

**“Perspectives on the Kingdom”**  
**Matt. 13:31-33, 44-46**

**Intro.** What is the Kingdom of God, and what is it to you personally?

This is the third in a series on Jesus’ parables of the kingdom recorded in Matt. 13. The kingdom of God was the focus of Jesus’ preaching as it is described in the first three gospels. It was the centerpiece. But for Jesus’ first hearers, it had baggage in the form of ingrained expectations which Jesus had to deal with. For us, the term “kingdom” has different baggage, but we definitely have work to get it in focus.

**(Baggage)** In Jesus’ day, the baggage was nationalistic. It was the assumption that the kingdom involved the restoration of military and political dominion to Israel, and even after the resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Culturally ingrained ideas die hard—then and now.

**Our baggage** is different. At least for me, the idea of a kingdom is quaint. A democratic republic is the only kind of government I have any experience with, so a kingdom is hard to get in focus. I think of fairy tales, or King Arthur, or royalty as it is in Britain, and none of it helps me think about the rule of God.

**What is the Kingdom of God?** Well for sure, God is king. God is the all-powerful, God is the king, no matter what we may think.

But declaring allegiance to the king—voluntarily placing oneself under his lordship—now that is a different matter. That depends on the character of the king.

- If I really believe that this king loves me and the world he created, and has our best interest at heart, then his kingdom seems a good thing.
- If the character of the Almighty is shown in the self-sacrificing love of Jesus, then humankind is indeed blessed.
- If being a part of God’s kingdom aligns me with his loving purposes for his world—if it aligns me with what he’s doing, I want to be a part. That’s the most important thing I could be doing.

**(When?)** But we still need a better handle on the notion of “kingdom.” To begin with, when is the kingdom? Now, or in the future. The answer, it seems, is: it’s both. In weeks past, we have noticed that some uses of the term kingdom have to do with here and now. In the parable of the sower, the soils represent people who receive, or don’t receive, the word of the kingdom right now. They produce an abundant crop—or they don’t—right now.

But the next parable, that of the weeds of the field, speaks of the end of the age. The weeds and the wheat grow together, but the conclusion doesn’t come until the end of the age. After the separation of the weeds and the wheat, (vs. 43) “*Then* the righteous will shine like the sun *in the kingdom of their Father.*”

The answer is that the kingdom is here, now, but it’s also future.

- It was foreshadowed by the Kingdom of Israel.
- It was initiated at Jesus’ first coming.
- But it will not be completed until his return.

**(Reign or Realm)** There is a companion question: is the kingdom God's reign over the world in a general sense, and over those who acknowledge his kingship in particular? Or is God's kingdom an established realm where his rule is universally embraced? Is it a *reign* or a *realm*? Again, the answer is both. God reigns now. When Jesus returns, there will be judgement, and God's realm will be the whole earth.

Again,

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- It was initiated at Jesus' first coming. God reigns now.
- But it will not be completed until his return. His realm will be the whole earth.

Our text is Matthew 13:31-33 and 44-46. It contains two pairs of parables. Each pair emphasizes a particular quality of the kingdom. The first pair addresses their doubts about a kingdom of weakness as he has described; the second expresses a response to the kingdom.

(31) He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; (32) it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it was grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

(33) He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

(44) "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 has and buys that field.

(45) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; (46) on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

We first focus on the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. These have been called the "Little Power" parables. We have seen how the Jewish audience Jesus addressed thought in terms of power. They thought in terms of a political kingdom that would triumph by force of arms. But these parables are about small and obscure beginnings which grow to produce impressive results.

**(Mustard Seed)** In conversations in Jesus' day, the mustard seed was inevitably the item used as an example of something very small. It was not literally the smallest seed, but it was used proverbially as that. It produced a shrub, which would typically grow to about four feet, but in some parts of Palestine, especially around the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was preaching, it would grow to 12 or even 15 feet. The point, of course, is that from this tiny seed comes a tree which offers shelter to other creatures, like the birds of the air.

I believe what Jesus wanted his followers to hear and believe is that a great kingdom can result from small and obscure beginnings—such as Jesus and his followers. There will be a kingdom, but it will not be imposed by force; it will grow. As we saw from the parable of the sower, it will grow from the word which lands on good soil. As we saw from the parable of the weeds of the field, it will grow up in a very ambiguous situation—the wheat and the weeds together—until the end of the age.

The disciples had to be concerned—this was their future. We share the disciples' concern. There are times when the gospel message seems awfully small and powerless. For myself, when I speak of Christ to another, I sometimes get the feeling that the message of Christ and his death and resurrection doesn't seem at all impressive. It's just words. I suspect that explains some of the nervousness we feel in evangelism.

Jennie's brother Don is one of the nicer guys I know. He visits us regularly, and occasionally faith comes up. He always converses politely, but there's a point beyond which he will not go. These words just don't get any traction.

Of course, in the mustard seed parable, Jesus wasn't primarily speaking of individual encounters, he was speaking of the growth of a kingdom, and in that, we know things they didn't know. We know, for example, that while the Roman Empire occupied Palestine in Jesus' time, the Christian faith grew to occupy the empire over the next few hundred years.

The parable of the mustard seed also suggests another angle: a kingdom imposed by force (such as the restoration of Israel to military and political power) may be impressive to begin with, and certainly would make the Jews feel vindicated. But such a kingdom certainly would arouse resentment among the conquered people. A kingdom composed of people who choose to be part of it because they responded voluntarily—even joyfully—to the word about it becomes a unified kingdom of people who truly want to belong. This may be weak, but it's also very strong!

**(Leaven)** The parable of the yeast is similar in its thrust to the parable of the mustard seed—it's a small, obscure beginning. Three measures is about 50 pounds of flour. But if you knead just a handful of yeast in that amount of flour, it will rise and it will produce enough bread to feed over 100 people! The focus of Jesus' in telling the parable, however seems to have been not just that it produced a lot of bread, but that the small amount of yeast penetrated the entire batch. Further, in Greek, the words of vs. 33 are not "all of it was leavened," but "*the whole* was leavened," and many believe that Jesus was subtly hinting about the penetration of the entire world.

That may have been an impossible stretch for them, but as we said in reflection on the mustard seed, we have a perspective they didn't have. We know that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost one out of three people in the world professed some form of Christian faith.

Can you imagine that Jesus is sitting in a boat in the edge of the Sea of Galilee in the first century planting a seed of challenge for his followers to take on the entire world? As Jesus himself said on occasion, "Let him who has ears to hear, listen!"

**(Gems)** The next two parables might be called the gem parables. One is about buried treasure, and the other is about a pearl of great value. Both are about response to the kingdom.

**(Treasure)** When we think of buried treasure, our thoughts turn to pirates. In the ancient world, where banking was risky business, burying or hiding treasure was not such a strange phenomena, and finding it did occasionally happen.

There were also lots of hired laborers, and those people might well be working someone else's land. If this were the case, the laborer found the treasure, then put it back where he found it. He then went and sold everything he had so he could buy the field and the treasure it contained.

**(Pearl)** The parable of the pearl of great value is similar. In this case, the merchant is constantly on the lookout for the exceptional pearl, he doesn't find it while doing something else. But the response is the same: he sells everything he has to enable him to buy it.

The point here is that these people saw such great value in their finds that they sold everything they had to possess it. The way Jesus puts it is, "in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Parting with everything he had wasn't a grudging sacrifice, it was a good deal. It was the really sensible thing to do. The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus says.

Occasionally we come across someone who has made a great sacrifice because of their faith. Last week I told you about the August family. The man, Halle, had worked for Federal Express for 20 years, but at the call of God, they sold everything and moved to Nicaragua as missionaries. This is the group our Nicaragua mission team will go down to help this coming week. From what I've heard about these people, I have no doubt that they could be described by this man's attitude, "in their joy, they sold everything and followed the Lord's leading to Nicaragua."

Our response might be, "Wow, they really were devoted! Look at what they sacrificed. I could never do anything like that." I think the question for us is not whether or not we're willing to move to Nicaragua as missionaries.

- I think the issue for us is to ask God to give us eyes to see his kingdom and his will with such vividness that if he calls us to Nicaragua, or someplace else, we will joyfully go.
- I think the issue for us is to ask God each morning to give us eyes to see his kingdom and his will with such vividness that our words and our actions that day will reflect his will and his kingdom.

We began with the question, "What is the Kingdom of God, and what is it to you personally?" How is your relationship with the king? Whether you are in the position of the man who in his joy sells all and goes and buys the field, or your life seems stifled with the cares of this world and you struggle to get your priorities right (that is, you're like the soil choked with thorns from the parable of the sower) God responds to those who seek Him. I urge you to bring yourself before him. Ask him to help you move towards himself. He will honor your faith—weak or strong.