Lesson 11
Matthew 13

We get the word *parable* from a Greek word (*parabolē*) meaning “to set aside” or “to compare.” It is a translation of a Hebrew word (*mashal*) that we usually translate as *proverb*, but we might better translate that word as *wise saying*. The Hebrew word covers a wide range of things, from what we call proverbs and what we call parables to what we might call a sermon.

During Jesus’s time parables appear to have been used by many teachers. Usually they were given in answer to a question, often a question asked by a follower; and they not only answered the question asked but did so by showing that there is more to the answer than the follower thought. Used that way, parables are a way of making the questioner think about his question.

As Joseph Smith pointed out, it is often very helpful to ask ourselves what the question was that produced the answer (see the study materials for lesson 8), what answer might have been expected, and how the parable goes beyond the answer that might have been expected. We may also want to ask ourselves what question *we* might have to which the parable is an answer and how that answer goes beyond what we might have expected.
N. T. Wright argues that Jesus’s hearers would not have heard the parable of the sower as we do. Instead, they would have heard it as a parable about Israel’s exile and return, comparable to Isaiah 6 and Jacob. For them the point would have been that Israel has been sown in Palestine, but only some have hearkened to Jesus’s revelation of the kingdom of God. However, if Wright is correct, why doesn’t this parable begin, as others do, with “The kingdom of God is like . . .”? Whether Wright’s interpretation of the parable is correct or not, he makes what I think is an insightful remark: “The parable itself is a parable about parables and their effect: this is the only way that the spectacular truth can be told, and it is bound to have the effect that some will look and look and never see, while others find the mystery suddenly unveiled, and they see what God is doing.”

**Verses 1–2:** Chapter 12 seems to begin in a grain field, but it ends indoors, perhaps in a synagogue, perhaps in a private home. At the end of chapter 12, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for thinking him evil and for asking for a sign, and he uses the visit of his family to make the point that anyone who does the will of the Father is Jesus’s brother. Here in chapter 13, he goes back outside and sits by the seaside to teach. When a large crowd gathers, he moves to a boat slightly offshore. Why does he do so? How will that help him teach?

As you read this chapter, think about how these teachings relate to what has come before them. What kinds of people are in the crowd? Are there likely to be scribes and Pharisees among them? Why? Who do you think would compose
the majority of the multitude? Are the disciples also there? What teaching problem does this mixture of people present? How does Jesus deal with that problem?

**Verses 3–8:** Verse 3 begins, “He spake many things to them in parables, saying . . .” Then Matthew recounts the parable of the sower. How do you explain that introduction to the parable? Is Matthew doing more than merely recounting the parable Jesus told? In the parable Jesus seems to describe a very ordinary set of circumstances. The farmer has plowed his field. Remember that he did this by hand and that only the rich could afford an animal to pull the plow, so the audience probably doesn’t have in mind someone plowing with an animal. The result is that he doesn’t plow deep or evenly. But as he plows, not every spot in the field is equally good for planting: there are paths in it beaten down by those crossing the field, there are stony areas, some of the thorny weeds were not plowed under and have survived, and even the places with good ground have different yields. Though the farmer knows this, when he sows seed, he seems to sow it over the entire field, regardless of its quality for planting. Why? Is the yield—one hundred times, sixty times, and thirty times what was sown in the good soil—what the farmer would expect, or is it a surprising yield?

What does this parable teach? It doesn’t come in direct response to a question, but what is the implicit question that it answers? Does it teach only one thing? Suppose you didn’t have the explanation given in verses 18–23. To what could you compare the parable? Does it teach us anything about missionary work?
Joseph Smith gave an interpretation of this parable. How does Joseph’s interpretation apply to our own day?³

**Verse 9:** Some read Jesus’s remarks about parables here and in other places as telling us that Jesus wished to conceal his teaching. It is easy to see how one might come to that conclusion, but I think it is mistaken. I think he is telling us about revelation, not about concealment.

What does this verse tell us about the responsibility for understanding Jesus’s teaching? What does that tell us about how we receive revelation? Given the conflicts we’ve seen in previous chapters and stories, what group is most likely not to have ears to hear (or, in our usage, “ears that hear”)? In other words, whom do you think Jesus may have in mind? Why?

Are those who have been excluded—the “sinners” according to Pharisaic law—more likely to hear what Jesus has to say? If so, why?

Might this particular parable be intended to inspire the disciples who have seen the intense opposition of the scribes and Pharisees? How?

What does it take for us to have ears that hear? When are we most likely not to have ears that hear?

Are Jesus’s parables supposed to work like the parable that Nathan told David so that, on hearing them, we will hear “Thou art the man” (1 Samuel 12:7)?

**Verse 10:** Has Jesus left the boat in which he was sitting?
Why do you think that the disciples ask this question? Is it significant that they ask why Jesus speaks to them (in other words, the other people, the multitude) in parables?

Verses 11–12: Verse 12 may have been a common proverb: “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Jesus applies it here to the disciples. What do the disciples have that has been given to them? In the context of the foregoing parable, what do others not have? Specifically, what does Israel not have? So what will be taken from them?

Verses 13–17: Can you put this explanation for why Jesus teaches in parables in your own words? Whom have we seen not hear what John the Baptist and Jesus teach, and what prevented them from hearing?

Jesus quotes scripture to them (the Greek version of Isaiah 6:9–10). Why does he quote scripture? Does it have anything to do with having ears that hear?

Does verse 15 tell us that God closed the people’s eyes and ears so that they could not see and hear, or does it tell us that the people closed them so as not to see and hear? How do we close our eyes and ears to the teachings of the prophets? What blessing have the disciples received that many prophets and righteous people did not receive (verses 16–17)?

Verses 18–23: If the disciples have ears that hear and eyes that see, as Jesus has said in verse 16, why does he have to explain the parable to them?

Why is it important for the disciples to have this teaching about the different ways that people respond to the message of the gospel?
The images here are common in Jewish literature: trees by a stream with roots that sustain them (Jeremiah 17:8; Ezekiel 31:2–5; Psalm 1:3), trees with shallow roots that wither (Sirach 40:15; Wisdom 4:3–4; Isaiah 40:24). Those images were part of people’s everyday experience. Are there contemporary images that might work for us as those images worked for them?

There is a progression in verse 23, from receiving to understanding to bearing fruit. What do you make of that progression?

**Verses 24–30:** Verse 24 tells us that Jesus spoke another parable unto “them.” This time to whom does that refer, to the multitude or to the disciples? What clues in the chapter help you decide?

Matthew introduces this parable (and that which begins in verse 31) with language that is very much like that used by Moses when he gave the Law to the people. (See Exodus 19:7.) Why might he have done so?

Matthew could have placed the explanation of this parable immediately after the parable, but he doesn’t. He gives Jesus’s explanation (in verses 36–43) only after he tells two more parables. Why do you think he does that?

As he has done earlier, Jesus appears to be working from one of John’s prophecies, amplifying it. (Compare Matthew 3:12.) Why might he have done so?

Jesus tells several parables that begin “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” The word translated *kingdom* literally means “reign.” In its earliest usages it meant “the king’s
power and dignity,” and it continued to have those connotations. How does this word relate to the Israelite understanding of themselves? To their expectations of the Messiah? How is it relevant to John the Baptist’s preaching that “the kingdom is nearby” (Matthew 3:2)? What word or words do you think would best translate the idea of the reign of God into contemporary English?

In what does the King of Heaven exhibit his power and dignity? Most commentators assume that the tares (weeds) were darnel, a weed that looks like wheat and sometimes carries a poisonous fungus. Does that add anything to your understanding of the parable?

We usually understand this parable as a parable about the Church in the last days. Some, however, have understood it originally to have been about Israel: it is important not to force too soon the separation of those in Israel who believe in Jesus from those who have not done so. Which interpretation do you think most reasonable? Why?

**Verses 31–32:** What question might Jesus be answering? Why answer with a parable in this particular case? What does this parable address that many people might have found scandalous about the early Christian church?

The mustard seed is indeed small, but it isn’t the smallest of seeds. And the mustard shrub, though large, isn’t gigantic. It grows to about ten or twelve feet. Jesus is using hyperbole here. Can you think of other places where he does so or may do so? Why would he use hyperbole?

Joseph Smith also gave an interpretation of this parable. Is that the only way we can legitimately interpret the parable?
Why or why not? The kingdom of God is often referred to as a tree in scripture, but this is perhaps the only time it is compared to an herb. Those who heard Jesus probably would have been surprised at his use of a mustard seed and the mustard plant. Why do you think he might have used a metaphor that they wouldn’t have expected?

**Verse 33:** Compare 1 Corinthians 5:6. Is leaven used as a symbol in the same way in both places? How is this parable the same as the immediately previous one? How is it different?

This is one of the few places where leaven is used as a positive symbol. See, for example, Matthew 16:6, and remember that every house had to be completely free of leaven during Passover. How is leaven a good symbol for evil? In this parable, how is it a good symbol of the reign of heaven?

We have an interpretation of this parable by Joseph Smith as well.5

**Verses 34–35:** Matthew says that Jesus teaches only in parables when he teaches the multitude, but that hasn’t been the case from the beginning. Jesus gave some parables in the Sermon on the Mount, but he didn’t speak only in parables. Why do you think his teaching method has changed?

**Verses 36–43:** Compare the explanation that Jesus gives here with the explanation in Doctrine and Covenants 86:1–7. What do you make of the differences in explanation? Do those differences help us better understand how to think about parables? According to this interpretation, what is Jesus trying to explain, evil persons in the world or evil persons in the kingdom? What do you learn if you
think it about it each way? What do you learn if you think about it as the Doctrine and Covenants does?

**Verse 44:** To whom do you think Jesus is speaking in this verse? Is he still speaking only to the disciples, or has he turned back to speak to the multitude?

What do we learn about the kingdom of heaven from this parable that we didn’t learn from the previous parables (verses 24–33)?

**Verses 45–46:** Does this parable teach anything different from the last one? If not, why did Jesus tell two parables, one after the other, with the same meaning? If it does have a different meaning, what is it? If it doesn’t, why does Matthew repeat it?

**Verses 47–50:** Does this parable differ significantly in its teaching from the parable of the wheat and the tares?

Do we learn anything from the order of these parables: the sower, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed and the leaven, the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price, and the fishing net? Can you attribute a primary teaching to each of these and then see any coherence to their order?

**Verse 51:** Jesus introduces the final parable in this series with a question: “Have ye understood all these things?” Why does he think he must ask that before telling the next parable?

**Verse 52:** Pay attention to the footnote for “which is instructed.” With the possible exception of the parable of the sower, all of the previous parables have been about the
kingdom of heaven. This one is about someone who becomes a disciple in that kingdom. Why does Jesus end this series of parables with this one?

Do you think that the disciples would have been surprised by the person Jesus uses as an example of someone who becomes a disciple? Why? Why do you think Jesus uses that example?

What would a scribe (a rabbi, a recognized interpreter of the Law) treasure? What old things would be in his treasury? What new things? Is what Jesus says here and his way of doing so related to the method he used when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount: “you have heard it said [something “old’], but I say [something “new’]”?

Verses 53–58: Jesus returns to Nazareth (presumably) and teaches in the synagogue. People are amazed at his wisdom (probably referring to the parables, his wise sayings). When they ask how he got this wisdom and how he does these mighty works or miracles, why are they amazed? Why are they offended? (The Greek word translated offended could also have been translated scandalized or caused to stumble.)

How does this event relate to the teaching at the beginning of the chapter (verses 13–15)?