

The Kingdom Parables

Matt.13:31-33; 44-45

Introduction

My grandfather drank only one soft drink: Pepsi.
Why? Was it always on sale? Not quite.

As a young investor he had been burned badly in the stock market. Shortly thereafter he was offered an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a brand new business venture—a soft drink. He refused; too risky, uncertain, looked like small beginnings. Yes, you may have guessed, he passed up an opportunity to own initial stock offerings in Coca-Cola. That’s why, the rest of his life, he drank only Pepsi, I suppose as a mild form of protest.

From a human point of view, many people in Jesus’ day were offered an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of an enterprise, which no doubt appeared risky and uncertain with small beginnings. What was it? The kingdom of God.

You would think an offer of the kingdom of God would be an easy one to accept. Reluctance or hesitation, therefore, must depend, on one’s expectations over against the offer.

Typical Jewish expectation was that the kingdom of God was coming with power and glory. There’d be national victory, military might, tangible splendor, a return to the glory days of King David, but greater.

Any student of the Hebrew Scriptures could garner a plethora of prophetic passages promising as much. Plus, if you lived in Palestine you’d be longing for it, given the history of brutal tyrants who had ruled the land for over a century.

The point is, according to common Jewish expectation, when the kingdom comes, you’ll know it and there’ll be no hesitation! Just as a blindfolded person standing at the end of the runway at the Lynchburg airport knows the difference between a glider taking off and a Boeing 747.

Well, here comes a poor carpenter from dumpy Nazareth supposedly inaugurating the kingdom of God and it sure looks like a glider.

As a bystander, do you see enough to want to invest everything, to lay it all on the line? Particularly knowing that other radicals in Jerusalem had failed miserably over the years to revolt against Rome.

Do you see the critical question:

How would you recognize the inauguration of God’s kingdom if it happened?

The tension between human expectation and the way God actually does it underlies much of the public ministry of Jesus Christ.

How does Jesus teach about the kingdom, like a politico rallying the faithful, like General Patton motivating the troops, like a football coach in the locker room? No, through parables, particularly what we call the kingdom parables in Matt.13.

Remember, parables are comparisons, taking the familiar to illustrate the mystery of the kingdom of God, which is otherwise unknown for its heavenly nature. The kingdom is not intuitively discerned. The King of Glory will not do things the way the kings of the earth do them.

Therefore, Jesus' parables force kingdom seekers to reckon with the heavenly nature of the kingdom. They challenge your assumptions, reveal your prejudices, force your hand:

Do I desire the kingdom on its terms or my own terms?

Will I merely fit Jesus into my kingdom—sure, come on in, I have a place for you, right over here where you can give me what I want but can't make my life messy—or will I humbly ask Him to fit me in His kingdom wherever He sees fit?

Jesus helps you answer that question by telling you what the kingdom is like. Notice the stock phrase: "*The kingdom of heaven is like*" in v. 31,33,44,45.

We have four short parables or comparisons.

The first two make basically the same point:

The final size of the product is surprising in light of the smallness of its beginning.

The second two basically answer the same question:

What happens when you understand the surpassing worth of the kingdom of God?

V.31 The mustard seed.

Have you noticed? The mustard seed is tiny, it can get lost in your hand, but when full grown you get a bush nine to twelve feet tall, overshadowing all the plants in the garden. Are the nesting birds significant? Probably.

Ez.17:22-23 and Ez.31:1-6 are verses which seem to be using the birds nesting in trees which God plants as symbols of the nations.

But, it doesn't start that way. The beginning appears to be insignificant. Jesus did not draw CNN International news headlines. He was executed as a common criminal at age thirty-three, just three short years after he started, apparently a despised Nazarene with 12-120 followers, not many for a region of three million people.

Would you have invested everything in that?

None of it makes sense, until the resurrection. Like the dead seed sown in the ground, so the body of Jesus sown in the grave burst forth in everlasting life. That's what he promised to his followers, everlasting life! Can you find a greater promise than that? What are you investing in with that kind of return?

The first disciples gave all for the Lord of life, because the Lord of Life gave all for them so they could have all anyone could ever want.

Those of you who don't have the seed:

Ask Him to plant the seed of life in your heart. You recognize it as faith, the ability beyond yourself to trust the promise of God to forgive you because of Jesus' death and to raise you unto everlasting life.

Only God can give it, and he jealously delights to always give to anyone who asks.

Those of us who have the seed:

- wait patiently for the fruit;

- pray for the full-flowering of the kingdom within you

- sow the seeds of the kingdom in word and deed where God has you;

- don't discount any small thing done for Jesus; he typically builds like the rest of us, one small brick at a time.

- Rest in this: God will give the growth, and don't focus on people. Jealousy and strive are evil.

1 Cor.2:5 *"What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth."*

How can we be sure about the small seed's inevitable flourishing?

Jesus tells a second parable based on the preparation of bread. V.33

In the preparation of bread, leaven, a piece of fermented dough, is mixed into a new batch of flour. Just a little bit of leaven kneaded in will cause the whole batch to rise when baked. Three pecks equals forty loaves, a stellar return on investment.

This is a second illustration of the kingdom: small beginnings yield unexpected large results.

But there's more. Why does the kingdom grow?

Because, like leaven in dough, the gospel's influence is penetrating and pervasive.

This is so at least two levels.

One, the kingdom of God is pervasively transforming the whole creation, fulfilling Is.11:9 and anticipating Rev.11:5.

Two, individually, the gospel leaven penetrates all of your life. It can't be compartmentalized. Jesus is king of all or He's not king at all.

He asserts His kingship every place you go- home, store, playground, business, pleasure,

And the grace of the gospel saturates the way you think about everything-

Your words, money, time, vote, internet news, etc.

Are you trying to tame the Lion of Judah, or have you let him run wild within you? Here's one way to tell. When the king has free rein in you things get upset, he knocks things

over, especially those items which are monuments to our own glory and trophies of self-interest. Jesus won't tolerate those because they destroy you and rob Him of the glory He deserves from your life.

You know grace is being worked into your heart when the priorities of Jesus are increasingly yours:

Joy producing holiness and hatred of sin;
Peace producing trust in the Father;
Sacrifice producing love, especially for the unlovely;
Light transforming your mind for truth.

Because the power of the kingdom, like leaven, is largely hidden from the world, don't expect the world to notice. It's even hidden from ourselves.

The Bible is clear that we don't even see ourselves or one another as we will be one day.

Col.3:4

1 Cor.13:

What we mustn't do is either despair that we are incomplete works in progress, nor should we capitulate to the world and offer it the kind of kingdom it will demand of Christianity. Such as mercy ministry without word ministry; keep to yourselves religion. World magazine reported that an upcoming movie with an explicit Christian message was originally given a PG rating because of the potential danger of the religious message.

What the world will want from the kingdom of God is a polite, innocuous kingdom. A God without wrath brought a people without sin into a kingdom without judgment by a Christ without a cross.

The glory of God's kingdom is missed by the world because it lies principally in the cross. From the outside it looks like defeat, weakness, scorn, tragedy. To the Jew, scandal, to the Gentile, foolishness, to the humanist, pitiful.

The cross brings each of us to the crisis of decision: What is the kingdom of God worth?

All that you do in life is implicitly based on a cost-benefit analysis:

If you go into debt, because you wanted it now versus later;
If you stay up late you tire more easily the next day;
You may borrow to go to college, a good investment.

The twin parables of v.44-45 illustrate what happens when you understand the value of the kingdom.

A man sells all to buy a field. You'd sit him down and ask, what could possibly be worth that? Why is it so valuable that you sacrificed in an extreme measure?

A man sells all to buy one pearl. The implication is he apparently paid full price!

These parables raise one last question: Who does understand the worth of the kingdom?

There are two answers:

One, the one who sees its surpassing value.

By dying to yourself, giving up all rights to yourself, you gain all life.

Jim Elliot said, he is no fool to give up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.

Two, the one who paid for it.

It is true, the cost of discipleship is everything. YET, is it not also true that the offer of the kingdom is a gift, it's not based on worth, performance, how good you are, what you earned or deserved. It is given by God to the undeserving absolutely freely.

How could that be? Because you have been bought with a price, dear pearl of God. Did not the Son of Man come like a merchant seeking His treasure, and when he found it, He paid the full price.

Jesus gave up all He had, his very life and safety, to the cross, to make you His pearl of surpassing value.