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Bread of Life
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Matt. 13:24-52

What is the Kingdom of God Like?

I spend a lot of my time trying to teach kids. This includes my own kids; but I also do this every morning for work, when I teach English to Chinese kids online. When you're trying to teach a child a simple word, such as a noun like, "apple," it's fairly easy: you just hold up a picture of an apple and say, "apple." Or for the verb "run," you pretend to run and say, "I run." You get the picture; simple, right?

But what about a more complex, abstract word, like "forgiveness" or "flattery"? How do you teach that to a young child, especially if they are not native English speakers? You try to *draw a comparison*, based on what they already know. If you're teaching them the word "similar," and they already know "equal" from learning math, then you can say, "it's like the word 'equal.'" It's not exactly the same, but it gets closer to the point. Sometimes, I try to do this by *telling a story* or giving a word picture that plays out the concept of harder words, like "forgiveness" or "flattery."

I do this with my own kids at home, too. I read my son old fables, like "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Fox and the Crow," or "The Greedy Dog," to help teach him about hard work, persistence, flattery, greed, and contentment. These comparisons and stories help us understand something from a different angle, and then understand how *we* fit into the story - or better yet, how it fits into our own lives.

Matt. 13:24-52

This is exactly what Jesus does when he teaches us using *parables*. Parables are stories he tells to make specific points. They are not exactly *allegories* - there isn't always a direct correspondence or significance for *every single* detail in the parable; but he gives us enough details to understand, learn from, and apply the point he is making. All throughout this chapter, Matthew 13, he tells parables that show us specific things about *what the Kingdom of Heaven* is like. Last week, we saw this in the "parable of the sower," where we saw four different responses to the *message* of the kingdom. In the rest of the chapter, he gives *seven* more parables; while they each have different points, all together they are answering the question: "*What is the*

Kingdom of Heaven like?” That is what Jesus is teaching us here - he is comparing different aspects of his Kingdom to stories relating to everyday life for his hearers.

This would have been *a very pressing question* on the minds of Jesus’s audience, on his followers and disciples. First-century Jews were expecting a Messiah-King, the true Son of David, to come and fulfill God’s promises in the Old Testament Scriptures to establish a never-ending kingdom that would bring deliverance and salvation to God’s people, crush their enemies, and usher in eternal peace and prosperity as the Kingdom dominated the whole world. As Jesus was revealing himself to be the Messiah, this is who and what many expected him to be! But the Kingdom Jesus was ushering in *did not match up* with the expectations. Jesus did indeed come to *save and deliver* his people, execute judgment on God’s enemies and abolish every wicked and evil thing, and establish eternal peace and righteousness over all of Creation! And yet, he did not do this all at once. When Christ came the first time, he ushered in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, which simply means *God’s special reign over His people in His place through His King, Jesus Christ*. God sovereignly reigns over *all things*, but the difference is between *rejecting His rule* as His enemies versus *willingly submitting to God’s reign* as His loyal, grateful subjects. And His Kingdom has indeed arrived on the dark shores of our world - but not yet in its fullness; it is *already here* but *not yet* in its completed, full form. We live in the *overlap of the ages* between the first and second comings of Christ; Christ’s Kingdom has begun! And yet, for now, the Kingdom of this world, the Kingdom of sin, Satan, and death, still rages on.

As I said, this understanding of the kingdom *did not satisfy* the expectations of Jews in Jesus’s day; so, Jesus gives a correct understanding through these parables. We live 2,000 years later - and yet, *we too* need to have a correct understanding of what the Kingdom of God is like; after all, *we are still living in the overlap of the ages!* And because of that, we are still tempted to have faulty expectations of what that means, and to be left disappointed, confused, and dissatisfied. We see the evil world raging around us and are tempted to think: “Where is God’s justice against evildoers? If the Kingdom is here, why is there still so much evil, injustice, and pain?” We’re tempted to grow discouraged as it seems that the *enemies* of Christ prosper and grow in influence, while we struggle to see the Kingdom expanding. We’re tempted to feel like we’re on the losing side. We’re tempted to think that the Kingdom of this world has more to offer us, and that the Kingdom of Christ is not really worth living for. We’re tempted to shove the

good news and *truth* of Christ's Kingdom into our own private lives, not talking about it or letting it have any great influence on how we live our lives.

You see, *we too* need to hear what Jesus's Kingdom is like, both in the *here-and-now*, and in the age to come. We need to have the *eternal perspective of Kingdom-mindedness*.

I. The Victory of the Kingdom - Though Delayed, the Future Judgment of God is Certain (13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50)

In vv. 24-30, Jesus begins drawing a "comparison" about the Kingdom of Heaven by telling the parable of "the Weeds and Wheat." He says it is like this: There is a farmer who goes out and plants good seed in his field which will grow into wheat. However, "while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away" (v.25). Believe it or not, this kind of situation was not unheard of in Jesus's day. There is a weed called "darnel" that is very similar to wheat; so similar that, when the plants are young and first start growing, they look almost identical. They grow up next to each other and the roots become entangled together. As the crop grows and the heads of the wheat grow up, it becomes very obvious that the plants are different: the good wheat is recognized *by what it produces*. But here's the problem: because the roots are entangled with the weeds, it was impossible to separate the wheat from the tares until the crop was finished growing and it was harvest time, even though the weeds were a danger to the wheat. Because of this, there were times when someone would seek revenge on another by planting this weed in their wheat field; it was common enough that there were Roman laws prohibiting it.

So, sure enough, after some time had passed and the crops began to grow, the servants discovered the insidious weeds in the field. They come to the master of the house and let him know. The scheme of the enemy is discovered, and the servants ask, "'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (vv.28-30).

A few verses later, Jesus explains the parable for us. In vv.36-39, Jesus gives us a list of what the main elements of the story represent: the farmer, the "master of the house" who sows, is "the Son of Man" - Jesus himself; the "field is *the world*." The "good seed" being planted here

is no longer the gospel message, like it was in the parable of the sower, but is instead *people* - the “good seed” here represents the “sons of the kingdom” - those who are true believers, having received the gospel of Christ by faith = while the “bad seed” that grows into weeds represents the “sons of the evil one” - non-believers, everyone who is outside of Christ and does not trust in the gospel. Those who believe in Christ are “sons of the Kingdom” - belonging to the Kingdom as citizens, but even more strongly, are Sons of the King, God himself. But the exact opposite is true of non-believers - not only are they outside of the Kingdom, they are *sons of the evil one* - not children of God, but children of Satan. This is strong language, an evocative image; is this just exaggerated language for the sake of the parable? No; those who reject Christ are called “sons of your father, the Devil” in **John 8:44**; **Eph. 2:1-2** says this is true of everyone apart from Christ. Sure enough, Christ says here that the “enemy” here is the “evil one,” the “devil.” Finally, we see that the harvest time represents “the end of the age,” the time of final judgment when the age of this world is over; the servants who reap the harvest and separate the wheat from the weeds are “angels.”

Jesus fleshes out the meaning for us further in vv.40-43. Right now, we live in the overlap of the ages, or “kingdoms.” The kingdom of God has indeed come, for Jesus, the King, has already come once! His kingdom has begun; he reigns in heaven, and all who believe in Him now are “sons of the kingdom.” But the kingdom of Satan is also still reigning in this world. Until this age ends, members of both kingdoms, both “believers” and “non-believers” continue to “grow up” like plants, side-by-side. Just as its impossible to tell the good and bad seat apart at the beginning, but later is revealed by their fruit, so it is with us: we all start out dead in our sins, sons of the Devil, and non-believers - but Christians are those who believe in the gospel of Christ, and by their fruit, prove in the end to be “sons of the kingdom.” However, we are not immediately plucked out of this world when that happens; we still remain in this sinful world, surrounded by sin, evil, and all of its harmful effects and influence. As long as we’re in this world, we struggle against our indwelling sin and temptation from without; we suffer the effects of sin in this broken world; we endure hardship, attacks, and harmful influence from the non-believing world around us; we even endure persecution and attacks from the enemy.

This is a discouraging reality at times, isn’t it? You see, as long as we’re in this world, we cannot experience complete deliverance from sin and evil - either ours, or the sins of others, or any of its consequences. We believe in the gospel, trusting Christ to bring us complete salvation

from our sin, Satan, suffering, every evil thing, and even death! Yet we continue on in the Christian life surrounded by these things; we're influenced, we sin, we suffer; we lost the battle sometimes, don't we? We may be tempted to ask, "Where is Christ's victory? Where is His kingdom? Where is the salvation he promised?"

When we're in the thick of it, we have to remember what he's telling us about the Kingdom and this world in this parable: these things are to be *expected*. This is by no means reason to doubt the kingdom; it is proof of what Christ is saying here - the Kingdom has begun, but it has not yet come in full; the victory is sure, but the final victory is *delayed*. But we must not lose hope, nor be deceived: the *time of judgment is certain and is surely coming*. At the end of the age, when Jesus comes back again, the angels will "reap a harvest," separating the "good seed" from the "bad" - true believers from unbelievers, enemies of God. On that day, the truth of who we are will be *revealed and sealed with certainty*.

This reminds us that *salvation and judgment go hand-in-hand*. There is no true salvation apart from true justice and judgment dealing with evil once and for all. And such final salvation is certainly coming, as vv.40-43 show us. "All causes of sin" and "all law-breakers" will be rooted up, thrown in the "fiery furnace" of God's judgment in Hell, so that Heaven - the Kingdom of God, New Heavens and New Earth, where we will dwell forever with the Lord - will be *absolutely free* from every evil, corruptible, and impure thing. *No one* there will ever sin or do what is wrong or evil; *nothing there* will be a cause or by-product of sin. This means *no more wickedness, injustice, temptation, pain, sorrow, suffering, or impure unrighteousness* whatsoever, for the rest of eternity! We will be *fully delivered from sin and evil*. We, ourselves, will be made *sinless* - we will no longer face temptation nor do what is wrong, but will be blameless and walk in true righteousness - both on the inside, and on the outside. As v.41 says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

This is both a *reminder of our certain hope* and also a *sobering warning* of the judgment to come. Jesus gives another parable making this same point, in the "parable of the net" in vv.47-50. The coming judgment of the kingdom is like some fishermen who drag a net behind their boat; at the end, they pull up all of the fish and separate the "good fish" they want to keep from the "bad" and worthless fish. So it will be at the end of the age. Both parables make this point, and use the same severe language for those who are not part of the kingdom: the unbelieving enemies of God will face God's *judgment and wrath against their sin*. On that day,

we will be separated between those who *have received the gospel of Christ* and those who *have not*. All who *believe in the good news of Jesus Christ - trusting that he lived, died, and was raised in our place* to save us from our sins - are *sons of the kingdom*. Even though we deserve GOD's just wrath against our sin, we will be *saved!* Purely by the grace of God! But anyone who does not trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ will not stand before the Lord's judgment on that day; without the sacrifice of Christ to atone for their sins, they will face the *full wrath of God* against their sin: as this chapter tells us *twice*, in both vv. 42 and 49, they will be "thrown into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." They will face the wrath of God we all deserve - *eternity in Hell*.

This reminds us to never lose an eternal perspective: even though sin runs rampant now, we must not be deceived: justice will come against all wickedness; that means against *our wickedness and sin*. Each of us must *repent and believe* in the gospel of Christ, trusting in Him alone for salvation, or else we will not stand before the Lord's judgment. But if we do trust in Him, we will be saved and enter into the fullness of Christ's glorious kingdom!

Next, Jesus teaches us about...

II. The Growth of the Kingdom - It Starts Small, yet Grows Greatly and Pervasively (13:31-33)

Next, Jesus tells two very similar parables - about the "mustard seed" and the "leaven" - that basically make the same point: in each, something starts off very small and seems insignificant, but then greatly increases to an extraordinary degree.

The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, he says, yet grows "larger than all the garden plants" and becomes a tree (vv.31-32). Though very small at first, it continues to grow and increase greatly in size.

Or picture a woman making bread: she puts in just a little leaven, yet it affects the entire lump of dough, so that it all becomes leavened and rises. It spreads *pervasively* throughout the whole lump.

And so it is with the Kingdom of God in this world. The Kingdom starts small, seems insignificant at first, but grows and increases, both in size and influence, in incredible ways. Jesus ushered in the kingdom, but now the way people expected; it seemed like an incredibly small, insignificant movement at first. Yet even in the days of the early church the Kingdom spread to an incredible degree, as we see in the book of Acts. The growth of the kingdom is slow

but steady; it spreads both in *size* and *influence* through the gospel, as people are saved, disciplined, and transformed by the gospel. But the growth of the Kingdom will not be completely visible and apparent *until the Lord comes, this age ends, and the Kingdom comes in full.*

We may be tempted to look around the world and think that the world has an outsized influence, that the gospel is making no real difference, and that we should just give up, or at least retreat into our own corner, with a defeatist mentality; but such a mindset *fails to believe* what Christ says here. We must remember that, though it seems slow at times, the Kingdom of God grows steadily and pervasively throughout this world, even when we cannot see it. And yet, we can look throughout history and see that this is true: we can see how the gospel has spread, all the way from first century Palestine to 21st century North America, and throughout the entire world! The church has grown; many have believed; many disciples have been made; many lives have been transformed by the gospel; and many cultures and nations have even been influenced by the Kingdom along the way as the grace of God overflows out of the lives of believers into those around them!

Therefore, let us not be dismayed; God is in control; Christ is the King, and nothing can stop or deter the expansion of his Kingdom. It is sure and certain; the inevitable progress of history marches on towards the day when *all of Creation will be transformed by the Kingdom and submit to the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Therefore, we must understand...

III. The Precious Value of the Kingdom - It is Worth More than Anything Else in Our Lives (13:44-46)

Jesus gives another pair of parables making the same point in vv.44-46: the parables of the “Hidden Treasure” and the “Precious Pearl.” The point of both is clear: the Kingdom of Heaven is more precious and valuable than anything else in our lives; indeed, it’s worth every imaginable cost.

It’s like a man hired to work in a field. While digging, he finds buried treasure worth a fortune! There’s only one problem: he doesn’t own the field. Under the laws of the day, the treasure would belong to the owner of the field; no “finder’s keepers” rules. So, the man covered it back up, sold all that he had, and bought the field, so that now field - and the treasure! - are his. Jesus isn’t commenting on the morality of this - he’s simply making the point: that treasure was

worth way more than all that the man had, and he knew it; so he joyfully gave up everything he had to gain far more!

The second parable says basically the same thing: a pearl merchant found a precious pearl, and recognizing its value, he sold all of his other pearls, and all that he had, in order to obtain it.

So it is with the kingdom: the Kingdom of God is worth far more than anything we have, anything we could hope to obtain in this world, even more valuable than our very lives. The Kingdom has *immeasurable, eternal, infinite value* - after all, to “gain the Kingdom” is to gain salvation, eternal life, and eternal joy, peace, and righteousness in God’s own dwelling place *forever. There is nothing better or greater!*

The Christian life is costly. It is not easy. There is a *costliness* to follow Christ’s demands as his disciples - we must die to ourselves, give up the pursuits of the world, and no longer live for ourselves. We are not our own but belong to God; we must bow to Him as Lord over everything in our lives. Christ makes demands on our time, money, values, relationships, how we find joy and happiness - every decision in our lives!

But if we truly recognize the *value and worth* of what we gain in Christ - the eternal Kingdom of God! - then we understand that no matter *what the cost* is in our lives now, it is *infinitely more worth it*. Therefore, we must be willing to give up everything for the Kingdom of Christ, no matter the cost.

And part of the cost of discipleship includes making disciples. Which leads us to our final point...

IV. The Message of the Kingdom - We Must Rightly Understand and Proclaim the Kingdom of Christ (13:34-35, 51-52)

Matthew inserts a pause from the parables, right after “mustard seed” and “leaven” parables, in order to comment on the purpose of parables in vv.34-35. We’re told that Jesus’s parables on the Kingdom were fulfilling *Psalms 78:2* - “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.” In Psalm 78, Asaph was drawing out greater meaning and understanding of the events of Israel’s redemptive history. In the same way, Christ is now unfolding greater meaning and understanding of the Old Testament scriptures as he gives new revelation about the Kingdom of God; Jesus is fulfilling it by giving a fuller

revelation. It is “new” in this sense, yet also builds upon and fulfills the “old.” In short, Jesus is revealing a true understanding of the Kingdom of God - the unfolding of salvation for God’s people, from the beginning to the end of time.

This is further fleshed out in the very last parable of the section: the “parable of the homeowner” in *vv.51-52*. He asks the disciples: “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’”

A “scribe” is a teacher of the scriptures. The key to rightly understanding and teaching the scripture, the whole Bible, is rightly understanding how it all points to *Jesus* - how Christ fulfills the promises of God, the Kingdom, and salvation. If we rightly understand His Kingdom, then we are like this rich homeowner who can bring out both “old” and “new” treasures - the right meaning of both the Old and New Testaments. But this isn’t just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. I think the point of the parable is that the homeowner brings out these treasures *for a purpose* - presumably, to generously help others. And so we, who rightly understand the gospel as the point of the Bible, are also equipped, like understanding scribes, to *share it and teach it to others*.

The message of the Kingdom - the message of the Entire Bible, ultimately - is the *message of the gospel*: that Jesus Christ is God’s promised Savior and King, who accomplished salvation through his life, death, and resurrection, and is coming again, both in salvation and judgment. And the glorious news is that salvation is ours *simply by believing this message, turning away from the Kingdom of Sin and Satan, and trusting in Christ alone!*

For those of us who believe this, let us commit ourselves to continuing in faith, understanding more and more, and also *proclaiming and teaching* this to others, in evangelism and discipleship.

And if you are not part of the Kingdom as a Christian, then I plead with you: believe this good news and join the winning side: enter the eternal Kingdom of God simply by grace through faith in Christ alone.

If you have any questions about this, or about baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can come now or find me after the service. Let us pray.