel Homilies, Homily 11)

Gregory reads the treasure as the desire for heaven, and the field in which it lies hidden as the discipline of the heavenly life. The finder hides what he has found because a longing paraded before human praise lies open to plunder by malicious spirits, as a treasure carried openly on the road invites robbers. Guarded in hiddenness, the desire is kept safe, and in his joy he sells all he has and buys the field: what looks from outside like renunciation is, from inside, the shrewdest purchase

ever made.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 543–546.** Everyone is called to enter the kingdom, which belongs to the poor and the little ones; Jesus' parables invite hearers into the kingdom's mystery and demand a radical choice: to gain it, one must give everything. Words are not enough; deeds are required.
- **CCC 827.** The Church, holy in her Lord, clasps sinners to her bosom and is always in need of purification; in everyone, weeds and good grain grow together until the end of time. This article quotes tonight's parable directly.
- **CCC 1036.** The parables' harvest imagery grounds the Church's sober preaching on judgment: the sorting at the close of the age is real, and the time to become wheat is now.

Thread Watch

- **Emmanuel thread (develop, quietly).** The leaven is IN the dough, the treasure IN the field: the kingdom's presence in this season is hidden but real, working from inside. God-with-us has become God-within-the-ordinary.
- **Fulfillment thread (develop).** One more citation for the count: Psalm 78:2 at 13:35. The scribe of 13:52, bringing out things new and old, is also this whole study's method in one verse.
- **Sealed guess (activate).** Close the session with the instruction: bring your sealed Take-Home Sheet 1 next week. Answer no questions about why. Anticipation is part of the payoff.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain why Jesus teaches in parables and how a parable both reveals and conceals.
2. Participants can walk through the four soils and name their own current soil honestly.
3. Participants discover that the wheat-and-weeds and the dragnet describe a kingdom that remains mixed under the King's patient permission until the harvest, and hear the strongest invisible-church objection answered from these parables.
4. Participants can articulate the paired logic of mustard seed and leaven (scale) and treasure and pearl (worth).
5. Participants leave with their sealed sheet assignment for next week and rising anticipation.

Timing for 90 Minutes

Win 15 min · Build 55 min · Send and Live It 12 min · Prayer and sealed-sheet instruction 8 min. If running long, the pre-chosen cuts are, in order: drop the Dig Deeper box on the scribe trained for the kingdom (saves about 4 minutes), then treat the treasure and pearl in a single question rather than two movements (saves about 5 minutes). Do not cut the weeds-and-wheat sequence or the steelman chain, and do not skip the sealed-sheet instruction.

EMMANUEL · SESSION 7 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Kingdom in Parables

Matthew 13 · 90 Minutes

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you sat in a boat and told stories, and two thousand years later the stories are still telling us. Give us ears to hear tonight. Break up our hard paths, deepen our shallow places, pull the thorns that choke your word, and make us good soil, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What story, from a book, a movie, or your family, has actually changed how you live? Why do stories get past our defenses when arguments cannot?
2. Which of the seven parables you read this week did you understand least? Just name it; we may get to it.

Build (55 minutes)

Why Parables?

1. Read Matthew 13:10–17. The disciples ask the question we would ask: why parables? **Live discovery:** Jesus answers from Isaiah's commissioning; have someone find Isaiah 6:8–10 and read it. What double work does a parable do, according to Jesus? What determines whether a parable opens or closes to a hearer?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Parables reveal and conceal at once. To the open, they carry the secrets of the kingdom in images that lodge for life; to the closed, they are riddles that pass through without effect, enacting Isaiah's grim commission of hearing without understanding. The variable is the hearer's heart: a parable is a mirror, and what you hear in it reveals what you have become. Yet the quotation itself ends with the possibility of turning and being healed (13:15), and it is the hearers who have closed their own eyes. Pastorally, then, we may add a hope the text does not state outright: a riddle can be returned to, and a door left ajar can still be pushed. And Jesus blesses the disciples' eyes and ears: prophets and righteous men longed to see what they see.

Four Soils, One Seed

2. Read Matthew 13:3–9 and its interpretation in 13:18–23. Name the four soils and what defeats the seed in each of the first three. What is the one variable in this parable, and what does that answer about the rejection we watched gather in chapters 11 and 12? Then the personal question, for silent reflection only: which soil are you this season?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The path (the evil one snatches what was never understood), the rocky ground (joy without root, gone at the first trouble), the thorns (the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke it), and the good soil (hears, understands, bears fruit at thirty, sixty, a hundredfold). The seed is never the variable; the soil is. This quietly answers the scandal of chapters 11–12: the word was truly preached and truly rejected, and the failure was in soils, not in the Sower. Leave the last question in silence; soil can be worked, and that is what Lent, confession, and this study are for.

The Field Nobody Gets to Weed

3. Read Matthew 13:24–30, then Jesus' own interpretation in 13:36–43. Answer strictly from the text: who sowed the good seed, who sowed the weeds, what do the servants want to do, why does the master forbid it, and who finally does the sorting, when? Then read the dragnet in 13:47–50: what does the net gather, and where does the sorting happen?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The Son of man sows good seed; the enemy, the devil, oversows weeds while men sleep. The servants want to purge the field immediately; the master forbids it because uprooting now would tear out wheat with the weeds, and he reserves the sorting for the harvesters, the angels, at the close of the age. The dragnet gathers fish of every kind, and the sorting happens afterward, on the shore, at the end. Twice in one chapter, Jesus describes the kingdom's present season as mixed, permitted so by the King until the harvest, with the separating reserved to God. Hold this; it is about to matter.

Build Then Press: Is the True Church Invisible?

The Strongest Protestant Reading, Given at Full Strength

A serious strand of Protestant theology, running from the Reformers through the classic confessions, distinguishes the invisible Church from the visible. The visible church, on this account, is real and necessary: it preaches the word, administers the sacraments, and is admittedly a mixed body containing hypocrites and nominal believers. But the true Church, the Church of the creed, is invisible: the whole company of the elect of every age, known with certainty to God alone, scattered through all the visible communions and coinciding exactly with none of them. No institution you can locate on a map, Catholic or otherwise, may simply claim to be the one Church Christ founded; at best it is a more or less faithful outpost of a body only God can see. History seems to testify for the objection: scandalous popes, corrupt clergy, lukewarm pews. Notice that this position does not demand a pure visible community; it denies that any visible community as such is the Church. It is theologically serious, and every scandal in Catholic history hands it fresh ammunition. Let it stand at full strength.

4. Now press with the parables still open in front of you. According to Jesus, is the mixed condition of the kingdom's field a corruption of his plan or a description of it? Who wanted the field purified immediately, and whose side of that argument does the invisible-church instinct resemble? What does the master say happens to wheat when servants weed on their own authority?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Jesus himself describes the kingdom in this age as a mixed field and a mixed net, and he attributes the mixture to enemy action his own patience tolerates until harvest. The demand for an immediately pure community is in the parable, on the lips of the servants, and the master overrules it: pull the weeds now and you tear out wheat, because only the harvest reveals which is which, and some of today's weeds, as St. Augustine preached against the Donatists, are tomorrow's wheat. A Church without sinners is promised, at the close of the age, by angels; a Church without sinners now would require exactly the premature uprooting the master forbids.

Concede what the objection guards, because it is true: holiness matters, scandal is real evil, and no Catholic may shrug at corruption. The Catechism says it without flinching: the Church clasps sinners to her bosom and is always in need of purification (CCC 827). But sinners in the visible Church do not refute her claim; they confirm her Lord's own description of the kingdom's present form. The invisible-church theory solves the scandal of the weeds by relocating the kingdom out of history's one planted field, and the parable never makes that move; the master keeps the one field and defers the sorting. Jesus says plainly that the field is the world (13:38); the Church is the kingdom's present form within that world, and she reads the parable's logic as her own: in everyone, weeds and good grain grow together until the end of time (CCC 827). The Church you can find on a map, with sinners at her altars from the beginning, is not disproved by that mixture; she is living inside the season her Lord described, and he has asked for our patience with her, and her patience with us.

Notice what the strongest form of the objection concedes: the visible church is mixed, exactly as the parables say. The remaining dispute is whether the Church Christ founded can be identified with any visible body at all. Here the parables still speak. The kingdom in this age is one field the master planted, one net let down, one tree the birds can find and nest in; Jesus does not answer the scandal of the weeds by relocating the kingdom into invisibility, he keeps the one planted, findable field and defers the sorting. And Matthew's Jesus founds something locatable: a church built on Peter (16:18) to which a brother's sin can be told (18:17), which no purely invisible fellowship could ever hear. Catholic teaching agrees that God alone knows with certainty who will be gathered as wheat; what it denies is that the Church of the creed can be severed from the visible body Christ founded, for the two form one reality, and grace runs through the visible means he left.

Small, Hidden, and Worth Everything

5. Read Matthew 13:31–33. What do the mustard seed and the leaven each say about how the kingdom grows? **Live discovery:** the full-grown tree with birds nesting is borrowed furniture; have someone find Ezekiel 17:22–24 and read it. What was Ezekiel's tree, and what is Jesus claiming for his mustard plant?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The mustard seed: smallest of beginnings, disproportionate growth, until the birds of the air, in Ezekiel an image of the nations, nest in its branches. Ezekiel's sprig planted by God on Israel's mountain height was the restored Davidic kingdom sheltering every wing; Jesus claims that promise for the movement currently consisting of twelve men in a boat. The leaven adds the

manner: hidden inside the dough, working silently, unstoppable, through three measures of flour, enough to feed a village. St. John Chrysostom's point stands: twenty centuries later, the size of the tree is itself the argument.

6. Read Matthew 13:44–46. In both tiny parables a man sells everything he has. What one word in the treasure parable keeps this from being a story about grim sacrifice? And what is the difference between the two finders?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

“In his joy.” The finder does not grit his teeth and pay a terrible price; he liquidates everything, delighted, because he knows what the field is worth. The kingdom does not extract a sacrifice; it reveals a bargain. The pearl merchant is explicitly searching; the treasure-finder is simply said to find, and the scene suggests a discovery he was not looking for. The kingdom seems to be found both ways, by surprise and by long seeking, and it costs both finders the same happy everything.

Dig Deeper: The Scribe with Two Treasures

Matthew 13:52 blesses the scribe trained for the kingdom, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. It is as close to a self-portrait as the evangelist paints, and it is also this study's method in a single verse: every week we read the new Gospel with the old Scriptures open beside it, and each keeps unlocking the other.

Send (12 minutes)

1. Where has scandal or the sin of Christians, maybe your own, tempted you to give up on the visible Church? What changes if the mixed field is the Master's own description rather than evidence against him?
2. The finders sold everything in joy. What are you still holding that keeps the field unpurchased, and what would selling it look like this month?

Live It This Week

- Reread the parable you understood least, once a day, and let it interrogate you rather than the reverse.
- Pray for one “weed”, someone whose place in the Church scandalizes or irritates you, remembering that today's weeds may be tomorrow's wheat, and that someone may be praying the same way about you.
- Do one hidden, leaven-like act inside an ordinary structure of your life: your kitchen, your shop floor, your group chat. Tell no one; let it work.

Closing Prayer

Lord of the harvest, your kingdom is smaller than we wanted and greater than we dreamed: a seed, a pinch of leaven, a treasure under ordinary ground. Give us patience with your mixed field and mercy on

our fellow weeds, joy enough to sell everything, and good soil for your word. And gather us, at the close of the age, shining like the sun in the kingdom of our Father. Amen.

Before You Leave

Give this instruction and answer no questions about it: bring your sealed Take-Home Sheet 1 next week. If anyone has lost theirs, tell them to come anyway; next week they will understand why.

Scripture Memory

Matthew 13:44 (RSV2CE): *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”*

EMMANUEL · SESSION 7 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every Passage in Order of Use

The Kingdom in Parables · Matthew 13

Primary Text

- Matthew 13:10–17 · Matthew 13:3–9 with 13:18–23 · Matthew 13:24–30 with 13:36–43 · Matthew 13:47–50
- Matthew 13:31–33 · Matthew 13:44–46 · Matthew 13:52 · Matthew 13:53–58

Live Discovery Passages

- Isaiah 6:8–10 (why parables) · Ezekiel 17:22–24 (the tree and the birds)

Background Passages

- Psalm 78:2 (quoted at 13:35) · Ezekiel 31:6 (the great cedar) · CCC 827 text for the steelman landing

Catechism

- CCC 543–546 · CCC 827 · CCC 1036

Memory Verse

- Matthew 13:44

Do Not Forget

- Closing instruction: bring your sealed Take-Home Sheet 1 next week. No explanations.