5. Journey’s End

As our Journey Through the Parables comes to a close, it’s time to look over the path we’ve taken and the lessons we’ve learned along the way. We have read all of Jesus’ parables together this year, absorbing not just the stories themselves, but the deeper meanings behind them. As we hear tales about servants and wedding guests, fathers and sons, sinners and tax collectors, we enter into the stories and we feel what they feel. By teaching through parables, Jesus makes the truth take root not just in our heads, but in our hearts.

We have seen a number of different kinds of parables. Some begin, “The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a...” and from them we learn about God’s Holy Kingdom. Others are about relationships: God’s relationship with us, our relationships with one another, and even Jesus’ relationship with God’s people, Israel. We learn about the end of days and about the meaning of forgiveness. Many parables teach us about several themes at once! Usually, we’ve been reading one parable at a time, but perhaps it would be interesting to go through those themes, one by one, tracing them through the long list of parables we’ve covered.

The Kingdom of Heaven

We began our study with some of the simplest parables. Jesus would say, “The Kingdom of heaven is like unto...” and offer a simple image in just a few words -- and yet, when we really thought about them, and when we considered the teachings of the Holy Fathers, we found that those little images packed a lot of information!

We learned that the Kingdom of heaven is like unto a mustard seed: it seems to be so very tiny, but it grows into such an enormous tree, giving shelter to every kind of bird. This is the Holy Church, which grows and grows to make room for, and to take care of, every sort of person there is. We learned more about seeds in other parables: we found that Christ the Sower plants the seeds of faith into every one of us, and if the soil of our hearts is good, those seeds, like the mustard seed, will grow; and from The Wheat and the Tares we found that in addition to those good seeds of faith, other seeds are sown by the Enemy, causing weeds to grow up among the good and fruitful plants. Every one of these parables seemed so simple, but taught us some important, and complicated, truths. What if we bring all three of these visions of seeds together? Jesus uses this seed imagery to show us something lovely: God gives us these small seeds of faith, and we can receive them and nurture them by making sure we have removed the rocks of sin from our hearts. This will allow the Kingdom to grow strong inside of us. Imagine that: we will carry the Kingdom within us, and it will be enormous and fruitful and good! But we must also be cautious, because not all seeds come from God, and we might also be nurturing bad seeds which bear bad fruit!
We have seen that the Kingdom of heaven is like the leaven or yeast we mix into flour to make our bread rise; when we receive these tiny seeds of yeast, they cause such a transformation and growth in our hearts! We learned that the Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that a man found in a field, or a great pearl found among lesser pearls: it’s something so valuable and wonderful that we must run and sell all that we have, giving everything for the Kingdom, the one precious thing that really matters. How important it is that we allow this beautiful Kingdom of heaven to enter into the soft soil of our hearts and to grow and grow, transforming us! There is nothing more important than nurturing those seeds and embracing that transformation, the Kingdom alive in our hearts.

We have also learned that the Kingdom of heaven is like a wedding feast! It’s a banquet thrown for us by God. If we think about a banquet, we might imagine a big long table, with beautiful tablecloths and flowers and dishes full of food! God’s banquet for us is like that. Heaven is set up by our heavenly Father to welcome us and nourish us. It will be a wonderful and joyful thing to be in Heaven; we can see from the idea of the banquet that it’s not lonely there, and you won’t need anything because it’s all there for you. Of course, finding our way to the banquet can be difficult: like the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom to bring them to the wedding, we must stay alert and keep our lamps filled with oil! We should always be watching for God, serving Him and building up our oil by serving His people around us. If we are vigilant, our Lord will escort us to that glorious banquet.

We have also seen that some people will not accept their invitation to the banquet. Some people will say that they are way too busy with work, with their new wives and their big farms -- the gifts God has given them are so interesting that they start to forget God! God will send out His servants to collect everyone -- even out to the “highways and the hedges”, and even gathering tax collectors and sinners. He will bring all of them to the banquet -- but they’ll have to put on their wedding garment and keep it clean, so that they are fit to be good wedding guests. Otherwise, they may be bound and thrown out by the angels! Of course, sometimes we do fall away from God, forgetting about Him or committing sins that carry us away from Him. Jesus offers us The Parable of the Prodigal Son to remind us that even if we walk away from God and waste all the wonderful things He’s given us, He is still there for us. If we realize our mistake, repent and run back to Him, He’ll kill a fatted calf and offer up a banquet for us! God creates the banquet for us, and wants only that we come and join Him there.

God’s Thoughts are Not Our Thoughts, and His Ways are Not Our Ways

Another of the major themes we find in Jesus’ parables is that God’s judgement is not the same as man’s judgement. That is to say, as humans we think we know what is good or bad, but God often sees it very differently. For instance, think of the times when God is seen as a sort of farmer. We remember from The Wheat and the Tares that when the workers saw that an Enemy had mixed in nasty weeds with the wheat they’d planted, they all thought the right thing to do was to weed that field immediately! But the farmer, God, saw it differently, and waited until the whole crop had grown up together, so that he could very carefully separate the good from the bad. We also know that when a farmer hired people throughout the day to work for them, He paid them all the same amount of money! The longer-working people were so upset, because by human judgement, everyone should get what they deserve, and people who show up late should not be paid as much as the people who come early.

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Of course, Jesus is showing us that God pays all of us equally. He gives us His mercy and His boundless love and life eternal! God loves every one of us, and offers each of us the same wonderful reward.

Throughout the parables, there are also times when Jesus is showing us that God often disagrees with us when we try to judge another person’s character. For example, when the Publican and the Pharisee went into the Temple to pray, most of the people who saw them would have thought that the Pharisee would be God’s favorite, for he prayed and fasted and followed all of the rules. The Publican was a tax collector, a man who had done cruel and bad things, so people didn’t like him and they thought God wouldn’t like him either. But they were wrong! God preferred the Publican because of his great humility and repentance. So often we see proud and confident people and we admire their strength and power, but God loves humility; He loves the small, meek people.

Israel and the Gentiles

Many of Jesus’ parables have a clear application for our own spiritual lives, but they also comment on God’s relationship with His people, the Israelites. We will call the other people on earth “Gentiles”, which pretty much just means that a person is not Jewish, and we call God’s people “Israel”, which is the name He gave to them. God had chosen a people to become a lamp for the whole world; that is to say, He took special care of the Israelites so that they would shine forth God’s light to everyone else. He wanted all of the people in the world to realize that He was God by seeing Him at work with His people, like when He parted the Red Sea for Moses. He did these big beautiful miracles for Israel, and they were the keepers of His Kingdom.

In The Parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that three people walk past a man who is dying on the street: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The priest and the Levite are religious leaders of Israel--but Jesus says that they don’t help the man. They aren’t good and loving leaders; they aren’t properly serving their people by leading them to Christ. It’s someone else, the Samaritan, from a different culture and background, who does the work God wants us to do. We can see here that Jesus is saying that He has given the Israelites the first opportunity to do His work, but they’re not doing it, so it’s going to be done by outsiders.

In two of the banquet parables, we see that God the Father invites His people, Israel, to the great feast He has prepared, but they refuse to come! He is upset that they won’t join Him, but He sends His servants into the highways and the hedges to invite everyone else. The banquet will go on, but it will be filled with all sorts of other people; God’s people won’t be Israel anymore, but it will be anyone who chooses to come to the banquet. Of course, some Israelites will come, and a lot of Gentiles will come, and anyone at the feast is God’s people now.

In one of those banquet parables, the people who are first invited, actually kill the servants who bring them invitations! In fact, Israel had killed several of God’s prophets, who were the servants that brought them God’s word, His invitation to the Kingdom banquet. We see this again when Jesus tells The Parable of the Vineyard or of the Wicked Husbandmen. In this parable, God has created a beautiful garden for His people, and put up a lovely hedge around it to protect them. He made everything wonderful, and put His chosen people in charge of farming it, with the agreement that they would give
Him some of the harvest when it was ready. They didn’t ever pay Him like they were supposed to, of course, and Jesus is telling us that Israel has not stayed true to their covenants or agreements with God. Just as God sent His prophets to Israel, the vineyard owner sends his servants, but instead of listening to the servants, they start killing them! Israel killed His prophets, and now God has sent His Only Begotten Son to them. Jesus is letting us know that, like those nasty vineyard tenants, the chief priests of Israel are hatching a plan to kill Him, the Son of God, who has come to call them to offer up worship to God. But those tenants won’t offer the harvest to the owner, just like Israel will not offer up their love and their people to God. Jesus tells us that the vineyard owner is going to bring in new tenants, anyone he can find, to replace them -- that is, Israel will no longer be the chosen people of God, but instead, the Gentiles who come to work in the vineyard will replace them.

It’s not all of Israel that rejects Jesus. Many of the Israelites were baptized and became disciples of Christ, though many did not. The leaders of Israel have turned away from God. The high priests and the scribes have power in this community, because God gave them power, but instead of using that power to serve Him and to bring all of the people to the Son, the Messiah who has come to lead them and save them, they want to keep that power for themselves. Jesus teaches about their bad leadership in several parables. For instance, in *The Parable of the Good Shepherd*, we find that the flock -- that is, God’s people -- knows its real Shepherd, Jesus, but there are also some thieves sneaking in at night, trying to take them away! Those thieves are the leaders of Israel, trying to lead God’s sheep away from Him. Jesus lets them know that He has other flocks out there -- He has sheep among the Gentiles, and all of us together are His flock.

**The Second Coming and Last Judgement**

Jesus uses parables to describe the Kingdom of heaven now, but He also teaches us about what is coming for the future of the Kingdom: He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose Kingdom shall have no end. Through various different parables, He gives us a lot of insight into what that Last Judgement will be like, and what we should do so that we are judged to be good members of His flock.

In *The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*, Jesus tells us that the Enemy, the devil, has sowed some bad things in the midst of the good things He created, and when the harvest is ready, at the end of days, He will sort them out, dividing the wheat from the tares. This farming image is very important, because there is so much hidden meaning behind it. It is clear that we want to be the wheat -- not the tares which will be cast into the fire! Tares are weeds, and they don’t produce any good fruit, but the wheat produces good grains that feed and nourish us. God offers an eternal reward for us if we can be fruitful, developing the fruits of the spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). What’s more, the wheat image reminds us of the idea that Jesus is the Bread of Life, and in Holy Communion, we receive His Body through the miraculous transformation of bread, which is really transformed wheat! God wants us to be fruitful like wheat, and that good wheat is very clearly associated with Jesus. We are called to become like Christ, so that when He returns in glory, He will judge us fruitful and good.

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Those who are judged to be tares are burnt -- just like we see in The Parable of the Dragnet, where the fisherman pull in a big net of fish, and they separate the good and the bad. Jesus tells us that the angels at the end of the age will separate us into wicked people and just people, and the wicked ones will be cast into the furnace of fire. We see this in The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in which the wicked rich man had no compassion and never once reached out to help poor Lazarus who was covered in sores and starving at his gate. In Hades, the rich man says that he is tormented in this flame. Jesus is teaching us that there is a punishment for wickedness, and it’s like a fire. God has created Paradise for us, and it’s like a beautiful banquet, but if you truly refuse to join Him at the table, the only place left to go is a terrible place, like a fire. At the banquet we have everything we need, but without that banquet, we don’t have what we need, like protection and water to help our thirst. Jesus is the Bread of Life, He’s the Living Water -- without those, we suffer and struggle.

Jesus is especially clear about how the Last Judgement will work when He tells The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, He will have all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, including us; we will actually see Jesus on His throne! That’s an amazing idea. We have known He will separate us, but now we understand that we will all be together, all of the nations and all of the people, gathered before Christ in His glory! In this parable, Jesus describes it as the way a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. Once again, we know that sheep are fruitful, providing wool, but goats don’t provide wool. What’s more, sheep obey and goats don’t. He then adds a new idea: the sheep are the ones who see Jesus in every person, serving Him by giving people food and drink and love, and the goats don’t. They don’t see Jesus in other people, totally missing the idea that serving other people is serving Christ.

Jesus also teaches us about the timing of His Second Coming, or rather, He teaches that we won’t know when He’s coming! Like the ten virgins, we have to be ready at any moment because we have no idea when He’ll be here. At the same time, we are like the people in The Parable of the Servants Waiting for their Lord: our Lord will take a long, long time to return, and we may start losing patience and even start being mean to one another! In The Parable of the Tenacious Widow, He emphasizes that we must be persistent like her, always praying and never losing heart. Because it will take a long time for Him to return, it will be hard for us to hold on to our faith, but we must be tenacious, and then the Judge, Christ in glory at the Last Judgement, will grant us our request, eternal life and communion with Him. Jesus asks, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” He predicts that it will be difficult for Christians to wait so long -- and now it’s already been about two thousand years! That truly is a long time to wait, and yet, we must be ready. He could come at any moment.

**There is Work to Be Done!**

Jesus often tells parables where we are servants or workers, because He expects us to do a lot of work! We are servants in the vineyard of His great world, and so we are supposed to be working in the vineyard! We will all receive the same one denarii as everyone else if we can go to work. He’ll be happy with how we took care of that vineyard if we are serving Him when we do it, if we are sharing the harvest with Him. Jesus is clear: the Christian life is not about sitting back and enjoying our blessings,
but about taking those blessings into the world and helping God make His beautiful creation even more wonderful.

In several parables, we learn that God gives us so many blessings, and He will not be happy if He returns to find that we didn’t do anything with them. In The Parable of the Talents, He comes home and rewards the servants who have taken the gifts He gave them and put them to work, so that the blessing increased! He is very disappointed with the servant who receives those gifts, and just buries them. It’s not only about money. We think also of The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, where a man is given the gift of forgiveness, but he doesn’t spread it around by forgiving others. He receives that forgiveness happily, but he doesn’t give forgiveness when he is asked.

It’s not just a coincidence that God gives us blessings and we should share them. He actually gives us the blessings because He wants us to share them! Think of The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: God gave the rich man so much money and food, and nice big house. But the poor starving man at his gate was also a gift! God saw that he was not generous, and God wanted him to enter into the joy of heaven, not to go suffer in Hades. God wanted him to learn to love another person, so He placed Lazarus at the gate to give him the opportunity to share. The whole point of the rich man’s blessings was to allow him to develop a loving and generous spirit, but he never did. We see the same thing in The Parable of the Rich Fool, where the rich man is about to die, and he hasn’t been generous and loving, so God blesses him with a huge harvest at the end of his life. He has all that he needs and much, much more: God is giving him all the opportunity to soften his heart and do something fruitful and good with his wealth! As St. John Chrysostom says in his sermon, we should store our riches in the best bank of all: the bellies of the poor! We store up treasure in heaven when we use what God gives us, whether it’s time or money or talents, to take care of the people on our path. We should see Christ in every person and then serve that person! When you see a hungry person, that’s Jesus who is hungry -- feed Him! If you see a thirsty person, give him a drink, because He is Jesus! We aren’t called to fix all hunger and make everything perfect, but God does give us blessings so that we can serve other people, and in doing so, we are serving Him.

Conclusion

Thank you so much for joining us on this amazing journey through Christ’s parables. We have learned so much together! We have come to know more about the Kingdom and about our relationships with God and with each other. But we also gained something else: we have these stories now. They live in our heads and our hearts, and as we go through our lives, lots of things will happen. We’ll be in new situations which will make us look back on a parable and understand it even better! These stories are messages -- seeds -- that Jesus has planted in our hearts, and they will continue to grow even after we finish these lessons together!

QUESTIONS:

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Now it’s your turn to ask a question! Is there something that’s been on your mind, some unanswered curiosity about one or more of the parables? Send it in! Go to tending-the-garden.com/contact and let us know.

FOR DISCUSSION:

Talk a little about your experience of studying Christ’s parables. Were there any parables that you heard for the first time this year? Were there any that you had heard before, but you learned something completely new about them as you studied this time? Do you have a favorite parable? Which one? Why is it your favorite? If you could jump into one of the parables, which one would you want to be part of, and why?