

Kingdom Identity

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, through today's word, open our eyes to see the kingdom of heaven that has come to us and help us to enjoy it. In the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives twelve parables about the kingdom of heaven, and seven of them appear in chapter 13. We have already reflected on two of these parables, and today we hope to experience the richness of the kingdom through the remaining five.

The kingdom of heaven that Jesus speaks about is not merely the heaven we will go to someday. It is the kingdom that comes to us, the kingdom we begin to enjoy even now, and the kingdom we carry into the world. The first message Jesus proclaimed was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17, ESV).

Even though Jesus directly declared that the kingdom was near, he spoke about its nature through parables. Matthew 13:35 explains that this was "to reveal what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." The kingdom had been hidden, but now Jesus is revealing it. As the Son of God, as God made manifest in the flesh, Jesus is unveiling the hidden kingdom.

Why are parables necessary to reveal what was hidden? Parables use everyday realities to reveal divine truth. This means the kingdom is close to our daily lives. Because sinful humanity cannot reach the kingdom on its own, Jesus brought the kingdom to us. More precisely, Christ himself came among us as the kingdom in person. In Luke 17:21, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives us the richness of the kingdom as a gift and expands our vision of it. In the parable of the sower, which we looked at earlier, the kingdom begins small. As we move through the parables that follow, we see the kingdom grow larger in scale and greater in scope.

First, Jesus came as the seed that is sown into the soil of our hearts. He also came as the Son of Man who sows the seed. The Son is connected to the nature of the seed.

In the third parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed. A mustard seed is so small that it is almost unnoticed, yet it grows to ten or even thirteen feet tall, large enough for birds to build their nests and live in its branches. We all know how the gospel of the kingdom, which began with Jesus and the twelve disciples, has expanded across the world and continues to grow.

When we first receive Christ, we begin to experience him as the mustard seed. The kingdom is contained within this seed. Galatians 3:16 tells us that God did not promise Abraham many seeds but one seed, and that seed is Christ. The word for seed here is the same word used in Matthew 13.

When we have even a mustard seed measure of the kingdom, we begin to enjoy the nature of the kingdom within us. Romans 14:17 says, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Righteousness, peace, and joy begin to grow in the soil of our hearts through the holy spirit. They begin to push out sin, anxiety, bitterness, and anger. As the qualities of the kingdom fill us, the kingdom begins to spread outward from us like a tree.

In the fourth parable, "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened." Three measures is about sixty pounds, which in the ancient Near East was the amount of dough a woman could work with all day to produce the most abundant supply of bread. Jesus sends His disciples into the world as yeast, bringing the kingdom of heaven into this world so that they may transform society and see the kingdom grow within it.

In the fifth parable, "the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field." The fact that it was in a field means it is close to everyday life, accessible to anyone who might come across it. The person who found it was not searching for treasure. He simply noticed something while working in the field. This is God's prevenient grace. The kingdom is not something we discover by our own effort. God brings it to us. And even when someone sees it, not everyone recognizes it as treasure. If the treasure were gold, someone might see it covered in dust and mistake it for a broken beer bottle. To recognize it as gold is itself grace.

When the man found the treasure, he hid it again, and in his joy went and sold all he had to buy the field. This shows that the value of the treasure is worth any sacrifice. The treasure is Christ himself. Anyone who discovers the worth of Christ will make a confession like Paul in Philippians 3:7–8: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

Selling everything to gain Christ is a completely reasonable choice. But with what can we purchase Christ? Here the gospel gives us a surprising reversal. Scripture contains a gift certificate that allows us to "buy" Christ. Isaiah 55:1 is God's gift to us: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. And he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy

wine and milk without money and without price.” This is an open invitation to receive Christ, the wine and milk of life, without cost.

The treasure being buried in a field reminds us of the Lord who died for us and was laid in a tomb. Discovering treasure hidden in the field is like realizing how astonishing and precious his work on the cross truly is.

When we encounter the Lord, we naturally want to invest everything so that we may possess more of him and know him more deeply. This is the nature of the kingdom.

In the sixth parable, the treasure becomes a specific jewel, a pearl. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one pearl of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought it. Pearls are often worn by brides at their wedding. My wife wore a pearl necklace at ours. In this parable, the merchant represents Christ, and the pearl represents those who believe in him. He sees every follower as a single pearl of great value. To obtain this pearl, he spent everything he had. He gave up his heavenly status and his very life.

A pearl is formed when a grain of sand enters an oyster and causes a wound. The oyster releases its substance over the wound, and over time the pearl is formed. In the same way, through the wounds of Jesus' suffering, we have become pearls. These pearls are joined together to become the necklace worn at the wedding feast of the church, the bride of Christ.

In the seventh parable, “the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, the fishermen drew it ashore, sat down, collected the good fish into containers, and threw away the bad.” The setting of the parable expands to the sea. The gospel of the kingdom is like a net that rescues people who are suffering like fish in the waters of the world.

Jesus continues by saying, “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This is in the same line as the judgment described in the parable of the weeds. When the kingdom draws near, judgment also draws near. Jesus reveals and opens the kingdom so that people may be prepared for that judgment.

Jesus teaches his disciples to become disciples of the kingdom, essentially different from the disciples of the Mosaic law. He wants them to understand the mysteries of the kingdom and follow them. Those who become scribes trained for the kingdom, those who proclaim the

gospel of the kingdom, are like “a master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

In Scripture, the master of a house is the one who bears responsibility and cares for others. He manages and provides for everyone in the household. The old refers to the old truth, the Mosaic law handed down from ancient times. The new refers to the new truth, the gospel of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus. These two are one connected revelation. The law reveals sin and points to Christ as the only answer, and Christ fulfills the requirements of the law. They cannot be separated. The new can be seen as the New Testament and the old as the Old Testament. There is a saying: “The old is the new contained and the new is the old explained.” The Old Testament contains the New Testament within it, and the New Testament explains the Old.

Jesus desires to train disciples like us, who are still lacking, to become scribes of the kingdom who interpret the old truth through the new and lead people into the kingdom. The ultimate goal of Jesus' discipleship is to shape each disciple into a person who embodies the kingdom, just as Jesus himself did. As the kingdom, we are meant to let the kingdom grow like a mustard tree, spread like leaven, draw out people like treasure seekers who uncover precious things, help Christ become treasure within them, and more specifically become merchants who seek the pearls that will become the wedding adornment of the bride of Christ. We are also meant to become fishermen who cast the net that gathers people.

God desires to cultivate the kingdom within you and around you. For some people, you may be the first embodied Christ they ever meet. For someone else, you may be the answer to a prayer they prayed that morning, asking God to send someone who would pray for them if God truly cared about their life.

So go out beyond the church with your kingdom identity. To do that, seek God's presence every day. May God bless you as you spend quality time with the Lord and allow your kingdom identity to grow. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, who brought the kingdom of heaven to us, thank you for calling us to be scribes trained for the kingdom. Let your kingdom vision grow within us like a great tree and spread like leaven, so that we may witness the glory of the kingdom. Grant us the identity of those who possess treasure and the identity of being pearls ourselves, so that we may live out the noble and holy life of the saints. And may everyone who sees us be caught in the kingdom's net and become disciples of the kingdom. In your name. Amen.