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Thy Kingdom Come: Deadly Serious Matthew 13:47-52

In the midst of Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, he instructed the disciples to pray for God's Kingdom to come. It's a prayer that most of us have prayed thousands of times as we've spoken what we call the Lord's Prayer. Here's my question: What does it really mean? Have you ever wondered about that? What are we really asking for when we pray for the kingdom to come? What is the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it a place? Is it a group of people? Is it Heaven? Is it Jesus? And what does it have to do with you or with us as a church?

Today's scripture reading will give us some help in grappling with some answers to these questions. Turn to Matthew 13 – a chapter filled with seven parables about the Kingdom – starting in verse 47.

Matthew 13:47-52

⁴⁷"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, what is the kingdom of heaven? Does today's scripture clearly define it? No, it simply says what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's descriptive of what happens in the kingdom of heaven but it doesn't necessarily tell us what the kingdom is. But still Jesus wants us to know something crucial about the kingdom so he tells this parable. And this is a parable that would really have made sense to the disciples.

They spent most of their time with Jesus around a huge lake called the Sea of Galilee. Some of them spent most of their lives on the lake as fishermen and had done exactly as Jesus describes here. People did two kinds of fishing at the lake. One was to use a casting net that the fisherman would skillfully throw out toward a nearby school of fish and gather in the net around them. The other was to use a large drag net that was let down from a boat gathered together and then dragged to shore, and that's the kind of fishing Jesus is talking about in this parable. Once the big net was pulled up on shore, you can imagine that it probably had all kinds of things in it – pop cans, old cars, old shoes – so they had to then separate out the fish that were useful and throw away the other stuff. The disciples had probably seen this a thousand times.

But how is fishing descriptive of the Kingdom of Heaven? Jesus makes the connection (verse 49), "*This is how it will be at the end of the age.*" The kingdom of God would not have been a new idea to first century Jews. In the Old Testament there is a developing theme of the kingdom of God as a future hope. It's something that's going to come in the end; God's enemies will be judged and God's people will be restored. And this parable builds on this same theme. This is how it will be at the end of the age, when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, there will be a separation. The angels, who do God's bidding, "*will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" Jesus is reinforcing the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven will not allow wickedness to thrive; it will not allow evil to prevail. The net will gather wide and indiscriminately, but only the righteous will be put into the baskets. In the end, there will be a separation. Jesus teaches that it will separate the righteous out to life and the wicked out to death. That's why this Kingdom of Heaven stuff is deadly serious. And it's a separation that God is in charge of; it's God's prerogative. We don't get to decide who goes where; we don't get to judge. The judgment belongs to God.

That's about the most un-American thing the Bible has to say. We value most highly in our culture the right of every individual to choose – we like to decide for ourselves. But the scriptures teach that God gets to decide. It doesn't matter if you don't like it; it doesn't matter if you're mad about it, and it doesn't even matter if you don't believe it. God is God – He gets to do what He wants – He is sovereign.

But God's decision is not random; Jesus teaches here that God chooses between the wicked and the righteous. So, how do you tell them apart? Most of the first century Jews would have believed that the nation of Israel was righteous and the gentiles were not, but Jesus makes it pretty clear that being righteous is more than simply being a descendant of Abraham. Look back at Matthew 7:21 – this is one of the places where Jesus teaches what he means by 'righteous'. *"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."* In Matthew's gospel, the righteous are those who do the will of God, the wicked are those who don't. So, which one are you? Are you doing the will of God? It's a deadly serious question.

This is not a warm and fuzzy parable; in fact, it's a warning. It's a warning that harkens back to Jesus' first sermon in Matthew where he simply said, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* The kingdom of heaven is coming; it's out of your control. That kingdom net is already let down in the water and it is gathering up all kinds of fish. You will be caught no matter how much you try to swim away. So this parable is forcing you to ask the question, "What kind of fish am I?" And it's a warning to the wicked that it's not going to be pretty when that net is dragged up on the shore.

In other words, it's a warning to people just like us. Over the last several weeks, we've spent a lot of time talking about the sovereignty of God. You just can't talk about the kingdom of God without talking about His sovereignty as well. Pastor Mark talked about it as one the essential tenets of the Reformed Tradition of Christian faith. Another one of those essential beliefs is that we are completely lost without God – that sin has crept into every part of our lives. Paul writes in Romans 3, *"There is no one righteous, not even one."* The fact is that none of us is worthy of getting into the 'good fish' basket. Sometimes our temptation when we read parables like this one is to think of all the wicked people we know and hope they're listening, but the first thing this parable should cause to do is fall on our knees before God in repentance and beg Him to fill us with the kind of faith that changes our lives – the kind of faith that leads to righteousness. Our only hope is to trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. He is the only who fully did the will of the Father in heaven, so our only hope is to have faith in his righteousness that is now available to us because of his death and resurrection - and then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to live in obedience to the will of God.

The parable is a warning about how it's going to be in the end of the age with the kingdom of heaven. But the kingdom of heaven isn't just about the future. The kingdom of heaven is also about right now. In fact, Jesus teaches that it makes a difference in your life now and in the future.

Matthew 13:51-52

⁵¹*"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.*

"Yes," they replied.

⁵²*He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*

This is one of those passages that I needed to read a few times before it started making sense, so let's look at it piece by piece. He says 'every teacher of the law'. Some of the other versions translate this as 'scribe' – it means a person who has studied the scriptures in depth. So, a person who has dedicated her life to the study of the law and is instructed about the kingdom has treasure. She has old treasures because she knows all the wisdom of Israel – she knows the law. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17), *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."* God is revealed to us in the Law and the Prophets – in the Old Testament – it helps to know how to live God's way in God's world. But the new treasures are found in learning about the kingdom. The original word we have translated as 'instructed' is actually the same verb used in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew. It literally means 'to become a disciple of'. When a person becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven or stands under Jesus teaching about the kingdom they have new treasures because now they rightly see everything through the revelation of the Messiah. Jesus is saying, "When you are disciplined by me about the kingdom all that you knew before about the law and the prophets is illuminated by what I've told you." But it's not just treasure that is to stay in your own personal storeroom. The treasure is to be shared with others – to be brought out of the storeroom so that others can enjoy it too. So that others who are being caught up in that kingdom net might now what it means to be righteous through faith in Jesus.

This passage as a whole teaches us both the trepidation of the kingdom and the treasure of the kingdom. On the one hand Jesus says, "The kingdom is coming, and in the end there will be a separation. The ones who God finds to be wicked will

be cast into the fiery furnace.” And on the other hand Jesus says, “But for those who have become disciples to the kingdom of heaven there is treasure – the most valuable treasure you could possibly imagine.” The kingdom of heaven is deadly serious. That’s why Jesus asked the disciples, “*Do you understand all these things?*” He wanted to make sure they understood just how important it was to stand under his teaching about the kingdom. He wanted to make sure they were ready to live for the kingdom of heaven. So, what kingdom are you living for? Is it yours? Is it your boss’s kingdom? Is it your career’s kingdom? Is it your kids’ kingdom? Or is it the kingdom of the most high God? Whose will is being done in your life? If you had to come before the king right now for your life evaluation, what would He say?

Beloved, Jesus’ command is to (Matthew 6:33) “*Seek first, his kingdom and his righteousness.*” But Jesus never really tells us what the kingdom is – not in this parable or in any parable. And, it’s actually kind of hard to pin it down to some pithy little explanation because it’s big and it’s of heaven – it’s not of us. But in the most simple of terms, a kingdom is where the king’s will is done. So, God’s kingdom is where God’s will is done. The kingdom came in a new way through Jesus – he lived it out perfectly – he showed us what’s important to the King and how to live the King’s way in the King’s world. And when we are obeying Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit in us we are living for God’s kingdom. Our eternal life in Christ doesn’t start someday; it starts now as God’s will is done in us and through us in the world. So, the kingdom of God is now and not yet because there will be a day when God’s kingdom will come in fullness. When it comes there will be no more suffering, no more sin, no more wickedness, no more injustice, and no more oppression. That’s why we plead with God, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God, may your kingdom come in me; may your kingdom come in our church. May your kingdom come in our community rocked this weekend by violence and death. May your kingdom come in our world rampant with evil. And may you help us to be deadly serious about seeking first your kingdom and your righteousness. Amen.

Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Matthew 13:47-52. Spend some time reflecting on the passage on your own. Write down or take note of the things that you think are important about this passage. If you’re in a group, spend a few minutes doing this privately and then talk about it together in the group.
2. Who gets to decide about the wicked and righteous? How does this inform us about the kingdom of heaven? How does this inform us about God?
3. What do you think it means to be instructed about the kingdom of heaven? Why does instruction about the kingdom lead to treasures new and old?
4. How does this parable make you feel? What should you do with that feeling?
5. What does the kingdom of heaven have to do with our everyday lives?
6. What is the Holy Spirit speaking to you about in this passage and sermon? What does God want you to do?