

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE...

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

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

³³*He 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.”*

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.*

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.*

⁴⁷*“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When 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. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In Matthew Chapter 13, in very quick succession, Jesus describes the Kingdom of Heaven in a series of parables. And each describes our standing in God’s kingdom in different ways. In today’s Gospel reading there are five different images: The kingdom of heaven is like *a mustard seed...yeast...treasure...a merchant...a net.*

We’ll deal briefly with each in turn.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed

There are two ideas to pick up on here.

First, don’t be deceived or disappointed by the apparent smallness of believers among the vast majority of non-believers.

Just as Jesus also taught his disciples: *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. [Luke 12:32, TNIV]*

The simple truth is that believers in Christ have always struggled against doubt and unbelief.

What we are to take to heart is what the little mustard seed becomes.

I don’t know why Jesus talks about a mustard tree. There’s no such thing. But the image to latch onto is the birds twittering joyfully in its

branches.

So instead of feeling like we need to set up a fortress church, set up against the heathen horde, what we should really be like is something joyful and expansive so that ‘the birds of the air’ – the ferals – happily rest in our branches.

I wonder, then, if Jesus was teaching against that tendency or religious people to become exclusive, even cultish – a ‘them verses us’ attitude.

That idea certainly comes out in the next parable.

The kingdom of heaven is *like yeast*

This is a very impressive loaf of bread this woman is baking. About 50ks of dough! The baker hasn’t just make a couple of buns and a yeast cake, to put on the shelf for later. This baker deals with the whole lump.

So what is Jesus getting at?

The lump of dough represents the world. The Kingdom of God pervades the whole world, like yeast in a lump of dough.

I think what Jesus is teaching us here is that God’s grace belongs to everyone.

Religious people would narrow God’s grace to only those who are worthy or who are ‘true believers’.

But if there is anything we learn from Jesus, especially from his death and resurrection, it is that everyone is forgiven and everyone will be raised at the last day.

There is not one tiny corner of this world that hasn’t been touched by God’s kingdom. Everyone and everything was encompassed in Christ’s death on the cross and in his resurrection from the dead.

What a reality check for Christians who tend to play the ‘them and us’ game of religious superiority.

I’ll put the thought as questions: What difference is there between you who worship on Sunday mornings to the person who at best only steps into a church for weddings and funerals?

Answer: Nothing!

I’m not going to explain that answer. I’ll let you chew on it for a while. But I will give you a couple of Bible passages that may help you:

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.” [Matthew 11:19, TNIV]

²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [Romans 3:23-24, TNIV]

The kingdom of heaven is *like treasure...*

There were many stories of neglected or abandoned farms having caches of treasure hidden in them. The area where Jesus lived was often disrupted by wars; and people would hide their valuables, only for later generations

to discover.

Most times when we read or hear this parable we focus our thoughts on the treasure. But I think the correct focus is on the point that the man bought the whole farm, and not just the little patch where the treasure was hidden.

There is no doubt that God's grace is a wonderful treasure.

The interesting thing in the story, though, is that the Man, namely God, buys the whole farm, that is the whole world, just for the sake of the little spot where the treasure can be found.

We have the deep mystery of the heart of God, who gives all that is most precious to him, namely his Son – the Son of God dies for the whole world, even though only a few will believe. And God raises this Treasure from the dead. And then has the audacity to declare that the whole world is justified in his Son.

What extravagant love!

And it teaches us something about how we are to be. Not a religious ghetto or cloister, or cult. God is not interested only in his little holy huddlers. Since the treasure is hidden somewhere in the field, so we are to buy in to the whole field, too. Not just pick and choose those parts of it we like or want for our congregations, but the whole neglected and neglectful paddock.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant...

To drive home that his followers are to look outside themselves, to those who also need the Goodnews of the Kingdom, Jesus then told the story about the merchant.

This merchant represents everyone in the world. Everyone in the world is looking for their heart's desire – like a pearl of great price. And everyone would give away or sell everything to own it.

Everyone has this need, this hunger, this desire, this restlessness. Some fill it with work, or family, or sport, or alcohol or gambling, or food. Like Adam and Eve, the apple is good, forgetting about God's goodness to them.

But the only thing that can satisfy is God's grace.

The matter to latch onto here is that the church is not in the business of browbeating people into believing. We have a treasure to give away free. A treasure that all people are desperately seeking, even though many can't quite define what it is they are seeking. What we need to do is pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance:

⁵*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.* ⁶*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* [Colossians 4:5-6, TNIV]

Now the last parable.

The kingdom of heaven is *like a net*...

First thing to note: this is a dragnet. It doesn't just catch fish, it catches everything – fish, prawns, crabs, coral, seaweed, old boots and other junk – whatever is in its path. God's kingdom, in other words, encompasses everything, good and bad – not just what would seem to be worthy of the kingdom, but the whole of creation, with all its flotsam and jetsam. (So those bible translations that only mention fish are a bit misleading.)

Again, Jesus is teaching against that religious selectivity and separatism that is so common among religious people. It is not up to us to judge who or who should not be in the Christian fellowship. Let the weeds and wheat grow together until harvest (Matt 13:30). It is in a way insulting to Christ for us take over his judgement by having selection criteria for Christian fellowship – and we tend to do that all too readily.

It is up to the Son's angels, the special agents who follow the Son's will, to do the separating.

And what is the separation criterion?

It is not how good or bad one has been. In heaven and in hell there are only forgiven sinners!

The criterion is “wickedness”. The story of the Wedding in Matthew 22 (vv1-14) helps us understand what this means. Everyone who was at that wedding was compelled to be there. You weren't allowed to opt out. So too everyone in the world is encompassed in the Rule of Jesus Christ (that is, the Kingdom of Heaven) for all are forgiven and all are raised at the last day. But there was one there at the wedding who was kicked out because he was ‘wicked’. And why? Because he refused to wear the garment the Bridegroom supplied. He wanted to be there dressed in his own filthy smelly rags –his idea of goodness and worthiness. In other words he had rejected the groom's graciousness – rejected the very forgiveness and resurrection that are the marks of the Kingdom. And that is true wickedness.

At the Judgement, then, it is not a matter of how good or how bad one has been. Whether one was a fish or a rotten old boot caught up in the net, if one is wearing the Groom's clothes one is collected into the basket.

A final word about the ‘punishment’, the fiery furnace. I don't think it is so much that God is gleefully roasting these evil one's over a hot fire – a final vindictive revenge. Rather, it seems to me the wicked are burning themselves up because they've finally realised what it means to reject God's grace.

In any case, what we are to focus on in these parables is the all-encompassing love of God for his creation. A love expressed in Jesus death and resurrection. The Kingdom of Heaven is truly the rule of Christ in our hearts.

Amen.