

**Parables of Jesus//The Parables of the Kingdom
Part Four - "The Kingdom Is Like..."**

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Matthew 13:31-52

**What do you expect life with God will be like?
What's the "kingdom of heaven" like?**

Jesus is giving us these "portraits of the kingdom" to confront false expectations and help us reimagine what the kingdom of heaven is really like, and how it is coming.

The people around Jesus, they're straining, squinting at the horizon, in search of the inbreaking of the kingdom. And what they are looking for, what they expect was that God's kingdom would burst onto the scene, in power and mighty. Big. Powerful. Victorious.

Enter Jesus. This son of peasants, from the back side of nowhere-Nazareth, wandering through the wilderness in relative poverty. And he begins to announce: "the kingdom of God has come near."

Jesus continues...

³¹He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it's the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

³³He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

³⁴Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. ³⁵So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."

³⁶Then he [Jesus] left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the story of the weeds in the field."

– Matthew 13:31-36

I. The 'Smallness' of Kingdom-Beginnings

"I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel, I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches." – Ezekiel 17:22-23

Shelter in the shade of its branches – for birds of every kind. Jesus is pointing to a kingdom where people from every nation and background find home and shelter.

This “tiny seed”, Jesus says, will become the largest of all the garden plants. Large enough to provide shelter to the birds.

The Kingdom of Heaven starts small, but becomes a place of refuge, and safety, and rest.

Jesus’ own life – and his body – as the seed that is planted in the ground, only to give way to the growth of the kingdom.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” – John 12:24

II. The Pervasive Good of the Kingdom

Our common belief in the equality of all humans is not just a “given.” It is a deeply Christian view of the world that has worked its way, imperceptibly, but pervasively, into our culture. Our belief in equality is evidence of, well, the influence of the kingdom of heaven. This idea has- like yeast- pervaded, almost imperceptibly, the fabric of our culture.

As God’s people, the church – Jesus’ living body here on earth – we need to know that when we get on board with God’s kingdom work, it will have this pervasive impact for the good. **Do not underestimate the impact of his kingdom coming through our work.**

The kingdom of heaven is irrepressible. It pervades and persists. So, we keep spreading the seeds of hope.

III. The Kingdom of Ultimate Value

⁴⁴ *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”*

There are many challenges, heartaches, and pressures that come from following Jesus in the way of the kingdom. Jesus promises that. But there is something else: the incredible joy of knowing the love of God for you, of being made new on the inside, of the freedom to love with God’s love. No wonder the man is full of joy.

Another angle to deepen this point:

⁴⁵ *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

Parables are not simple analogies that ‘clear everything up,’ they work on us, and I think they work on multiple levels. I think it may be working multiple levels of meaning.

Meaning One: It might mean that in the same way as the man who sells his land to buy the field with the treasure, so too, this pearl merchant sells all his other pearls to buy this one.

That means no other approach to life compares to what God is giving us in the kingdom of his Son. It might seem unwise to put “all your eggs in one basket,” but with the kingdom, this investment is really all there is. You *do* put all your eggs here. You do sell off all other ways of life to gain this on. No hedging bets. It’s all on the table. This tells you, and me: “Do not think to have some other ideology, other spirituality, in your back pocket. This is it.”

Meaning Two: Notice: the “kingdom” here is not like a “pearl” of great value – that would be a one-to-one equivalent to the kingdom is like a “treasure hidden in a field.” But that’s not what the text says. The kingdom is not like the *pearl*, it’s like the *pearl merchant*. What does that mean? if the “kingdom” is like a merchant, who’s the merchant? And what’s the pearl? What’s this search all about?

Maybe it’s the inverse of the treasure in the field story. There, *we* are the person who “finds” the treasure – and “sell it all” to gain the kingdom. But here “the merchant” – maybe that’s God. And what does God seek out? In Luke 19:10 Jesus says: “The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.”

Could the pearl of great value be us – God’s people? Maybe you and I are the pearl? Certainly, in Jesus, God shows his radical, generous love – he “sells it all” to purchase us for himself. Like, maybe we’re the pearl?

This is true of how salvation works all through the scriptures. On the one hand, we discover the “treasure of the kingdom,” and you’d be a fool not to sell it all – to give up life on your own terms – to get the true life in Christ, to get that treasure.

But then, on the other hand, you aren’t the only one doing the searching! In fact, God was searching for you before you ever knew it. God does go searching, to buy back a people for himself. And he only gets that at great cost to himself – by giving his life for us.

Kingdom people know the treasure of being treasured – the joy of being God’s joy. And when we know that, we are “sold out entirely” to this kingdom way of life. And we join God’s “search and rescue” mission – this way of life.

Really, the picture that emerges is one of love. God’s love for you. And your exceeding joy in that love – of being brought into that love. And we experience this love right now.

IV. The Kingdom of Ultimate Consequence

⁴⁷ “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets but threw the bad away.

⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

⁵² He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

When talking of the mustard seed and yeast, the treasure, and the pearl, we can see that the kingdom is already present with Jesus’ coming. The kingdom has come with the coming of King Jesus. Here we see that what we “do with Jesus”, and his kingdom, is of ultimate consequence.

This last parable reminds us that the “kingdom” has a future dimension to it; that the kingdom will come in fullness with a final judgment – this great reckoning.

Jesus is talking about eternal destiny. The kingdom is a matter of life or destruction. The wicked, says Jesus, will not be allowed to continue their wickedness forever. There will be an end to the wickedness. Only those who want God and God’s ways will be part of God’s good future. For the kingdom will be free of the violence, oppression, and evil that we still see.

“When I think about the distinctive features of the kingdom of heaven on earth...and look at the world with “kingdom eyes” to see what Jesus was driving at, considering the effect his stories have on us, it begins to dawn on me what he was talking about: love.

Love turns everything right-side up. Love cannot be stopped and never runs out....Love is wonderful, astonishing, and indescribable....Jesus was trying to get his disciples to see how God rules the world – a king and his kingdom on earth – through love. Not just any love, but the love of God revealed in and through the Messiah and his disciples. That’s why he told stories, envisioning what the world would look like if we loved one another with such a heavenly love....

It is the love of Christ that opposes evil, that leavens the whole world. It is a priceless pearl, a hidden treasure, the net that gathers the disciples of Jesus.” – Rodney Reeves

Reflection Questions

When you think about the phrase “the kingdom of God” or Matthew’s equivalent, “the kingdom of heaven”, what images come to mind?

How do the image of a mustard seed and of yeast change, challenge, or enrich what you thought about?

In what ways is God calling you to keep up the “good work” he has given you in the world? How does the pervasive, irrepressible sense of “yeast in dough” an encouragement to you in this regard?

In the parable of the treasure in a field, the man sells everything – in joy! – to gain the treasure. How has the kingdom brought joy to you? What can you do over the next weeks to “treasure” what God has given you in Christ?

The “pearl of great value” might be a reference to how God sees us. How does understanding the great joy, and the deep cost that Jesus pays to buy you back, encourage your heart? How can you remind your heart of his love for you this week?

The kingdom has already come when Jesus comes, but it is still coming in all its fullness at the ‘end of the age.’ How does this reality that God will not allow evil to persist strengthen your heart? How does it call you to respond in faith to Jesus?

Prayer

Take some time to express your thanks to God for his rich love for you. Ask God for wisdom and strength to continue seeking his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33) in all you do.