

INTRODUCTION

It's dangerous to jump to conclusions. There is a funny story about a Catholic priest who was riding on a bus, when a man who was obviously drunk got on and sat down next to him and started reading a newspaper. The priest wasn't happy, because the man didn't smell good and had a bottle of whiskey sticking out of his coat pocket. The drunk turned from his newspaper and asked, "Father, what causes arthritis?" The priest said with venom, "It's caused by immoral living, drunkenness, and a lack of personal hygiene!" The man said, "Well, that's interesting." And he went back to reading his newspaper. The priest started feeling guilty for the way he had spoken to the man, so he turned to him and said, "My son, I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?" The drunk man said, "Oh, I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here in the paper that the Pope does." So never jump to conclusions!

When it comes to studying the New Testament, don't make the mistake of thinking you've learned everything there is to know about the messages and miracles of Jesus. I've been studying the Bible seriously for 39 years and I'm still learning new things about Jesus! The first five messages in our "Parables and Miracles" series have all been about miracles, and this is the first message that deals with the parables of Jesus. There are many "Parables of the Kingdom" in Matthew, and today I'll introduce the topic.

As we begin the study of parables, it's important to have a working definition of a parable. Our English word "parable" is a transliteration of the Greek word "*para-bole*." We recognize that the word *para* means "alongside," because we have an English word "parallel." We know a paralegal is someone who works alongside an attorney, and a para-church organization works alongside the church. The word *bole* literally means to "toss, or throw." Have you ever tossed a bowling ball? You are bowling and this word comes from the Greek and Latin words, *bole*. So a parable is something that is tossed alongside something else. With that understanding, a good definition of a parable is: "A parable is a supernatural truth laid alongside a natural picture or story." Or as someone said, "a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." There's a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable. When Jesus shared a parable or employed a metaphor, He used a picture, story, or image that is easily understood, and alongside it, He laid down a powerful life-changing truth. In our study of the parables in Matthew, I'm going to highlight more than just the fifteen stories that are traditionally considered parables. I'm also going to focus on the word pictures, analogies, and metaphors Jesus employed, even if they aren't a classic parable. For instance, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." That's not a story but we'll talk about it, because salt is a natural element and there is a spiritual truth laid alongside it. Sometimes Jesus specifically explained the spiritual meaning of a parable or word picture, but most of the time He simply laid down the natural truth, and His listeners had to meditate on it to dig below the surface to discover the life-changing truth.

Why did Jesus speak in parables instead of just speaking the direct truth? The disciples wondered the same thing. Later in Matthew we read, "The disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' He replied, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables.'" (Matthew 13:10-13) I can't help but chuckle at the

wisdom of Jesus, because He answered their question about parables with a parable! If I could paraphrase what I think Jesus meant, He was saying, "Spiritual truth is so explosive, that I don't want to just leave it lying around for anyone to grab. It's so valuable that if you want it, you're going to have to dig below the surface to find it, but the reward will be worth the effort. To the one who finds truth, he or she will find MORE truth. But to the one who doesn't cherish or follow the truth they have, they'll lose it." With that introduction to parables, let's introduce the "Parables of the Kingdom" by reading Matthew 4:12-17:

"When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.'

The Kingdom of God is one of the most important doctrines in the Bible. In case you're wondering, the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are identical. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to use the phrase "kingdom of heaven" and he uses it 31 times. Matthew was a Jew writing primarily to a Jewish audience, and Jews often substituted the word "heaven" for "God," because they considered the name of God too holy to be spoken or written. In Matthew's account, Jesus told fifteen parable-stories, and twelve of them begin, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." As we consider God's Kingdom, I want to answer five important questions.

QUESTION: WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Answer: God' rule over my life

The answer is: God's rule over my life. There are dozens of verses in the Bible that speak of God being King over His creation. For instance we read, "The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all." (Psalm 103:19) Think about it, the only thing you need for a kingdom is a king. You don't need palaces, thrones, armies, or geographical boundaries. The only essential requirement for a kingdom is a king. And when you crown Jesus as Lord of your life, He becomes your King and you become a part of the Kingdom of heaven.

As Americans, it's hard for us to understand the idea of kings and kingdoms, because few of us have ever lived in a political kingdom. We have an NBA team in Sacramento called the Kings, and when I was a kid I played "king of the hill" and there's also an important piece on the chess board that we call a king. But about the only exposure most of us have had to a king was the rock-and-roll singer from Memphis, thank you very much. However if you lived in the United Kingdom, or the Kingdom of Thailand, you would have a better frame of reference to understand the Kingdom of Heaven.

However, we know enough about British royalty to know that an individual like Queen Elizabeth deserves honor and respect. In fact, many Americans are fascinated by the pomp and circumstance of the royal family. When Prince Charles married Lady Diana at St. Paul's in 1981, 750 million people were glued to their television sets to watch the wedding. I recall that

when we visited Thailand to lead the annual meeting for missionaries a few years ago, we saw pictures of the King of Thailand displayed on billboards and signs throughout the country. They love their king, and it's actually a crime to say anything critical about him. I was on a van with some of our members as we passed a picture of the king. He is rather thin and has dark hair. I said to the other folks in the van, "I finally figured out who the king looks like. Do you remember the Smothers' brothers? The King of Thailand looks exactly like Dickie Smothers!" Everybody agreed, and laughed. Then I noticed the Thai driver of the van was listening. I don't know if he understood English or not, but in case that remark sounded like a critical remark about the king, I added, "And you know, what a compliment that is, because Dickie Smothers is one of the most handsome, respected performers in all of America!" So even though we've never had a political king, we have a basic understanding of royalty. Now, just multiply the honor, respect, authority of an earthly king by the power of ten billion and you might start to understand what an awesome King our God is.

QUESTION: WHERE IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Answer: Here and in the future

There is a twofold answer to that question. The Kingdom of God is here (now) and in the future. Jesus launched His ministry by saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." He wasn't talking about thrones, crowns and armies. He was speaking of a spiritual kingdom. Remember, all you need for a kingdom is a king. The reason the kingdom of heaven was near was because the King was standing there when He said it. It would be like me standing right in front of you saying, "Pay attention, the pastor is near."

But Jesus also spoke of the kingdom in another way. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus if he was a King, He replied, "I am, but my kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36, 37) If the only Kingdom was the spiritual one, why would Jesus teach us to pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?" There is a present kingdom and there is a kingdom to come. There is an invisible kingdom present right now and it is populated by everyone who has surrendered to the rule and reign of King Jesus. But there will also be a literal, visible Kingdom in the future in which Jesus will literally reign over the heavens and the earth. Dr. George Ladd was a respected scholar at Fuller Theological Seminary for many years. He wrote a book entitled *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. In it, he addressed the dual meaning of the Kingdom. "The Kingdom is a present reality, and yet it is a future blessing. It is an inner spiritual redemptive blessing which can be experienced only by way of the new birth (John 3:3), and yet it will have to do with the government of the nations of the world (Revelation 11:15). Obviously no simple explanation can do justice to such a rich but diverse variety of teaching." (p. 17)

Both aspects of the Kingdom are taught in the New Testament. For instance Romans 14:17 speaks of the spiritual aspect of the Kingdom: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Paul pointed out that the kingdom of God shouldn't be equated with keeping the trivial dietary laws of the Old Testament about what you could eat and drink. The kingdom of heaven involves righteous, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are all blessings of the Kingdom that we can experience and enjoy right now. But as Dr. Ladd mentioned, when Jesus returns in the future, He will rule over the earth in a literal sense. You might recognize these words from Revelation as the chorus of G. F. Handel's

“Hallelujah Chorus.” The Bible says, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15) Even though there is a dual meaning of the Kingdom, obviously the only one we should focus on is the one that is here and now—the righteousness, peace, and joy that comes when the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts.

QUESTION: HOW DO I BECOME A SUBJECT IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Answer: You must be born again

Not everyone is a part of God’s kingdom. There is only one way to become a subject in the Kingdom and that is by being born again. John 3 tells us about a Jewish Pharisee named Nicodemus who came to see Jesus at night. Well, call him Nick for short. He was the original Nick at night. As Jesus and Nick discussed spiritual matters, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no man can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” (John 3:3, 5) There are two kinds of birth. There is a physical birth that brings you into the kingdom of humanity, and there is a spiritual birth that brings you into the Kingdom of heaven. All of us have had the first birth, but not everyone has had a second birth. And the only way to see or enter the kingdom of heaven is to be born again. And the only way to be born again is to admit that in your first birth, you were born a sinner and you need a new birth, a rebirth from the inside out. Everyone knows their physical birthday, mine is January 16. But if you are born again you also have a spiritual birthday to celebrate. I happen to know I was born again on March 11, 1961. This past week I celebrated my spiritual birthday. I’m more certain of my second birth than I am of my first. I can’t remember being born the first time: I have a birth certificate, and I accept my parents’ word that I was born in Ruston, LA. But I can’t remember it, so I can’t be certain. However, I remember my spiritual birthday—it was the day Jesus came into my heart and made me a new creature. Has there ever been a time in your life where you can look back and say, “That was the day that I was born again?” If you want to see God’s Kingdom you must be born again.

QUESTION: WHAT IS MY JOB IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Answer: Love and serve the King

Once you enter God’s Kingdom through a new birth, you have a job to do. It is to love and serve the King. The main theme of Matthew’s writing is that Jesus is the King. The Old Testament ended with Israel looking for a King, and Matthew begins with the Magi asking about the one born King of the Jews. The Baptism of Jesus was the coronation of the King. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is the Constitution of the King. It describes how citizens of the Kingdom think and act. The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 6:33. Jesus had just been talking about not worrying about what you’re going to eat or wear. This happens to be my life verse. Jesus said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.”

The climax of the story is when Jesus is being tortured by the Roman soldiers. They placed a crown of thorns on His head and mocked Him saying, “Hail, the King of the Jews!” The story concludes with Jesus being taken up to heaven and being seated at His rightful place at the right hand of the throne of God—the place of a King. So, our job is to love and to serve Jesus in any

way possible. This involves obeying Jesus because He said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15) If you want to be a part of the Kingdom to come, you need to obey the King now. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21) Are you loving and serving the King by obeying His every command?

QUESTION: HOW CAN I ADVANCE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Answer: Invest my treasure in heavenly business

The best way that I can do that is by investing my treasure in heavenly business. God commanded us to spread His Kingdom around the world. Do you have a Kingdom vision? We've heard a lot about church growth, it was even the subject of my doctoral dissertation. But I have come to understand that my job is not to try to expand this church; my job is to work with God to expand His Kingdom around the world. In other words, I'm not into church growth, I'm passionate about Kingdom growth. If we're committed to expanding God's Kingdom around the world, He will build His church. There are a lot of ways to expand God's kingdom, and one of the best ways is to place your treasure in Kingdom investments. Jesus said, "Stockpile treasures in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars...The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being." (Matthew 6:20-21 *The Message*)

I never read that verse without thinking about Nell, a wealthy widow, in Gardendale, Alabama where I served as pastor before coming here. We were constructing a new building and she was returning home from a commitment dinner where I had spoken about this verse. I said everything we hang onto can be lost due to rust, burglars, or moths. She had filled out a card pledging to give a very safe amount for the project. As she opened her purse to remove the key to her front door, a huge moth flew out of her purse. She has no idea how it got there, but God used that moth to remind her that her safest investment was one that would expand His Kingdom. She multiplied her pledge and gave an amount that would seem dangerous instead of safe. Nell is in heaven now, and I'm sure she's enjoying the benefits of her eternal investments much more than her earthly investments.

Your treasure is more than your money. Whenever you give your time, or your energy to serve God by serving others, you're investing in heaven's business. Whenever you work at Good Sam, or go on a mission trip, or share your faith, you're investing your treasure in heaven. Let me ask you a personal question: How are you earthly doing lately? Have you seen the value of your earthly investments shrink? On the other hand, how are your heavenly investments doing? I opened my IRA report a few days ago and compared the value today to what it was a year ago—it had lost about 40% of it's value. I've decided "IRA" doesn't mean Individual Retirement Account—it stands for Increasingly Reducing Account! But then this past week I also gathered together my information to file my income tax report. I looked at the contribution giving record and thought about what I had invested in God's Work: for missions; to build this beautiful Lighthouse and the Conference Center, and I wished I had given even more! What about you? Are you investing in this kingdom or in God's Kingdom?

Jesus said that where your treasure is, your heart will be also. If your treasure is in stock

portfolios, don't be surprised if your heart seems to be getting weaker and weaker! But if you invest your treasure in heaven's work, your heart will grow stronger and stronger as God's Kingdom expands.

CONCLUSION

Now that you know a little more about the Kingdom of God, I hope you're asking the question you should ask every time you're exposed to God's truth: "So what?" In other words, "What should I DO with this truth?" Look at the words of Jesus again. He didn't say, "Look, the kingdom of heaven is near." He didn't say, "Listen up, the kingdom of heaven is near." He didn't say, "Chill out, for the kingdom of God is near." No, He said, "REPENT for the kingdom of heaven is near." The word repent is *metanoia*, which literally means "to have to new mind." It means to change your old way of thinking and start thinking in a new way that leads to a new way of living. Have you ever considered the fact that you may need to change the way you think about reality? The opposite of repentance is a refusal to change your mind and think differently.

It's so easy for us to get stuck in a rut of stinking thinking. In 1870 the United Methodists were holding their annual conference in Indiana. The presiding Methodist Officer, Bishop Milton Wright, asked the audience for some thoughts about the future. The president of a Methodist college said, "We are living in a very exciting time when I think we will see many new inventions. I believe it won't be long until we will fly through the sky like birds." Bishop Wright was so disturbed by this statement, he publicly reprimanded the college president by saying, "This is heresy. This is blasphemy; I read in my Bible that flight is reserved only for birds and the angels. We will not have such talk in this meeting." Feeling good about his pronouncement, Bishop Wright then returned home to his two young sons, Wilbur and Orville Wright! Are you willing to repent and start thinking differently about life and what God can do?

The primary message of Jesus was, "Repent!" To the Jews who heard Jesus, He was saying, "Stop thinking that you can go to heaven by obeying the Laws of God: I'm introducing a new kingdom, and it's near to you right now because the King is standing here!" To us, it means we have to keep changing our minds about what we think is most important in life. If you think money and possessions are all important, you need to repent—there is another kingdom and you'd best be investing your treasure there. Do you think the purpose of your life is just to wake up, shower up, show up at work or school, and then go home eat supper, watch the tube, go to bed and then do it all again the next day? It's time for you to repent. Jesus offers you a totally different quality of life called the kingdom of heaven, and you don't have to wait for it—it's available now! Repent! Do you think you can live your life selfishly, only thinking about your precious self, spending all your energy having your needs met? Repent! Change the way you're thinking. Jesus offers another kind of kingdom where we live in relationship with Him and the other subjects and we are called to serve our King by serving others. Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is here and now because Jesus is here right now!

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes