

The Kingdom You Don't Want to Miss

Matthew 13:44-52

It's hard to believe the Christmas season is already upon us. I spent Friday morning doing our annual Black Friday tradition—not waiting in line, but wrestling with our cheap, plastic Christmas tree trying to get the thing to stay up—with the added challenge this year of a one-year old intent on bringing it down.

We all have our Christmas traditions. But at its heart, Christmas is celebration of the arrival of Israel's long-awaited king: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the whole world. And with the arrival of the King, comes the dawn of God's kingdom on earth.

We've been learning more about God's kingdom the last few weeks, as we've been looking at the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13. Jesus has been using short stories, metaphors, and sayings to reveal to his disciples the secrets of God's kingdom—helping correct some of their expectations about how God's kingdom will come on earth—while at the same time concealing those secrets from those on the outside who stand against it. Parables help him do both.

This morning we'll look at the final four parables in this chapter, which emphasize the value of the kingdom and what's at stake in missing out on it, as well as the call for Jesus' followers to make his kingdom known.

But the idea of “God's kingdom” can be rather confusing. When the Bible talks about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (which are synonymous in the Gospels; they're used interchangeably¹), what is it talking about? Pastor and author Greg Gilbert asks the question:

What is this kingdom, exactly? Is it a realm, a piece of real estate that God has special authority over? Is it the church? Is it here now, or is it something we're waiting for, something that will come in the future? For that matter, who exactly is in the kingdom of God? Doesn't God's rule extend over everyone, regardless of whether he or she believes in Jesus?”²

What are we talking about when we talk about the Kingdom of God? As we prepare to look at these final parables this morning, I want to start with that first question—what does the Bible mean by the phrase, “kingdom of God”? We need to know what it's talking about, because as we're going to see in these parables, there is no greater treasure than to be included in God's kingdom, and no greater terror than to miss out.

¹ Compare, for example, Matt. 4:17 and Mk. 1:15. Most scholars speculate that the use of “heaven” was a way to refer to God while recognizing the sacredness of his name. See, e.g., Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 110, n. 9.

² Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 86-87.

What is the Kingdom of God?

The kingdom of heaven is one of the central themes in Matthew's Gospel; it's mentioned 55 times. In fact, it's one of the central themes in all four Gospels, and even the whole Bible. There is no greater treasure than to be included in God's kingdom, and no greater terror than to miss out. So what are we talking about? What is the kingdom of heaven?

Most of us usually think of *geography* when we hear that term. We think of a realm over which God rules, kind of like the medieval ages or the fairy tales, with castles and knights and fair maidens. A kingdom was the realm—the real estate—over which the king exercised control.

In the Bible, the kingdom of God has less to do with geography, and more to do with God's *activity*. It's not talking so much about the area he rules over, but *his rule itself*. His reign or kingship. The royal reign of God.³ If we think of it in loose analogy to our own government structure, it's the difference between the land we call America (a realm), and the actions of our President (his "reign," if you will). God's kingdom refers to the latter.

The kingdom is God's authority, power, and presence to rule and accomplish his redemptive purposes for his people and his creation. That reign is sometimes associated with special places—like the Garden of Eden, or the Promised Land of Canaan, or Jerusalem—but it extends over the entire universe. *It is not, however, universally recognized*. At least, *not yet*. In fact the mark of a fallen world is rebellion against God's kingdom—the failure to recognize and submit to his rightful rule. And so when the Bible speaks of the *coming* of God's kingdom, it's not talking about taking more territory, but the final establishment of God's rule and reign over all the earth. It's the universal recognition of what is already true—the Lord reigns.

According to Matthew's Gospel, this kingdom has dawned with the advent of Jesus Christ. The new day that ancient Israel looked forward to, the day when God would act decisively to establish his authority, his power, and his presence to rule his people and accomplish his redemptive purposes for creation—according to Matthew, that kingdom is at hand, because the King is at hand—King Jesus.

But as we saw last week, there is an *already* and a *not-yet* aspect to God's kingdom. Israel was expecting (even Jesus' disciples were expecting) God's kingdom to come in a big, loud, and victorious way. They didn't yet understand that Jesus would accomplish it not through power and force, but through his death on the cross. And they didn't yet understand that he would establish it in two phases. Victory would wait till the end, when Jesus comes again: the final overthrow of Satan, the undoing of sin and death, and the universal recognition of God's glory and authority as king—every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

But with his first coming Jesus is *already* beginning to reign in the meantime. The kingdom already "exists where knees and hearts bow to the King and submit to him."⁴ It is already possible to enter into the kingdom by turning away from sin and turning to King Jesus in faith. And those who belong to the kingdom already enjoy the presence of God by the Spirit. It's the

³ See G.E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 122-148.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 121.

Holy Spirit who enables us to joyfully obey God from the heart, as is proper for citizens of his kingdom (the kind of life reflected in the Sermon on the Mount back in chs. 5-7). We already have eternal life with God, even as we look with hope to our future inheritance in the age to come.

And according to Jesus, *there is no greater treasure on earth than to be included in his kingdom.* To surrender to him. To belong to him. To be ruled and cared for by the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth, and who lovingly laid his life down to make us his own. Jesus wants us to be satisfied in him and his kingdom. That's what our first two parables tell us this morning.

Be Satisfied in Jesus and his Kingdom (The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, 13:44-46)

Look with me at vv. 44-46:

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

We have two parables here that together make the same point: there is nothing more valuable to lay hold of than the kingdom of God—even if it costs you everything you have.

The first parable describes the value of the kingdom by comparing it to finding a treasure hidden in a field. Now, the lawyers among us right now are weighing whether the finder in fact has the right to the treasure since he found it on someone else's property before he bought that property. That's not the point of the story. The point is that what he found was so incomparably valuable, that if having it meant he had to lose everything else, he joyfully paid that price.

And the same goes with the second illustration—the merchant finding a pearl of such supreme value that he gladly sold everything else he owned in order to have it. There is no greater treasure than to be included in God's kingdom, even if it costs you everything you have. In fact, unless you say no to every other kingdom, you cannot take hold of this one. To gain the kingdom, the people in both parables had to lose everything else. The kingdom of God is not like a fancy pearl to be added alongside all sorts of other pearls—other saviors, other allegiances, other hopes, other kingdoms.⁵ To take this one pearl you have to say no to all the other pearls, all the other would-be saviors and kings.

But once you've tasted the goodness of life under God's rule and care, it's hard to be satisfied with anything else. Pastor and author Jared Wilson illustrates this well. He writes,

When I moved to Vermont I heard a lot about the maple syrup here. I thought I had had maple syrup before. It turns out I had only engaged in a corn syrup masquerade. Aunt Jemima, Mrs. Butterworth, and the like—all shams. (Those probably aren't even their real names.) It wasn't until I actually tasted 100 percent pure, dark amber Vermont maple syrup that I "saw" what I had only heard about before. And now . . . I will not have any other kind

⁵ This illustration was inspired by N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 177.

of syrup . . . I will not go back. I've tasted the goodness and lost my taste for the pale imitations.⁶

So it is when we taste the goodness of Jesus and his gospel, the goodness of God's kingdom. All other would-be kingdoms pale in cheap comparison.

So what is it that God actually accomplishes through his redemptive rule? Why is there no greater treasure than participating in it? Let's think about some of the "member benefits," if you will, that we've seen so far in Matthew's Gospel.

First, those who recognize Jesus as King and come to him in faith and repentance receive *the forgiveness of their sins*. Matthew 1 told us that King Jesus came to save his people from their sins (1:21), and in ch. 9 he showed us how he has divine authority to forgive sins—something only God can do (9:1-8). So the first "benefit" of entering into his kingdom is that *your greatest problem is decisively dealt with*. The problem that has plagued humanity throughout all history, that wreaks havoc on our lives and relationships—the selfishness, greed, the lies we tell. The problem that has separated you from God and brought his judgment on you—*Jesus deals with it!* And he deals with it by giving his own life in our place on the cross.

Second, being part of God's Kingdom means that God is not only our King but also our *Father*. It's those who belong to the kingdom that can pray with Jesus, "*Our Father* in heaven, hallowed by your name" (Matt. 6:9). We who were once enemies, rebels against his kingdom, God has now adopted us into his family through Jesus. He's rescued us from the dungeon and given us a place at the family table. If we are part of God's kingdom, we are not merely subjects, but sons and daughters. The love he has for his eternal Son is the love he has for us, his children—a love far stronger than anything we can imagine. As Jesus said in Matthew 7, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (7:11).

Third, members of God's kingdom have *security* and *significance*. We spend so much of our lives chasing things we think will satisfy and fulfill us. Or worrying about whether life will turn out the way we want it. Jesus says to his people, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:31-33). Our security in life is not dependent on our situation, but on the strength of our King. Our identity does not come from what we do or wear or accomplish, or from what others do to us. It comes from our union with King Jesus. Which frees us, therefore, to seek *his* kingdom and *his* purposes instead of our own. To be the light of the world, to make disciples of all nations, to bring glory and honor to him (5:14-16; 28:18-20).

The list could go on and on. But one more: members of God's kingdom have *hope*. We have hope. This world does not work the way it's supposed to. God's kingdom has begun, but it's not yet complete. But if we belong to the kingdom, then we have hope that this will end well. There will be a victory in the end. The harvest will come, and the righteous in Christ will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (13:43).

⁶ Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 64.

There is no greater treasure than to be included in God's kingdom. To know Jesus as King and to lovingly serve him. And once you've tasted the goodness of life under his rule and care—the forgiveness of sin, relationship with the Father, significance, purpose, and hope—it's hard to be satisfied with anything else.

But not everyone enters into or enjoys the kingdom of God. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." And so Jesus' next parable warns us that there is no greater terror than to miss the kingdom. Beware of missing out on the kingdom.

Beware of Missing Out On the Kingdom (The Parable of the Net, 13:47-50)

Verse 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 righteous⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (13:47-50)

The picture here is the kind of net that had weights on one side, so it would sink to the bottom, and then cork or wood on the other, so it would float. And you would drag it like a wall through the water, either between two boats, or with one side anchored to the shore and the other carried by a boat in a kind of semi-circle.⁷ And that net would collect everything in its path. And so afterward, you have to sit down and sort it out. Anything unclean or otherwise inedible would be pitched, and the rest collected. In the same way, God's rule and reign extends over all humanity.

But not everyone will enter in. And when Jesus explains the meaning of this parable in vv. 49-50, this is the point he emphasizes (very similar to the parable of the wheat and weeds earlier)—that some will face judgment for rejecting the kingdom. In the end, God's messengers will sort the evil from the righteous, and the evil will be judged in a terrifying way—what is described here as a fiery furnace with ongoing suffering and anguish. There is no terror greater than to miss out on God's kingdom.

This reality should give all of us pause. It ought to *warn* us if we don't know Jesus as our Savior; if we've been keeping him at arm's length, trusting in something or someone other than him to get us in the right with God. To reject Jesus is to commit treason against heaven, and the penalty is eternal death.

And this reality ought to *humble* those of us who know Jesus as King. But for the grace of God, there go I. There is nothing in and of ourselves that makes us worthy before him. As Paul says to all of us,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of

⁷ See Osborne, 542.

wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:1-5, ESV).

Salvation is all of grace, and only by grace—being given something wonderful even though we deserve something terrible. And we receive that blessing through faith in Jesus. Turning away from sin, and trusting our lives to Jesus as our King and Savior.

Becoming a member of the kingdom isn’t like walking into BJ’s and buying a membership card. It’s not something you can buy or earn by being good enough or keeping the Law. You enter by faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul continues, “For by grace you have been saved *through faith*. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10, ESV).

The reality of coming judgment ought to humble us, and it ought to break our hearts for the countless people who do not yet recognize Jesus as King or trust him as Savior, who are for that reason facing a Christ-less eternity in hell. It ought to motivate us to make the love and hope of Christ known.

And that’s what the final parable is about, the parable of new and old treasures. Jesus wants us to be faithful to make God’s kingdom known.

Be Faithful to Make his Kingdom Known (The Parable of New and Old Treasures, 13:51-52)

Verse 51: “‘Have you understood all these things?’ Jesus asked. ‘Yes,’ they replied. He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old’” (13:51-52).

This parable is arguably the most difficult to understand in the whole chapter. Did the disciples *really* understand everything Jesus was telling them (because later on they seem to be missing a few things)? Why does he call them scribes or teachers of the law? What are the new and old treasures?

I think this final parable really summarizes the whole chapter, maybe even the book so far. Jesus has been revealing to his disciples what he calls “the secrets of the kingdom” (v. 13), “things hidden since the creation of the world” (v. 35). God’s kingdom doesn’t come out of nowhere; it was planned and promised long ago. But it’s Jesus’ new work that brings those old promises to completion. This has been the message of the entire Gospel of Matthew so far—what God planned in the beginning, what he promised through his prophets, he is now bringing to completion through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, the true king of heaven and earth.

The scribes of the Pharisees were able bring out of the treasury only what was old—the promises of the Law and Prophets. Only those who have been instructed or “discipled” for the kingdom by Jesus, who have learned the secrets he’s been revealing here, are able to bring out both the new *and* the old—the *Old* Testament promises as they are fulfilled in the *new* work that Jesus is doing.

And now that they've been instructed, they have a job to do. They are to become a new kind of scribe—teachers who announce to all that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ. As he charges them at the end of Matthew's Gospel, they are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:19-20).

And so it is for us. For everyone who knows Jesus as King. We have a job to do—to make his kingdom known. It's not our job to “establish” or “build” God's kingdom, or to “expand” it. That's not how the Bible talks about our role; those are things only God does. Rather God invites us to *enter* into it by faith, to *possess* it as his people, to someday *inherit* it, with all his promises and blessings. And in the meantime, to *bear witness* to it.⁸ To announce to the world that there is only one King of heaven and earth, only one kingdom that will rule in the end, that there is no greater treasure than being included in that kingdom, and no greater terror than to miss out.

As we celebrate the Advent season we're going to spend the next three weeks bringing out of the treasury both the new and the old. We're going to look at Old Testament promises of the kingdom through the new lenses of Jesus—to see how his advent is the solution to all the old problems and the answer to all the old promises—and how he's *still* the solution and the answer today. Next Sunday we'll look at the King whom God promises in Genesis 17. Can you believe that all the way back in Genesis, the story was already pointing forward to Jesus? And then we'll look at the King of whom God approves in Deuteronomy 17, how Jesus fulfills the Law. On the 22nd we'll consider the King whom God will establish in 2 Samuel 7—God's covenant with David. And finally, on Christmas Eve, we'll worship the King of Kings from Matthew 2.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand, because the King has come. And there no greater treasure than being included in it, and no greater terror than to miss out.

⁸ E.g. Dan. 7:18, 22; Matt. 7:21; 10:7; 24:14; 25:34; Mk. 9:47; Acts 28:23; 1 Cor. 6:9-10. See DeYoung and Gilbert, 132-134.