

Our Lord's Teaching about the Kingdom of God  
Matthew 13:44-48

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*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he had and buys that field. Mt. 13:44*

Several Sundays ago, through a church that shall remain unnamed, a Director of Christian Education, who shall stay anonymous, was leading over Zoom a class of adults, who were all highly committed, active, and faithful members of the church. The teacher asked her class this question: What does the kingdom of God mean to you? In response to the teacher's question every single microphone on the Zoom call stayed on mute. There was absolute silence. No one had an answer as to the meaning of the kingdom of God.

So apparently there is in some churches a lingering need for teaching about the kingdom of God.

I do not say this to fault the members of that adult class. It may be Jesus' own fault. Jesus spoke frequently and at length about the kingdom of God, but, insofar as I can tell, he never once defined it. He was always describing it, comparing it to one thing or another, but he never defined it in precise terms. That leads me to believe the kingdom of God is a divine mystery undefinable in strictly human language.

But we cannot shrug our shoulders and leave it at that. The kingdom of God is too important to be left without some idea as to its meaning. The kingdom of God as a theme is at the heart of the heart of the teaching of Jesus, and he speaks of it in such a way that it is the one treasure worth finding in life. So let's do some theological work on the kingdom of God this morning, theological work that can have practical implications to enrich your life.

We have to limit the field. References to the kingdom appear well over one hundred times in the gospels taken together.<sup>1</sup> So there is no way for one teaching sermon to treat every nuance about the kingdom. But we are true to the Bible and Jesus' meaning if we keep to the three parables in today's reading and a small consortium of other texts.

*The kingdom of God is something of great value.*

The kingdom merits discussion because of its great worth in the estimation of Jesus. He calls it a treasure that leads to joy. The three quick parables in the scripture reading for today, though they are but thumbnail sketches, tell of the kingdom's worth. Jesus compares it to a treasure hidden in a field that, when found, is worth selling everything one has in order to purchase that field and make it one's own. He compares it to a fine pearl that, when found, is worth selling everything one has in order to purchase that pearl. And he compares it to a fish net that is amazingly comprehensive in its catch.

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<sup>1</sup> James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 54.

Jesus gives the reason the kingdom has that tremendous value in the Sermon on the Mount. There he speaks of the worrisome things of life that make us anxious. He singles out having enough to eat, enough to drink, and enough to wear; but he probably means all the fears and worries about having enough – enough hope, enough courage, enough stamina, enough what-have-you. And then he says this. Don't worry. Don't be anxious. Seek the kingdom of God, he says, and all these things will be yours. (Mt. 6:33) The kingdom is valuable because it gives life the peace and strength and confidence it needs.

The Christmas shepherds found the treasure and went back to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard (Lk. 2:20). The woman at the well in Samaria, after talking with Jesus, sensed she had found something of a great price and hurried into her village to joyfully tell everyone she had met a man who fully explained her life to her (Jn. 4:29). Clement of Alexandria, a second century Christian writer, exclaimed that believers are so persuaded that God is always with them that the whole of life is a festival and that people go to their fields praising and to the sea singing.<sup>2</sup> A hymnist penned a song about the found treasure:

I've found a Friend, O such a Friend!

He loved me ere I knew Him.<sup>3</sup>

Another thrilled at the thought

This is my Father's world;

Why should my heart be sad?

The Lord is king; let the heavens ring.

God reigns; let the earth be glad.<sup>4</sup>

The treasure of the kingdom is the joy that follows when souls discover life has strength and sense because of fellowship with God.

Who wouldn't give up everything to have that? The kingdom of God is something of tremendous value. It is a treasure. It is a pearl of great price. It is the key to peace, happiness, and contentment.

*The kingdom of God is something right at hand.*

This treasure of tremendous value is so close you can taste it. That was the message of Jesus at the start of his public ministry. His first sermons after his baptism in the Jordan and his temptation in the wilderness, his first theme as he went around Galilee teaching and preaching was this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Mt. 4:17) It is a message he picked up from John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and carried with him wherever he went. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "Repent" means to orient your life toward this; "the kingdom of heaven" is the same as the kingdom of God; and the vital point is that the kingdom is not away off in some distant land or a future day on a distant horizon. The kingdom is has come near. The kingdom is at hand.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Sloane Coffin, *What Is There in Religion?* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> James G. Small, "I've Found a Friend," *The Hymnal* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1941), #474.

<sup>4</sup> Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World," *Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), #485.

Again, the parables of today's reading tell of the kingdom's at-hand-ness. The treasure was found in a field a man was plowing. The pearl was found in the wholesale merchandise a jeweler was examining for his store. The mighty catch came on an ordinary day of fishing.

See the implications of that, please! The tremendously wonderful treasure that is the kingdom of God is right where you live your life. The joy of discovering life has strength and sense because of fellowship with God is at hand. Jesus described a farmhand happening upon it while he plowed; a merchant happening upon it while he selected goods for his inventory; and fishermen finding it while they fished. By extension, you can trust that the peace, happiness, contentment, and treasures of the kingdom of God are just at your fingertips when you are doing what you do in the school, at the office, on the job, and in the home. The kingdom of God is something of tremendous value and it is right at hand.

*The kingdom of God is something not of this world.*

We should not let the parables that illustrate the kingdom in terms of a treasure, a pearl, and a catch of fish lead us to suppose the kingdom is something material. It is not. The kingdom of God is not something tangible.

Jesus said as much to Pontius Pilate at his trial. Pilate asked Jesus about his kingdom, thinking that a kingdom had to be some kind of territorial jurisdiction, a stretch of land, a region with defended and defendable borders. But Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." (Jn. 18:36)

He had said much the same to the Pharisees earlier. The Pharisees, who had from the Old Testament some notion of the kingdom of God, once asked Jesus what they should be looking for in terms of the signs of the coming of the kingdom. Think of them as having their telescopes, binoculars, and metal detectors out, scanning the signs of the time for the coming of the kingdom. Jesus told them to put away their contraptions and calendars and calculators. He said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed . . ." (Lk. 17:20) The kingdom isn't something material; it is not of this world.

The kingdom of God is something spiritual. It dwells in the heart. "The kingdom is within you," according to Jesus (Lk. 17:21 mg). It is not out there but in here. It is spiritual. It is something not of this world.

*The kingdom is something related to this world.*

We should not let the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God lead us to think it is removed from the world and not concerned with the issues of the world. The late John Stott, a leading evangelical - - in the good sense - - preacher and teacher in London wrote that one problem we Christians can have sometimes is that our God is too religious - concerned only with church and liturgies and Bible studies and sacred music and such, with no concern with what happens out in society.<sup>5</sup>

Adolf Hitler was absolutely dismissive of the church and did not want it meddling at all in the Third Reich. He sneered to Martin Niemöller, a German pastor, that the church and its

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<sup>5</sup> John Stott, *Involvement*, Vol. 1 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1985), p. 36-37.

ministers should stay out of governmental issues and policies and stick to saving souls. Niemöller looked the dictator in the eyes and said, “[N]either you nor any power in the world is in a position to take from us Christians and the Church the responsibility God has laid upon us for our people.”<sup>6</sup>

That has to be our answer, too, to all who want the church to stay out of politics. Jesus himself linked the kingdom of God with the issues of social justice right in the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>7</sup>  
We are to pray

Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

While the kingdom is not of this world it is related to this world and engaged in this world. The kingdom is not a Christianized society but it is not aloof from society and the issues of social justice.<sup>8</sup>

*The kingdom is approached through love for God and for neighbor.*

We have not yet answered how to find this spiritual treasure of a kingdom that is near and which we are to seek, this thing at hand that is not of this world but which is related to the world. The answer is that we approach the kingdom by loving God and loving neighbor.

Jesus once told a man that he was not far from the kingdom. What was it about that man that led Jesus to say he was close to the spiritual treasure that is the realm of God? It was something the man said and seemed to mean and to live. What he said was that the greatest thing of all is to love God – heart, mind, and strength – and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. (Mk. 12:28ff)

Where the rule of the love of God is our rule, and where that love for God reaches out to become love for neighbor, the blade of our plow scratches the hidden treasure, one pearl of beauty stands out from all the rest in the pile, and the threads of the net begin to strain with the catch. When we love God and love our neighbor we are standing in the treasured kingdom that touches life and enriches it.

We come back around now to where we were at the beginning. What does the kingdom of God mean to you? I hope all of you will unmute your mics and say, “The kingdom of God is God’s rule of love in my heart and it moves me to love God and to love my neighbor. Living under this rule is so enriching and filled with so much piece of mind, who wouldn’t want to orient life around it? It is a treasure well worth finding because it means more than anything.”

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> John Henry Jowett, *God – Our Contemporary* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922), p. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> Stott, p. 26.