

# Adult Teaching Resources

July 26, 2020



## What the World Needs Now...

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30—"The World Needs Rest"

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23—"The World Needs the Word"

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43—"The World Needs Patience"

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52—"The World Needs Wisdom"**

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# The World Needs Wisdom

*Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Bible Background

**Key Verse: Matthew 13:33**—The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

Theological terms and ideas can be difficult to understand. Even those who went to seminary and studied for years have trouble with theological terms and ideas. Jesus knew that what he would tell people could be hard to grasp. Instead of lecturing his hearers like a professor in a classroom, Jesus used stories to help his audience understand difficult concepts like “the kingdom of heaven.”

Today, we’ll explore different examples of Jesus teaching us about the kingdom of heaven in ways we can understand.

### Opening

After everyone arrives, ask your group to form smaller groups of 3-4. Once settled, ask each person to think about the one sermon illustration they remember the most. It could be a story, a song, a picture, etc.—something that helped explain the sermon better.

Give each group time to share with each other:

What was the sermon illustration?

What was the point of the sermon illustration?

What was the sermon about?

How did the illustration help explain the sermon?

Do you think you would have remembered the sermon without the illustration? Why do you say that?

Give each group time to talk together, then open the floor to the larger group for any volunteers who would like to share.

## Reading the Bible

What is the kingdom of heaven like in the first parable? (a mustard seed)

How big is the mustard seed? (the smallest of all seeds)

What happens when that seed grows? (it is the greatest of all shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches)

What is the kingdom of heaven like in the second parable? (yeast that a woman mixed in with three measures of flour)

What is the kingdom of heaven like in the third parable? (treasure hidden in a field) What does the one who found the treasure do? (sells all he has and goes to buy the field)

What is the kingdom of heaven like in the fourth parable? (a merchant in search of fine pearls, finding the one special pearl) What does the merchant do? (sold all he has and bought it)

What is the kingdom of heaven like in the fifth parable? (a net that was thrown into the sea a caught fish of every kind)

What did they do with the good? (put into baskets) What did they do with the bad? (threw it out)

What will the angels do? (they will come and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth)

What did Jesus say about those trained for the kingdom of heaven? (they are like the master of a household who brings out his treasure what is new and what is old)

## Making Connections

When have you seen something grow from a seed into a plant, bush, or tree? What lesson does the transformation from seed to plant, bush, or tree teach you?

Why do you think Jesus chose the image of a seed and tree? What is the purpose of including the birds in the story?

What do you think the point is to the parable of the mustard seed?

Have you ever tried to bake your own bread? What steps did you use? What was the result?

Our Lesson Writer helps explain the baking process, “Yeast” is better translated as “leaven,” something like sourdough starter. Every day, when a woman finished kneading the dough and prepared to bake bread, she would put a small piece of dough aside in a covered bowl: the yeast in it would continue fermenting and serve as leaven for the next day’s bread.” What is our “yeast?” What happens when we don’t add the yeast?

Why do you think Jesus’ parables are about things hidden? Do you think having the kingdom of heaven as something hidden is the best way for the kingdom of heaven to grow? Why do you say that?

## Making Connections *continued*

Is there any tangible item you would give up all your other tangible items in order to obtain? What is it? Why do you want it?

Is there anything in the world that you would be willing to give up everything, including your possessions and professional identity, in order to obtain? What is it? Why do you want it?

According to the parable of the good fish and bad fish, the angels will separate the two. What is your understanding of the role of angels? How does your idea of angels conflict with this parable? How does your idea of angels agree with this parable?

## So What?

Ask everyone to gather back in the smaller groups from the beginning of the lesson. Ask each group to read again vv. 51-52.

“Have you understood all this?’ They answered, “Yes.” 52 And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Jesus told the disciples that they would be the ones to explain the gospel and the idea of the kingdom of heaven to others. Now, that challenge and call is our responsibility.

Ask each small group to come up with three short parables about the kingdom of heaven that will instruct, inform, and transform their peers. They can use any metaphors they’d like. Their parables can be as long or as short as they’d like. Following the themes found in today’s passage, give each small group time to think and write.

After every group has finished, ask each group to share their parables with the larger group. Spend some time in conversation and discussion about how hearers will respond to each new parable.

## The Challenge

This week, share one of the new parables from your class with someone else.

## Prayer

*Loving God, thank you for your parables. You give us an easy way to learn and a great model to follow as we try to teach others. Give us the courage and the words to share your kingdom with others. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Mustard seeds**—Modern readers might be familiar with mustard greens, but the ancients sometimes cultivated mustard for its seeds. As such a large plant, one wouldn’t typically plant mustard in a small garden, but a few in a field could come in handy. Mustard seeds could be used as spices, for medicinal purposes, or even for the extraction of oil.

**Birds in the bush**—The image of birds coming to nest in the rapidly growing mustard plant calls to mind Old Testament texts that speak of trees in which birds come to nest in their branches (Daniel 4:10-12; Ezekiel 17:22-24, 31:6). In Jewish thought, birds were sometimes used as symbols of the Gentiles.

**Hidden leaven**—While the NRSV and other translations say the woman “mixed” the leaven into the dough, the word used is *enkrypto*, which means “to hide.” It’s built from the root *krypto*, which is far more common: *enkrypto* is used only here in the New Testament. English words like cryptology and encryption, referring to secret codes, are derived from it.

**Finders keepers?**—The parable of the hidden treasure in a field does not say anything about why the treasure-finder was poking around in someone else’s field, nor does it speak to the ethics of buying someone’s land without disclosing the presence of a massive treasure. Was he looking for treasure, like someone crisscrossing the beach or a historic battlefield with a metal detector? We typically imagine that the man was a hired hand sent out to plow, but the story does not say so. Nor does the story identify the treasure or say how long it had been there: things we would like to know. Presumably, if the owner of the field had known about the treasure he would not have sold it, so perhaps the lucky finder/buyer felt justified in keeping it for himself.

**Pearly drinks**—Readers might be interested to know that the Greek word for pearl is *margarita*. The alcoholic drink known as a margarita probably gets its name from the Spanish word for “daisy.” It is similar to a brandy cocktail known as a “daisy” that was popular during Prohibition.

Some ancient stories associate pearls and drinking, though alcohol was not involved. Pliny noted that pearls were considered of utmost value in the Roman empire: more valuable than gold or rubies. He and several other Latin writers recount a story in which Cleopatra reportedly bet Mark Antony that she could finish off 10,000,000 sesterces’ worth of food and drink in a single meal. When it was time for the dessert course, a small dish of vinegar was brought to her. Cleopatra, according to the story, was wearing earrings made from the two largest pearls ever found, gifts of visiting kings. She removed one of her impressive pearls and put it in the vinegar, where it dissolved. She then drank it and won the wager by slurping up a highly valuable pearl.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Horace, another Latin writer known for his satire, told a similar story claiming that a certain son of the famous actor Aesopus took a pearl from the ear of an infamous woman named Metella, a celebrity of her time, and likewise dissolved it in vinegar. Horace commented that he might as well have thrown it into a river.

While I found these stories in Amy Jill Levine's *Short Stories of Jesus* (Harper Collins, 2014), pp. 146-147, the sources are Pliny, *Natural History* 9.119-21, and Horace, *Sermons* 2.3.239-42. They are also discussed in B. Ullman, "Cleopatra's Pearls," *Classical Journal* 52.5(1957), [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/journals/CJ/52/5/Cleopatras\\_Pearls\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/journals/CJ/52/5/Cleopatras_Pearls*.html).

**A self-portrait?**—Commentators have often imagined that v. 52 is like the author's self-portrait: he thinks of himself as a Christian scribe who understands the new teachings of Jesus and is able to relate them to ancient teachings preserved in the Hebrew scriptures. Matthew constantly quotes from the Old Testament, seeing ways in which Jesus fulfilled or related to Israel's religious heritage.

## The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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### What's missing?

While Matthew has brought together several parables of the kingdom from a variety of sources, attentive readers might note that he omitted a related kingdom parable that he clearly had at his disposal. The author of Matthew often follows the gospel of Mark, who pairs the parable of the mustard seed with another short parable often referred to as “the seed growing secretly” (Mark 4:26-29).

Jesus said: “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself (*automatos*) the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The main point seems to be that the kingdom was founded by God’s initiative, and God could be trusted to bring it to fruition. The verse about the harvest is a rough quotation of Joel 3:13, an Old Testament prophecy regarding the surety of a coming judgment. The main point, then, is that the seed grows by itself. We can neither “bring in the kingdom” nor predict the time of its ultimate revelation.

We can’t fully understand how the kingdom grows, but we can trust God that it will. Our tendency is to try and explain everything. I remember how delighted I was in biology class to learn something about how plants grow—how the apical meristem of a shoot undergoes continual mitosis, rapidly producing cells which then differentiate into xylem or phloem or cambium or epithelium—but none of that knowledge enabled me to actually make a seed grow. The seed grows by itself.

This is not to say that we have no place in the story. The first farmer was Jesus, sowing the seeds of the kingdom in the hearts and minds of his followers. But one of the secrets of kingdom growth is that Jesus’ followers are called to continue sowing the seed of Christ’s kingdom love. In other places, Jesus taught us not only to be faithful in sowing the seed by proclaiming the kingdom, but also to recognize that there is already a harvest in the field that needs to be brought in (Luke 10:2).

The growth of the kingdom is a cooperative venture. It is God who makes it grow, but we have a part in the sowing and the reaping as we work to bring others to Christ and as faithful subjects of the kingdom.

Why did Matthew not include this parable? Perhaps it is because he wanted to pair the parable of the mustard seed with the parable of the leaven, and thought those were sufficient illustration of how the kingdom grows mysteriously as the work of God. The other parables in the sequence emphasize the need for human response to the claims of the gospel.