

# The Kingdom is Like (2)

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February 26, 2025

Text: Matt 13:44-52

We come to the second set of kingdom parables. We identify these because they begin, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” In the first set of three, Jesus talked about how the kingdom grows. It grows like a mustard seed, beginning small and perhaps unnoticed, but maturing into a tree. The kingdom grows like yeast permeating a large batch of dough, noticeable only by the changes it makes in the dough itself.

The second set of three has a different focus, with one being similar in nature to the first. We’ll get to it in more detail, but the parable of the weeds (13:24-30, 36-43) is similar to the parable of the net (14:47-50). That is, it has a similar focus and meaning. But let’s look at the first two.

Several weeks ago, Bill preached to us from I Peter, chapter 1. His title, if I recall correctly, was “The Value of Your Faith.” The key verse was verse 7, where Peter writes in regard to the trials we face, *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.* Peter’s point was that the genuineness of faith is proven by trials, but also that it is our faith that holds of when we go through trials. And genuine faith, more valuable than pure gold, brings honor to Jesus Christ.

But we often treat our faith as if it were not only not valuable to us, but not even very important to us. We allow all sorts of assaults on our faith. The music we listen to, the books we read, the movies we watch, the television programs we watch, the friends we keep, are often the very things that assault and degrade our faith. In many cases, those entertainments are designed to erode away the Christian faith. They take our time away from the more noble pursuits. We fill our time with entertainments and then complain that we don’t have time to read the Bible, to read devotionally, or to pray. We rush home from church to watch the game. And I’m sorry to say that the church itself sometimes does things that excuse us. We need to understand that what we have is precious and ought to be protected. If it were gold, you would lock it in a safe.

We not only allow assaults on our faith, we also do not take the necessary steps to protect and build our faith. There was an interesting meme on social media recently. A girl says, “I want God to speak to me.” A boy responds, “Then read the Bible.” She says, “No, I want to hear God speak.” The boy says, “Then read the Bible out loud.” When Paul wrote to the Ephesian church about the armor of God, he was writing about the defensive equipment a soldier wears. He began by telling them, *Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes* (Eph 6:11). He doesn’t say so you can attack Satan, but so that you may withstand Satan. Our faith is under attack from every side, so we are to don the armor. We are to be equipped with the truth, not with opinion. We are to guard our hearts against unrighteous appetites. We are to take up the shield

of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit - the word of God. Faith is protective. But we are to have the certainty of the knowledge of our salvation. And we are to know the word of God well enough to defend against false interpretations. Remember that Satan used Scripture to tempt Jesus. Our armor is prayer and Scripture – consistent prayer, and a functional comprehension of the Word of God. That means that we need to read it, study it, and hear it expounded. It also means that we need to listen to soul-lifting music and read inspirational books. We need to understand that what we have is precious and ought to be build up and improved. If it were gold, you would be trying to accumulate more of it.

And that's the focus of these first two parables.

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."* Let's imagine that you are broke. The money is gone and the job you have doesn't pay enough for you to live on. You live hand to mouth. Bills are killing you. One day, you just decide to go out into the country for a walk. As you are walking through the fields, you notice a strange reflection in a rock wall. You go check it out and discover that it is a box of gold coins. You don't have any way to get it home, so you very carefully hide it back in the rock wall. Now, what do you do? Those gold coins would solve all your financial problems. There's probably enough there to pay off your mortgage and replace your old car. You go home, gather up everything you can think of to sell. After everything is sold, you discover that you have just enough to buy that field, so you go and make the owner an offer. He sells you the field. You decided that the treasure in that box was worth selling everything you own to obtain. In Jesus' day, if you bought a field, everything in that field was included in the price. All the mineral rights, any spring that might be there, anything left on the property. Which means that now that box of gold coins is yours.

Here's the thing: *"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field."* Just like that treasure, the kingdom of heaven is so valuable, Jesus says, that it is worth whatever price you have to pay to get in. It is so valuable, it is worth everything you own. It is so valuable, you should do whatever you have to do to obtain it.

The second parable is like it, but there's an interesting difference. *"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls."* Tell yourself a different story. You are a wealthy person. You drive a Maserati and live in a 12-bedroom mansion. You are a dealer in fine jewelry. Today, you are traveling to Indonesia, Australia and the Philippines in search of flawless white pearls and then to Tahiti for the precious black pearls from the rare *Pinctada Margaritifera* oysters. You know what you're looking for. But in a Tahitian market stall, you stumble upon a pearl you've never seen before. You've heard about them, but you've never seen one, and it's the only one there. It's a South Seas blue pearl, perfectly formed, and larger than any of the pearls you've ever bought or sold. What are you going to do?

Jesus said, *"he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."* You get on the phone to your stock-broker and tell him to sell all your stock. You call your realtor and tell him to sell your house. You call an auto dealer and tell him to pick up your Maserati. That pearl is so rare and so valuable that it is worth everything you own. This, Jesus says, is the value we should place on the kingdom. It is so valuable, so precious, that you should do whatever must be done to obtain it. It is the thing of such high value that Jesus told us before to seek it as a first priority. Nothing should

stand in the way of entering the kingdom of heaven.

Now, please understand, I'm not talking about "going to heaven". I'm not talking about what happens when we die. That's not what Jesus is talking about. He's not talking about the Holy City, or the streets of gold, or the multitudes around the throne. He's not talking about the future. It's important that we understand what Jesus, in Matthew's account, is doing. Jesus is the King. He's come to inaugurate his kingdom on earth. He's come to recruit citizens to the kingdom. He's talking about living today as a child of God and a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus talks about eternal life, it's not the same as "everlasting" life, and it's not about the future. It's about the sort of life, the quality of life that we live now on this earth. He's talking about a new creation and a new birth into a new life that we live here and now. And he's telling us that this new life is so valuable, so precious, that it is worth whatever we must pay right now to belong right now.

We come to the third parable in this series: "*The kingdom of heaven is like a net ...*"

We know that four of the disciples were fishermen by trade: Peter and Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. And Jesus is using an image that they know very well: the fishing net. These four, at least, as well as anyone who lived in or near Capernaum or Galilee, would have seen fishermen throw their nets. These nets were weighted around the edges and when they were thrown, the weights would cause the net to sink and trap whatever was beneath. It was indiscriminate. It caught everything. Then, when the main cord is pulled, the outer edges of the net were drawn together, forming a large sack to haul in the catch. They would also deploy trawl nets, let out from the boat as it was propelled through the water to form a barrier. Then the net was drawn to the boat or to shore with the catch. The fishermen then were tasked with sorting the fish.

According to Jewish law, Leviticus 11:9ff, if it had fins and scales it was considered to be clean. If it did not have fins and scales, it was unclean. The Sea of Galilee contains several species of fish, a couple species of sardines and a couple species of tilapia. It also has two species of barbel fish - we would call them catfish - and eels. The tilapia and sardines are clean according to the law, the eels and catfish are not. But they didn't want to just throw the unclean fish back into the lake, so they were thrown up onto the shore and left for the gulls. The good fish were put into baskets, some to go home for food, and some to go to market.

Later on, we'll hear Jesus say, "*many are invited, but few are chosen*" (Mt 22:14). The nets are indiscriminate. All sorts of creatures may be caught in them. Jesus could be saying that as the kingdom of heaven grows, there will be many who are attracted, many who come, many who join in but never join up. That is, they're somehow along for the ride. And we see that Jesus had many followers, many fans, people who followed so that they could be entertained, so that they could see the miracles. Many go along for the show. Many come for the potlucks and the concerts. But few stay for the work. As we learned in the parable of the weeds, we may not know who are the pretend Christians, or who is just there for the entertainment. There are those who want to be known, like the Pharisees who made a show of their righteousness so that people would respect them.

Just as fishermen sort their fish after the catch, so, Jesus says, will there be a sorting in the kingdom of heaven. The righteous will be separated from the wicked, and the wicked will be

discarded. That's not the way Jesus said it, and this is now the second time that we have an image of hell. In the parable of the weeds, Jesus said that *everything that causes sin and all those who do evil* will be thrown *"into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* Here, Jesus says, *"The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* The utter grief and agony of the punishment of the wicked should cause us no joy, but rather a sense of urgency that we do not want anyone to end up in that situation.

Nor does God want anyone to perish. Our earliest memory verse: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him* (Jn 3:16-17). Peter wrote that *God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Pe 3:9). *All have sinned, and the wages of sin is death.* That is, the default setting for us is the blazing furnace. Jesus came to change our destiny, to bring us into his kingdom, and to save us from that dreadful fate. Jesus did not tell these two parables - the weeds and the net - as a threat, but as a statement of fact. This is how it will be in the end. And this is how it works in the kingdom of heaven: *"The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father"* (Mt 13:43).

We remember that Jesus told us to seek first the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). Now he's telling us why. Entering the kingdom of heaven is the most important thing you will ever do. Citizenship in the kingdom is the most precious possession you could ever have. More precious than the gold of El Dorado. More costly and rare than a South Seas blue pearl. It is the wisest investment you could ever make, and it's worth selling all you possess. When Jesus told the rich young man to sell all and come follow, he was giving eternal investment advice. The man was not willing to go that far. He wanted something easy and safe. The kingdom of heaven is neither easy nor safe, but it is a sure investment.

But then we must realize that the kingdom of heaven is also selective. Not everyone will be allowed entry. Everyone is invited. Everyone is able to enter. God extends the broadest possible invitation. But there is a condition. If I'm reading this right, the condition is holiness, cleanness before God. Anything less is unacceptable. The good news is that God will cleanse us, if we wish.