



Chapter 13

Who doesn't love a good story? The very best put us on the edge of our seats. Some make us laugh, cry, or even snort. Others draw us in with mystery, suspense, and drama.

Icebreaker:

1. What's your favorite story, whether true or fiction? Why do you like it?

Jesus is a master storyteller, and this is a chapter of stories—parables, to be exact—all about the kingdom of heaven. The seven parables of this chapter represent the third of Matthew's five major sections of Jesus's teaching. "The genius of Jesus' parables," according to scholar Donald Hagner, "lay at least partly in his ability to transform the ordinary things of life into vehicles of truth." Jesus's skill is obvious, but His motivation is surprising.

Verses 1-23

Jesus responds to the swelling crowds by teaching from a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This first parable is about soil more than anything else. Seed falls on four different types, but only one is suitable for healthy growth. That's it. There's no overt application or explanation, but only a mysterious phrase: "He who has ears, let him hear." Ok?

People have their reasons for telling stories. Stories entertain. They're memorable. They stir emotions. They illustrate truth. They simplify complicated ideas. None of these, however, are Jesus's primary, stated reason in verses 11-15. For Jesus, parables reveal truth (i.e. mysteries or "secrets") to those who have faith and obscure truth from those who do not.

2. Maybe you've noticed how those who are hardhearted toward Jesus do not hear, see, or interpret life events the same as you do. If you have, share an example with the group.

There's nothing new about this predicament where the same "seed" scatters but the result varies. Centuries earlier, Isaiah saw how hard, shallow, thorn-infested hearts would prevent people from seeing and hearing the signs of the Kingdom's arrival. The disciples are blessed, though, because *they can* see and hear these Kingdom mysteries.

Jesus's parables, then, are a wedge between those who accept or reject Him. Those with faith grow in their understanding of God's mysteries. Those without will be further ignorant of God's ways. Jesus explains the parable to the disciples, bringing the parable's meaning into focus.

3. These soil types may bring specific people to mind whom you're close to. Briefly share what you've observed about their encounters with Jesus and pray that God would transform the "soil" of their hearts.

Verses 24-30

God's Kingdom seeds are yielding wheat, but weeds are growing alongside! Why? Because the sower isn't the only actor in the story. There's an enemy who seeks to undermine the growth. The "master of the house" is clear: wait until the harvest to deal with the weeds. Speaking of waiting, we have to wait for an explanation.

Verses 31-35

One of the mysteries of God's Kingdom is that it can appear to be unimpressive or even undetectable in our present experience. Even so, it's leading to an unmistakable and transformative culmination. The old saying rings true: *appearances can be deceiving*.

4. Read Hebrews 11:1. How do these two images in our passage of *a growing plant* and *active yeast* relate to this description of Christian faith in Hebrews?

Jesus's parables are God's way of revealing Kingdom mysteries to those who have faith to believe. Psalm 72—cited in v. 35—points to how this was God's plan from ages past.

Verses 36-43

Here's a major shift as Jesus "left the crowds and went into the house." He's no longer engaging the outsiders so that He can invest into the disciples. Now we get to hear the meaning of verses 24-30, and it's common to read this explanation with a mix of emotions.

5. We live in a world where it can seem like the wicked flourish. How does it help to be reminded in these verses that true justice will ultimately be done?

6. Until the final judgment, the "sons of the kingdom" live alongside the "sons of the evil one." How can we, as a community, encourage each other to live lives that are faithful to Jesus in a world where evil, like weeds in our yard, is all around us?

Verses 44-46

These express the unquestionable worth of the Kingdom alongside the high cost of discipleship. The value of the Kingdom makes the cost worth it (recall Matt 6:33)!

7. The first two parables involve selling everything. What does this look like for those of us who have so much in terms of financial resources, homes, cares, social status, etc.?

Verses 47-52

Similar to the parable of the wheat and weeds, 47-50 depicts the final judgment that awaits.

8. God's final judgment will be severe. How could the imagery of these verses help clarify our life's purpose and the role of our community at Calvary?

Verses 51-52 reveal that, as Jesus's disciples, we are to be ready to teach one another the treasures out of all of Scripture, from both the Old and New Testament.

Verses 53-58

Discipleship to Jesus can cost us our closest relationships, as we saw also at the end of the previous chapter. Some will not understand. Some will want to remind us of our past (although Jesus's was flawless). Some may even wonder whether we've gone off and joined a cult.

9. Have your relationships been harmed by following Jesus? If you feel inclined, describe what has unfolded.

Tying the Bow

Faith is our irreducible and irreplaceable ingredient in God's Kingdom. The *heart of faith* receives the seed and produces fruit. The *eyes of faith* observe the Kingdom's advance even as weeds obscure the view. The *mind of faith* finds hope in God's final justice even as the present age celebrates, or at least minimizes, sin and evil. The *life of faith* finds the Kingdom's value to be so great that, in comparison, everything else is expendable.

10. Spend time in prayer for each other, that each of you would have the kind of faith that accepts and even experiences the ever-expanding Kingdom that Jesus describes throughout this chapter.