



Dalziel Brothers after Sir John Everett Millais, *The Parable of the Leaven*, 1864, wood engraving, 13.9 x 10.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

# MATTHEW 13; LUKE 8: 13

## FEMALE DISCIPLES AND JESUS'S FIRST PARABLES

---

LYNNE HILTON WILSON

### **Female Disciples**

**Lk 8:1–2.** *“he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him, and certain women.”* Luke emphasizes that the Lord’s disciples included women traveling with the Apostles. In the late second temple period, women were usually illiterate and were discouraged from leaving the home and from speaking in public. A female servant may have occasionally traveled with her master, but the idea of a female disciple traveling with a master teacher is revolutionary. Christ completely transformed the cultural interaction between men and women. The fact that this made it into Luke’s account is evidence that the apostolic church also supported female disciples. In nearly the same breath, Luke groups together the female disciples and the Apostles in serving the Lord. (Luke did not separate mention of the Apostles from that of the women with a change of verse—that was done by a later editor). We hear of two of these women again by name at Jesus’s cross and tomb, being special witnesses of His Resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Across the four Gospels

*Table 1. Overview of events in Mt 13; Lk 8; 13*

<b>Event</b>	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>
Men and women disciples			8:1–2
Ministering women			8:2–3
Parable of the sower	13:1–9	4:1–9	8:4–8
Why speak in parables	13:10–17	4:10–12	8:9–10
Interpretation of the sower	13:18–23	4:13–20	8:11–15
Parable of the tares	13:24–30		
Parable of the mustard seed	13:31–32	4:30–32	13:18–19
Parable of leaven	13:33		13:20–21
Jesus’s use of parables	13:34–35	4:33–34	
Interpretation of tares	13:36–43		
Parable of hidden treasure	13:44		
Parable of the great pearl	13:45–46		
Parable of the net	13:47–50		
Treasures new and old	13:51–52		
Nazareth rejects Jesus	13:53–58	6:1–6	4:16–30

we learn the names of twelve female disciples working beside the Lord and His twelve named Apostles. These women are

1. Mary the mother of the Lord (Mt 1–2; 12:46–50; 13:53–58; Mk 3:31–35; 6:3–4; Lk 1–2; 3:23; 4:16; 8:19–21; 11:27–29; Jn 2:1–12; 6:42; 19:25–27)
2. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Lk 1:5–80)
3. Anna the prophetess (Lk 2:36–38)
4. Mary of Magdala (Mt 27:55–56, 61; 28:1; Mk 15:40–41, 47; 16:1, 9; Lk 8:2; 24:10; Jn 19:25–26; 20:1, 11–18)
5. Mary the mother of James and Jose (Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40, 47; 16:1; Lk 24:10)
6. Mary the wife of Cleopas (Jn 19:25)
7. Mary of Bethany (Lk 10:38–42; Jn 11:1–6; 17–20, 28–33; 12:1–8)
8. Martha of Bethany (Lk 10:38–42; Jn 11:1–44; 12:1–2)
9. Salome, wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John (Mk 15:40; 16:1)
10. Joanna, wife of Chuza (Lk 8:2–3; 24:10)
11. Susanna of Galilee (Lk 8:3)
12. The other Mary (Mt 28:1)

Most of these women worked and traveled beside the Lord and His Apostles. We are told the names of forty-five women in the New Testament, over thirty of whom were devoted followers of Christ (the majority are mentioned as members of the apostolic church as recorded in the epistles and book of Acts). The New Testament also shares details of ninety-four unnamed women, most of whom are disciples described in the Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

**Lk 8:1 (JST).** “*the twelve [apostles] who were ordained of him.*” Since we are never told that the Apostles were from the tribe of Levi, we assume this ordination refers to a higher order or Melchizedek priesthood than what the Levites had. Luke’s message relays more than *who* followed the Lord; it also shares *how* they served and *what* the message entailed.

**Lk 8:2–3.** “*Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others.*” These three named women were joined by others who supported the Lord’s mission financially and with their time. Mary is associated with the name of her residence, Magdala, which lay four and a half miles south of Capernaum. Archeological excavations found Magdala to be a very wealthy town on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was known for preserving fish and exporting it to places as far away as Rome (see Lk 5:11). We don’t know if or why Mary had seven devils possess her, but clearly, she had an important role to play as the first witness of the resurrected Lord, and the adversary undoubtedly wanted to thwart her.

Joanna traveled with Jesus in Galilee and to Jerusalem and was at the cross and among the first eyewitnesses of Jesus’s Resurrection (Mt 28:8; Lk 24:10). Her husband, Chuza, worked as a steward for King Herod Antipas (see my Introduction, page 4). Because his name was known to the early church, he was probably a Christian as well. His job as a steward was being a business and household manager and often a legal representative. Chuza’s job required great responsibility and would have been well paid. The scriptures tell us that Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, was curious about Jesus and wanted to meet Him (Lk 9:9; 23:7). It is likely that as the chief priests and scribes did, Herod sent a servant like Chuza to spy on Jesus, but we do not know for sure (Lk 20:20). Herod Antipas built a new city and palace on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Tiberias. This may have been where Chuza and Joanna lived. Herod also had other palaces across Galilea and Perea.

Susanna is mentioned only here. She may have also been a woman of wealth, as her name is included among those who paid for Jesus’s ministry. Perhaps she gave her time and skills to assist the Lord’s work. This is the only reference to her by name, though she may be included among the “other women” at the cross and tomb.<sup>3</sup>

## **Eight Parables**

The Gospel of Matthew records five of Jesus’s discourses. Chapter 13 is Matthew’s third and central discourse and treats “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 13:11). It acts as the focus of the book.

Consistent with other ancient chiasmic literature, this chapter has at its center messages that are key to the author’s theology, emphasizing what Matthew apparently views as the key aspect of Jesus’s mission: teachings about the coming of the kingdom of heaven and what it takes to enter. Many of the parables in Matthew’s Gospel begin with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”<sup>4</sup> This pattern is unique to Matthew; even when Luke and Mark record the same parables, they use the phrase “kingdom of God.”

*Table 2. Comparing usage of kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven in the Gospels*

	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
<i>kingdom of God</i>	5	15	32	2
<i>kingdom of heaven</i>	32	0	0	0

Matthew’s Gospel places this sermon directly after several examples of unbelief (Mt 11–12). This explains, in part, why it is filled with parables: the audience was not prepared to learn more. The eight parables in chapter 13 are paired as double witnesses—there are two about sowing and two about food as well as parables explaining two kinds of treasure and two kinds of bringing forth. Joseph Smith saw these parables as speaking of the gathering of Israel. The other Gospels place the same parables in different locations. The parables teach the impatient about patience and disciples about discipleship. Matthew also draws attention to how Jesus’s parables fulfill Old Testament prophecy (13:14–15, 35).

The Gospel of Luke places many of Jesus’s parables as dialogue along the journey as the Twelve and several noble women travel with Jesus and financially support His ministry across Galilee (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are specifically mentioned, along with “many others”; Lk 8:2–3). The cost of discipleship rings through these parables in Luke.

### *Introduction to parables*

Most of the parables recorded in the New Testament are found in the three Synoptic Gospels. The word “parable” comes from the Greek *parabole*, meaning “laying one thing beside another for comparative purposes.” It can also refer to metaphors and comparing one thing with another.<sup>5</sup> Jesus explained that He taught in parables to unfold the secrets of heaven to those who could not understand yet. Biblical students commonly refer to this as the messianic secret.<sup>6</sup> One-third of Jesus’s New Testament teachings are found in the parables.<sup>7</sup>

By teaching in parables, Jesus allowed His audience to comprehend His stories on different levels at different times. Everyone can glean something from the parables without being held responsible for not understanding their whole meaning. In this sense, teaching with parables extends love and compassion to the learners and motivates them toward a greater understanding. Often it is easier for humans to remember and assimilate stories than didactic teachings. Jesus, the Master Teacher, reached out to teach His audience where they were.

## *The Book of Mormon and parables*

Interestingly, no parables are recorded in Jesus's teachings to the Nephites in 3 Nephi, but we do find parables in the form of allegories elsewhere in the Book of Mormon (for example, the vision of the tree of life in 1 Ne 8–12 and the allegory of the olive tree in Jac 5). We can presume that those Nephites who heard Jesus preach a year after His Resurrection had ears to hear and thus did not need Jesus to teach in a hidden manner.<sup>8</sup> In Paul's words, they were ready for "strong meat" (Heb 5:12, 14).

## *How to get the most out of parables*

Jesus used parables to provide a portrait of Himself. The Catholic scholar Father Fichtner asked, "Would Christians understand Jesus better had he left behind a portrait?"<sup>9</sup> Many biblical scholars describe the parables as detailed portraits of the Lord and His Father. Parables are described as "pictures that leave a deeper impression on the mind than abstractions."<sup>10</sup> The Prophet Joseph Smith's rule for understanding scripture—and specifically for interpreting parables—was to ask, "What was the question which drew out the answers?"<sup>11</sup> It also helps to ask, What did Jesus intend to say to His audience? Did His audiences change? What was the effect on the hearers? What are the multiple levels of interpretation?

## *The parable of the sower or four soils—Mt 13:1–23; Mk 4:1–20; Lk 8:4–15*

The parable of the sower is as much about the four soils as it is the sower. On one level, Jesus is the Sower and teaches us how to prepare our hearts to hear and grow His word. This is one of the few parables that all three Synoptic Gospels record. It is also the longest and possibly the best-known parable. It has a timeless nature, yet "the story drawn from common life, portrays an uncommon message."<sup>12</sup>

**Mt 13:2 (Mk 4:1; Lk 8:4). "multitudes."** Matthew and Mark set the scene with Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee. A multitude gathered, and in order for the whole crowd to hear Him, Jesus stepped into a boat and sat down to teach those gathered on a beach. Luke does not mention a shoreline or boat.

Matthew included the detail that the crowd stood as Jesus taught, an inclusion that was no doubt made for a reason. Did those listening realize they were listening to God and so respectfully stood in His presence? Or was the audience not willing to commit to staying for a while? In the synagogue, one stood to read the scripture and sat down to discuss it. That is opposite to this scenario since Jesus sat and the crowd stood.

Mark begins Jesus's teachings with "Hearken," or "Listen!" This little detail adds to the feeling that the author was present (but this information came possibly from Peter or another eyewitness).<sup>13</sup> Also, Mark alone includes Jesus's chastisement to the disciples for not understanding the meaning of the parable (Mk 4:15).

**Mt 13:3 (CEV; also Mk 4:3; Lk 8:5). "A farmer went out to scatter seed."** The farmer or sower on one level is the storyteller—Jesus. In Matthew, the seed is the kingdom, in Mark it is the word, and in Luke it is the word of God. In all three cases, the seed is *fertile* and *fruitful*. These little seedlings represent Christians at different stages of conversion.

Farmers in ancient Palestine (and much of the world) spread their seed first and then plowed the seed into the soil. Because the soil was not plowed first, some seeds would fall on hard, thorny, and rocky soils.<sup>14</sup> Jesus used this example of farming to describe His listeners as different types of soil. The parable and Jesus’s explanation follows in parallel columns:

*Table 3. Events from the parable of the sower and their meanings*

<b>Scripture references</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Jesus’s explanation</b>
Mt 3:4, 9; Mk 4:4, 15; Lk 8:5, 12	“ <i>fell beside the road</i> ” (NAS). The seeds are trodden down, and birds <sup>15</sup> come and eat them off the hard ground.	The sower scatters God’s word everywhere, but it is not understood—in part due to Satan’s efforts to remove it from the listener’s heart.
Mt 13:5–6, 20–21; Mk 4:5, 16–17, Lk 8:6, 13	“ <i>fell on rocky ground</i> ” (ESV). Without enough soil, the seedlings have no root and are scorched by the sun and die.	“ <i>hear the word . . . with joy.</i> ” The rocky soil is those who hear the word but do not allow it to take root in them. When they experience hard times or temptation, they become offended and lose their faith.
Mt 13:7, 22; Mk 4:7, 18–19, Lk 8:7, 14	“ <i>thorns . . . choked the seedlings</i> ” (BSB). The seedlings cannot take root when thorns or more established weeds overpower their roots.	“ <i>They who receive the word among thorns</i> ” (JST, Mk 4:18) are caught up with the cares of the world, lusts, and riches—all of which choke the Spirit’s voice.
Mt 13:8, 23; Mk 4:8, 20; Lk 8:8, 15	“ <i>fell into good ground.</i> ” The good ground has great potential and allows the seeds to grow and bear fruit.	“ <i>The good ground are they who receive the word in an honest and good heart . . . keep what they hear and bring forth fruit with patience</i> ” (JST, Lk 8:15).

**Mt 13:9–11 (Mk 4:9–11, Lk 8:8–10).** “*ears to hear . . . the mysteries.*” Unlike the general audiences, Jesus’s disciples had softer hearts, preparing them to hear and learn more. So, Jesus taught them more. The Spirit works the same now for humble and seeking disciples.

The New Testament uses the Greek word *mystēria*, “mystery, or mysteries,” twenty-seven times, but this parable is the only place where it is used in the Gospels. The basic meaning is “a sacred secret” dealing with silence. The Bible Dictionary explains that a mystery is “a spiritual truth that was once hidden but now is revealed and that without special revelation would have remained unknown.”<sup>16</sup>

The Gospels of Mark and Luke refer to the mysteries as the “kingdom of God,” while Matthew changes that to “kingdom of heaven.” This phrase had special meaning in Matthew’s Gospel—we find it repeated thirty-three times in that book and nowhere else in the New Testament. Possibly Matthew used it for his Jewish readers who were careful about not repeating the word *God* and thus tried to avoid overusing it.

**Mt 13:14. “fulfilled.”** Much of this parable is shared word for word across the Synoptics. Yet, this verse is an interesting departure. Matthew’s Gospel intentionally makes a detour to highlight this fulfillment of Isaiah. This is Matthew’s tenth of fourteen fulfillment verses, and it is the sixth prophecy citing Isaiah.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, this is found in Isaiah’s vision of the throne of God and can be read as part of a temple text as well. Eyes, ears, and hearts need to be opened to revelation for deep conversion. Isaiah and Jesus teach of an interdependency between conversion and complete healing.

Table 4. Comparison of Isa 6:9–10 and Mt 13:14–15

Isa 6:9–10 (compare 2 Ne 16:9)	Mt 13:14–15
<p>And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but [ye] understand not; and see ye indeed, but [ye] perceive not. Make the <i>heart</i> of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.</p>	<p>By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people’s <i>heart</i> is waxed gross and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal.</p>

**Mt 13:15. “heart is waxed gross.”** Matthew’s text accuses those with hard-hearted obstinance for not responding to divine requests. (The KJV seems to say that God hardened some hearts, but that comes from the translators’ Calvinistic interpretation.)

**Mt 13:15. “ears are dull of hearing.”** Even though the sower generously spreads the seed, or word of God, to all, those who do not receive and nourish the seed do not listen for the still, small voice. Our generation is also sympathetic to the distractions that can overpower one’s hearing and understanding of God’s word. Sometimes the world is so loud and our thoughts too crowded to hear the quiet voice of inspiration.

**Modern apostolic emphasis.** In the April 2015 general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke about this parable. He focused on those who have committed to live the gospel message. He encouraged all to seek spiritual truths: “Spiritual food is necessary for spiritual survival.” He quoted two colleagues who discussed how they deal with the “rocky” cares of the world and prepare their “soil” to live a gospel-centered life:

Hugh W. Nibley spoke of the dangers of surrendering to the cares of the world. He was asked in an interview whether world conditions and our duty to spread the gospel made it desirable to seek some way to “be accommodating of the world in what we do in the Church.”

His reply: “That’s been the whole story of the Church, hasn’t it? You have to be willing to offend here, you have to be willing to take the risk. That’s where the faith comes in. . . . Our commitment is supposed to be a test, it’s supposed to be hard, it’s supposed to be impractical in the terms of this world.”

This gospel priority was affirmed on the BYU campus just a few months ago by an esteemed Catholic leader, Charles J. Chaput, the archbishop of Philadelphia. Speaking of “concerns that the LDS and Catholic communities share,” . . . he said this:

“I want to stress again the importance of really living what we claim to believe. That needs to be a priority . . . in everything we do.”

“. . . We Catholics believe that our vocation is to be leaven in society. But there’s a fine line between being leaven *in* society and being digested *by* society.”<sup>18</sup>

**Joseph Smith’s contribution.** We find phrases and ideas from this parable scattered throughout the Doctrine and Covenants (including “sowers” in D&C 86:2; “an hundred fold” in D&C 78:19; 82:18; and so forth). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught specially about this parable to the elders of the Church:

I shall now proceed to make some remarks from the sayings of the Savior, recorded in the 13th chapter of his Gospel according to St Matthew, which in my mind affords us as clear an understanding, upon the important subject of the gathering, as anything recorded in the bible. . . .

. . . Now mark the expression; that which was before sown in his heart; . . . men who have no principle of righteousness in themselves, and whose hearts are full of iniquity, and have no desire for the principles of truth, do not understand the word of truth when they hear it.—The devil taketh away the word of truth out of their hearts, because there is no *desire* for righteousness in them. . . .

We draw the conclusion then, that the very reason why the multitude, or the world, as they were designated by the Savior, did not receive an explanation upon his parables, was, because of unbelief. To you, he says, (speaking to his disciples) it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: and why? because of the faith and confidence which they had in him. This parable was spoken to demonstrate the effects that are produced by the preaching of the word; and we believe that it has an allusion directly, to the commencement, or the setting up of the kingdom in that age: therefore, we shall continue to trace His sayings concerning this kingdom from that time forth, even unto the end of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Humans’ lack of righteous desires and deeds opens them to Satan’s temptations. Yet with the help of God’s “word” (repeated six times in Matthew’s discussion of the parable) we can move from being hard-hearted, rocky, or thorny at times in our lives to becoming good soil to nourish the Spirit—ready to produce the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). As disciples, we have the responsibility to change our hearts and repent daily.



### *The parable of the tares—Mt 13:24–30, 36–43*

The second in this first set of paired parables, the parable of the tares continues the theme of sowing.

**Mt 13:25. “sowed tares among the wheat.”** This second parable describes an enemy who sowed tares, or bearded darnel. This plant looks the same as wheat until it comes to ear. Roots are often intertwined, so farmers do not want to pull the tares prematurely and risk losing the wheat as well (Mt 13:29). Tares are poisonous—they taste bitter and when eaten can cause dizziness, vomiting, convulsions, or death.<sup>20</sup>

**Mt 13:30. “grow together until the harvest.”** God’s kingdom is on the earth again, but the delayed harvest, or eschatological Judgment, must wait until the fruit is ripe. The Saints are not yet ready. Once the Church becomes a Zion society, the Savior can return. He will open His millennial reign with a burning of the tares, and Satan will be bound. Burning is used as an image for judgment. There will also be a Final Judgment at the end of the Millennium. The JST reverses the order in this parable so that the wheat is gathered first and the tares are burned second.

**Mt 13:37. “He answered.”** Matthew’s text includes the Lord’s interpretation of this parable once the disciples leave the public setting and are alone with the Lord. He identifies “the Son of man” as the sower. He may have intended it to exclusively represent Himself, or He may have used it as it is in the Old Testament to refer to God’s servants (for example, Ezekiel). He continues His explanation, saying that the good seed is “the children of the kingdom” and that the tares are “the children of the wicked one.”

**Christian fathers.** Early Christian fathers also interpreted the parable. Irenaeus (c. 180) taught that “the field is the world. . . . The apostate angel who is the enemy for he was envious of God’s workmanship and took in hand to render this workmanship into something at enmity with God. . . . For this reason, the Lord commanded his disciples to be on guard.” Clement of Alexandria (circa 195) taught that “heresies would be sown among the truth, as ‘tares among the wheat,’ was foretold by the Lord.” Victorinus (circa 280) taught, “The Apocalypse shows that these reapers, shepherds, and laborers are the angels.”<sup>21</sup>

**Restoration perspective.** The Lord explained more details of this parable and its fulfillment in the last days to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

The field was the world, and the apostles were the sower of the seed; and after they have fallen asleep the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, . . . even Satan, sitteth to reign—behold he soweth the tares. . . .

But behold, in the last days, even now while the Lord is beginning to bring forth the word, and the blade is springing up and is yet tender—behold, . . . the angels are crying unto the Lord day and night, who are ready and waiting to be sent forth to reap down the fields; but the Lord saith unto them, pluck not up the tares while the blade is yet tender (for verily your faith is weak), lest you destroy the wheat also. (D&C 86:2–6)

Six years after that revelation, the Prophet Joseph Smith referenced this parable in a brief history of the kingdom of God on earth. He described the tares as corruption within the Church and Christianity:

The wheat and tares must grow together till the harvest; at the harvest the wheat is gathered together into the threshing floor, so with the Saints the stakes are the threshing floor. Here they will be threshed with all sorts of difficulties, trials, afflictions and everything to mar their peace, which they can imagine, and thousands which they cannot imagine, but he that endures the threshing till all the chaff, superstition, folly and unbelief are pounded out of him, and does not suffer himself to be blown away as chaff by the foul blast of slander, but endures faithfully to the end, shall be saved.<sup>22</sup>

### *The parable of the mustard seed—Mt 13:31–32; Mk 4:30–32; Lk 13:18–19*

The next set of the twin parables is about food—mustard seeds and leaven. Jesus likened the kingdom of God (or “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew) to the potential found in a small seed that grows into a tall, fruitful plant. Along the Sea of Galilee mustard flowers grow up to ten feet high. The flowers become pods filled with the seeds that are used as a spice to make mustard.

Early Christians interpreted this parable as describing Jesus. The wicked saw Him as being insignificant like a small seed. Disciples see Him as the magnificent tree of life offering salvation to all humankind.<sup>23</sup> Others interpret the seed as Jesus’s words or message that grew to beautify and fill the whole earth.

On multiple occasions, the Prophet Joseph Smith used this parable to describe the Restoration. The first example is from a published letter to the elders of the Church, and the second and third are from a spontaneous sermon in the summer of 1839 (recorded by William Clayton).

The first example describes the Book of Mormon:

Let us take the book of Mormon, which a man took and hid in his field; securing it by his faith, to spring up in the last days, or in due time: let us behold it coming forth out of the ground, which is indeed accounted the least of all seeds, but behold it branching forth; yea, even towering, with lofty branches, and God-like majesty, until it becomes the greatest of all herbs: and it is truth.<sup>24</sup>

The second and third examples describe the restored Church and angels, respectively:

The Son of man shall send forth his Angels & All these authorative [sic] characters will come down and join hand in hand in bringing about this work. The Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed; the mustard seed is small but brings forth a large tree. . . . The fowls are the Angels. . . . Angels come down combined together to gather their children and gather them. We cannot be made perfect without them nor they without us; when these are done, the Son of man will descend, the Ancient of Days sit. We may come to an innumerable company of angels, have communion with and receive instruction from.<sup>25</sup>

*The parable of the leaven or yeast—Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20–21*

**Mt 13:33 (Lk 13:21).** *“is like unto leaven, which a woman took.”* This parable draws parallels between the man planting in the previous parables and this woman baking. Jesus, as well as the Gospel authors, were revolutionary in offering almost equal examples of men and women working to build the kingdom of God.

In the Old Testament, leaven is often the symbol of corruptibility, but here it is used oppositely to show its dynamic power. The message is that the kingdom of God is hidden in the flour and will permeate everything. In teaching this parable, Jesus used numbers that produced a great shock value. We need to look beyond the Greek measurements to appreciate Jesus’s hyperbole in His storytelling. Three measures of flour—the equivalent of 110 pounds (50 kg)—would have been enormous in amount. This woman put in a little yeast but then made enough bread to easily feed 150 people.<sup>26</sup>

The yeast has taken on many interpretations, including how the Spirit touches a life by contact with truth, which can then grow. Missionaries share God’s word one person at a time, and that then grows into the righteous leavening of the world. The gospel has an expansive force within it and will spread by transforming one person at a time.

The Prophet Joseph Smith referred to this parable several times with different interpretations. On December 22, 1842, Joseph taught,

It alluded expressly to the last days when there should be but little faith on the earth and it should leaven the whole world; also, there shall be safety in Zion & Jerusalem, & in the Remnants whom the Lord our god shall call. The 3 measures refer directly to the Priesthood; truth springing up on a fixed principle, to the 3 in the grand presidency, confining the oracles to a certain head on the principle of 3.<sup>27</sup>

The Prophet also used the parable to highlight the role of the Three Witnesses as the three measures and of the priesthood as the leavening that multiplied the bread dough:

It may be understood that the Church of the Latter-day Saints has taken its rise from a little leaven that was put into three witnesses. Behold how much this is like the parable: it is fast leavening the lump and will soon leaven the whole. . . . [The] three measures of meal, undergoing the purifying touch by a revelation of Jesus Christ, and the ministering of angels, who have already commenced this work in the last days, which will answer to the Leaven which leavened the whole lump.<sup>28</sup>

The Lord specifically used parables so that different audiences could understand His teachings differently.

*Setting change and fulfillment passage—Mt 13:34–43*

**Mt 13:34–35.** *“without a parable spake he not unto them: that it might be fulfilled.”* After Jesus’s disciples followed Him, Matthew included several shorter parables taught in this private setting. The change in audience opens the way for the disciples to ask the Lord for the interpretation of the

parable of the tares (which is included above). Matthew paused to share another fulfillment passage (his eleventh out of fourteen), showing a fulfillment of Ps 78:2.

**Mt 13:36. “the house.”** According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus stopped His public parables, sent the multitude away, and entered a specific house. Perhaps it was Peter’s mother-in-law’s home or a house the group used as its headquarters—we are not told. This private setting opened the way for the Lord to explain His interpretation of the parable of the tares. Matthew recorded four more parables on the kingdom of heaven given in the same home setting.

### *The parable of the hidden treasure—Mt 13:44*

Only Matthew includes the next four parables that Jesus uses as analogies of the kingdom of heaven. The next pair of parables line up as the hidden treasure and hidden pearl. Matthew also creates an interplay between the hidden treasure and the previous parable, the hidden leaven, while masterfully connecting the smallness of the pearl and of the mustard seed.

**Mt 13:44. “treasure hid.”** Jesus speaks of a poor day laborer or traveler finding a great hidden treasure. The laborer’s morality is not in question because he bought the field. One point is that the kingdom can be present and yet not perceived by many travelers. Because of the invasions that swept through Palestine for centuries, people often hid their treasures in the ground (see Prov 2:4; Sirach 20:30; and so forth). At the time of the New Testament, we see this happening in Qumran when because of the threat of Roman destruction in AD 68–70, the Essenes hid their treasured parchment and copper scroll (now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls) in caves.

**Mt 13:44. “joy.”** The word “joy” is important here—the kingdom of heaven is about finding eternal joy. This parable is also a story about sacrificing everything for the treasure of the kingdom, or a testimony. The Prophet Joseph Smith used this parable to illustrate the gathering of Israel: “Nothing but [the] Kingdom being restored can save the world. Like unto a treasure hidden in a field. This figure is a representation of the [kingdom] in the last days.”<sup>29</sup> The Prophet saw the purchasing of the treasure as the sacrifices required of the Saints, “selling all that they have, and gathering themselves together unto a place that they may purchase for an inheritance.”<sup>30</sup> Membership in God’s kingdom requires the sacrifice of everything God asks of us.

### *The parable of the pearl of great price—Mt 13:45–46*

**Mt 13:45. “pearls.”** Pearls were among the rarest treasures in the ancient world and so were in great demand. They were a sign of wealth and were valued more highly than gold. As a comparison from the time of the New Testament, Cleopatra supposedly had a pearl worth ten million sesterces (the equivalent of 1.5 million days of labor or billions of dollars).<sup>31</sup> In the Old Testament, Job compared pearls to what he valued the most: “The price of wisdom is above pearls” (Job 28:18 ESV).

**Mt 13:46.** “*when he had found one . . . went and sold all.*” When we look at the two treasure parables together, the most important message is the find. Both discoveries are a surprise. They also contrast the rich and poor. Both parables speak of the need for a total self-surrender to receive the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’s hyperbole draws listeners in and sets the stage to teach the cost of discipleship to His Apostles.

**Christian fathers.** Two early Christian fathers had interesting observations about this parable.

- Clement of Alexandria wrote, “Jesus is a pearl of translucent and purest radiance.”
- Origen (circa 245) wrote, “There are many merchants engaged in many forms of merchandise. However, the kingdom of heaven is not likened to any of these except the one who is seeking beautiful pearls. And he has found one pearl equal in value to many—a very costly pearl that he has bought in place of many pearls. I consider it reasonable, then, to make some inquiry into the nature of the pearl. Please note that Christ did not say, ‘He sold all the *pearls* he had.’ For he had not only sold those pearls he had bought . . . but also sold everything that he had.”<sup>32</sup>

**Joseph Smith.** The Prophet Joseph Smith used this parable to describe sacrifice for Zion. He quoted the parable and then added, “The Saints again work after this example. See men traveling to find places for Zion and her stakes or remnants, who, when they find the place for Zion, or the pearl of great price, straightway sell that they have, and buy it.”<sup>33</sup>

### *The parable of the fish net—Mt 13:47–50*

This parable held special meaning to at least half of the Apostles, who were fishermen (Jn 21:2 records that Peter, Andrew, James, John, Thomas, Nathaniel, and two unnamed Apostles were fishing. The first four in this list were professional fishermen).

**Mt 13:47. “net.”** The Greek here, *sagēnē*, refers to a drag net. These large nets are designed to catch more fish. While the top of the net floats on the water, the center of the net is weighted in order to sink. When the nets are thrown into the water, they encircle schools of fish that are then dragged to shore. The net indiscriminately gathers the fish. Fishermen often set their nets out at night because the fish swam closer to the surface for warmth. In Matthew, Jesus referred to “every kind” of fish included in the net, probably referring to missionary work, as this is the group he has called as fishers of men. A normal catch would contain large and small fish. The small and “unclean” fish were thrown back in, and the large and “clean” fish were kept. (For the Mosaic dietary code, see Lev 11.)

**Mt 13:48. “when it was full.”** Jesus described waiting until the net is *eplērōthē*, meaning “fill, full, complete.”<sup>34</sup> It speaks of spiritual readiness as well as individual capacity.

Joseph Smith recited this parable when speaking on the last days:

For the work of this pattern, behold the seed of Joseph, spreading forth the Gospel net upon the face of the earth, gathering of every kind, that the good may be saved in vessels prepared for that purpose, and the angels will take care of the bad. So shall it be at the end of the world—the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire, and there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.<sup>35</sup>

***Mt 13:49 (JST).* “at the end of the world, and the world is the children of the wicked.”**

Jesus offered an eschatological interpretation of judgment on the wicked. We learn that angels will help separate the just and unjust.

***Mt 13:50.* “cast them into the furnace of fire.”** Matthew’s text repeats word for word the theme of God’s judgment of the unrighteous with the image of burning (Mt 13:42, 50).

*The parable of the householder—Mt 13:52*

***Mt 13:52 (JST).* “Every scribe well instructed in the things of the kingdom of heaven.”** In the Jewish world, scribes were scholars who could write, and they often interpreted the Law, or Torah. Jesus called for a new type of scribe taught by Jesus (which Matthew himself was). The new scribes need to go through the cultural traditions, learnings, and scriptures to separate out or find new things in the light of Jesus’s gospel. Everything takes on a new light through understanding Christ’s plan of salvation. “At its heart the gospel consists of ‘new things,’ and that newness must never be underestimated. But for Matthew, these ‘new things’ presuppose and are fundamentally loyal to the ‘old things.’”<sup>36</sup> Matthew’s Gospel is an example of a new scribe who ties the Old Testament and the New Testament together.

In 1835, the Prophet Joseph summarized his message to the elders by repeating this parable, adding another prism or angle through which to see the parable:

For the works of this example, see the Book of Mormon coming forth out of the treasure of the heart. Also the covenants given to the Latter-day Saints, also the translation of the Bible—thus bringing forth out of the heart things new and old.<sup>37</sup>

## **Nazareth Rejects Jesus**

*Jesus returns to Nazareth—Mt 13:53–58; Mk 6:1–6; Lk 4:16–30; Jn 6:42*

***Mt 13:55.* “Is not this the carpenter’s son?”** Like Luke’s record of Jesus’s visit to His little hometown of Nazareth (Lk 4:16), Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts include the popular thought that Jesus was a *tektonos*, “builder” (ISV) or “carpenter” (KJV). All four Gospels mention the general assumption that Jesus is Joseph’s son. Mark and Matthew share most of this conversation and have only a few word differences.

**Mt 13:55–56. “is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?”** Jesus’s half siblings are mentioned here and in Mk 6:3 Both accounts include four named brothers and at least two unnamed and unnumbered sisters (Mark recorded a nickname for Mary’s third son: Joses for Joseph).

**Mt 13:57–58. “they were offended in him. . . . And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”** The people’s rejection of Jesus came at the tragic cost that they were not able to receive His messianic message nor miraculous healings. Mk 6:5 adds that Jesus laid His hands on a few of the sick and that “He was amazed at their lack of faith” (NIV).

## Notes

- 1 Lk 24:10; Mt 27:56; 28:8.
- 2 Lynne Hilton Wilson, *Christ’s Emancipation of New Testament Women* (Palo Alto, CA: Good Sound Publishing, 2015). Appendix 3 contains a full list of all the New Testament women, named, unnamed, and fictional.
- 3 Mt 27:56, 61; 28:1–10; Mk 15:40–41, 47; 16:1–8; Lk 24:1–11, 22–24.
- 4 This phrase is repeated eight times; see Mt 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 20:1–2.
- 5 “Parabole,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, online at <https://biblehub.com/greek/3850.htm>, continues: “Likeness, similitude . . . an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated, . . . specifically, ‘a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God . . . are figuratively portrayed.’”
- 6 See Mt 3:10–17; Mk 4:10–12; Lk 8:9–10; Isa 6:9–10.
- 7 Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew: A Theological Commentary of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing, 2015), 175. Also see John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 6–9.
- 8 The fact that Jesus came to the Nephites almost a year after His Resurrection is seen by comparing two editorial statements by Mormon: the great storm at Jesus’s death came “in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month on the fourth day,” and Jesus appeared “at the ending of the thirty and fourth year” (3 Ne 8:5; 10:18–19).
- 9 Joseph Fichtner, *Many Things in Parables: Reflections for Life* (New York, NY: Alba House, 1988), 3.
- 10 Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1966),.
- 11 “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1459, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/102>.
- 12 S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 392.
- 13 As I described in a previous commentary, early Christian historians recorded that Mark recorded Peter’s Gospel.

14 David R. Huggins and John P. Reganold, “No-Till: How Farmers Are Saving the Soil by Parking Their Plows,” *Scientific American*, July 1, 2008, <https://scientificamerican.com/article/no-till/>. *This article describes the benefits of the ancient farming technique, including a lack of erosion and less water use.*

15 The early Christian father Cyril of Alexandria saw the birds as wicked spirits: “Let us look, as from a broader perspective, at what it means to be on the road. In a way, every road is hardened and foolish on account of the fat that it lies beneath everyone’s feet. No kind of seed finds there enough depth of soil for a covering. Instead, it lies on the surface and is ready to be snatched up by the birds that come by. Therefore those who have in themselves a hardened mind and, as it were packed tight do not receive the divine seed but become a well-trodden way for the unclean spirits. These are what is here meant by ‘the bird of the heaven.’ But ‘heaven’ we understand to mean this air, in which the spirits of wickedness move about, by whom, again, the good seed is snatched up and destroyed. Then what are those upon the rock? They are those people who do not take much cares of the faith they have in themselves. They have not set their minds to understand the touchstone of the mystery. The reverence these people have toward God is shallow and rootless. It is in times of ease and fair weather that they practice Christianity, when it involves none of the painful trials of winter. They will not preserve their faith in this way, if in times of tumultuous persecution their soul is not prepared for the struggle.” Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1–13* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 265–266.

16 Bible Dictionary, “Mystery,” online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).

17 Ten of the citations refer to fulfilling the spoken words of the prophet, and two refer to what is written by the prophet. As mentioned earlier, the number fourteen represents the name David in Hebrew orthography, thus witnessing that Jesus was the chosen son of David and the promised Messiah. The fourteen fulfillment examples are at Mt 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17, 12:17; 13:14, 35, 21:4; 26:56; 27:9.

18 Dallin H. Oaks, “The Parable of the Sower,” April 2015 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).

19 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” pp. [225–226], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/1>; emphasis added.

20 *New Testament Student Manual: Religion 211–212 (Salt Lake City UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018)*, 72.

21 David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Belief (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998)*, 496–497.

22 “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” pp. 1247–1248, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/419>.

23 Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Belief*, 495. You can see the change in thought from approximately AD 195, when Clement of Alexandria described the seed as Christ’s salvation, to AD 390, when the *Apostolic Confessions* describe the parable thus: “The Lord has taught us that the word is like ‘a grain of mustard seed,’ which is of a fiery nature. If anyone uses it unskillfully, he will find it bitter. For in the mystical points, we should not be rash, but cautious.”



24 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” p. 227, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/3>.

25 “Discourse, between circa 26 June and circa 4 August 1839–A, as Reported by William Clayton,” pp. 17–18, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-between-circa-26-june-and-circa-4-august-1839-a-as-reported-by-william-clayton/7>. Also see similarities with Dan 4:21; Ps 103:12; Ezk 17:22–24.

26 Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 667.

27 “History Draft [1 July–31 December 1842],” p. 19, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-draft-1-july-31-december-1842/21>.

28 “History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” pp. 649, 651, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/105>.

29 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1980), 13.

30 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” p. 229, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/5>.

31 David Matz, *Daily Life of the Ancient Romans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 28; A. L. Millin, “A Dissertation on the Use of Pearls as an Ornament among the Nations of Antiquity,” in *European Magazine and London Review*, May 1813, 399. Other sources have the value of the pearl at different levels, but all over the equivalent of a billion dollars in today’s money.

32 Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Belief*, 495–497.

33 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” p. 229, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/5>.

34 “Pléroó,” *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, available online at <https://biblehub.com/greek/4137.htm>.

35 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” p. 229, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/5>.

36 Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Challenge of Jesus’s Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 121.

37 “Letter to the Elders of the Church, 30 November–1 December 1835,” p. 229, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-elders-of-the-church-30-november-1-december-1835/5>.