

God is moving in incredible ways in our church! During the middle of the week, women are gathering for prayer. The events are so powerful that people from the community, people from other churches are coming, saying they feel the presence of God and they want to be there. We have men gathering in small groups all throughout the week to dive deep into the Word for accountability and spiritual growth. We have a movement happening with the young people of our church. Our student ministries are full and students are making the decision to follow Jesus. It is such an exciting and encouraging time.

I have been excited all week for the message I get to bring today from Matthew 13. In Matthew 11 we talked about how faith can be built up in our lives through taking our questions, our confusion regarding suffering, to Jesus and allowing him to bring clarity and understanding. When we take our questions to Jesus, our faith is strengthened. Last week, in chapter 12, we learned why some people, like the Pharisees, never come to faith in Jesus, even though Jesus may be right in front of them. They are seeing the same evidence everyone else is, and yet they don't believe. They have closed their eyes because Jesus isn't who they wanted or expected him to be. We must come to Jesus on his terms, not our own. Today, all of that is going to come together in a crystal-clear way as we turn to Matthew 13 and hear Jesus use several parables to tell what the kingdom of heaven is like. We'll look at seven of them. At the end of the message, I am going to extend an invitation to you. If you want to place your faith in Jesus—to say, "I believe in him, I want to trust him and follow him, and I want to be a part of the kingdom he came to make possible"—please know that invitation is coming, and see if you sense God speaking to you today, calling you to respond.

Let's begin by setting the stage. "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables" (Matthew 13:1-3a). To appreciate what is happening here, I want to show you a picture of the Sea of Galilee [view the online sermon to see the photo]. Imagine Jesus is standing near the shore and there are hundreds of people following him. Everyone wants to hear what he has to say, but there are so many people they can't all see or hear him. So he gets in a boat and they set it out 30-40 yards from shore, and all the people line the shore and sit down. The way sound waves bounce off the water, it was a natural amphitheater. Everyone can see and hear. This is Jesus' classroom where Jesus would teach about the kingdom. Listen to what Jesus told them.

#1 The Parable of the Soil

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear." (Matthew 13:3b-9)

The most well-known parable Jesus told is the parable of the prodigal son, but the parable of the soil is what almost all biblical scholars call the most important parable Jesus told, because this parable is Jesus' own explanation for why different people respond to him in different ways. That's a natural question, right? In Jesus' day, why did some people listen to Jesus' sermons, witness his miracles, and decide that it was not a big deal and just go back to their ordinary lives? Why did others respond in faith and give their entire lives to him? We want to know the same thing today: Why do some people have family and friends who love Jesus who share the gospel with them, but never respond? Why do some people accept faith as a teenager with passion and zeal, become committed to their church and to their youth group, but then go to college and their faith all but evaporates? Why do some people who have faith go through a season of great trials and come out more resilient and more reliant on God, while others go through the same trial and decide there is no God? What's the differentiating factor? Their intellect? Their emotional wiring? Their family of origin? It's a fascinating question. This parable is Jesus' answer to that question.

Oftentimes when a dating couple is breaking up, the person who is initiating the breakup will say something like, "It's not you, it's me." Which we all know is a lie. What they are thinking on the inside is, "All your friends are crazy, you post ridiculous things on social media, you have bad breath—it's definitely you." But no one wants to say those things, so they say, "It has nothing to do with you. This is just something I'm working through!" That's not what Jesus does when he explains why people are not interested in him. He says, "It's not me, it's you." In this story, the sower is the same, and the seed is the same. The only thing that is different is the soil.

You all know I love trees! The last few years I've planted over 2,000 trees. Five years ago, I planted maple trees. They were all the exact same size when I planted them. They all came as seedlings from the exact same tree, so they have identical genetics. Look at the difference in their size [view the online sermon to see the photo]. I planted these myself. They are all in the same yard. Same genetics. Same starting condition. What's the only difference? The soil. What happens above the surface is a reflection of what's beneath the surface. That which you can see with your eye reveals what you can't see with your eyes. Jesus tells this story because it's a picture of people! Jesus says, "I am the same yesterday, today, and forever, for everyone. I am the way, the truth, and the life. The gospel is true and powerful to save and transform everyone who believes." Jesus says the reason people respond one way, rather than the other, has nothing to do with him, and everything to do with them.

We often think that as individuals when we are presented with the gospel message of Jesus, we are the ones examining and evaluating the gospel, when in reality, it's the gospel that examines and values us. What's the takeaway from the first parable?

The parable of the soil: The kingdom reveals the condition of our hearts.

#2 The Parable of the Weeds

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the

weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’” “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’” “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-30)

This parable answers one of the most pressing and frequently asked questions when it comes to faith: Why would a good God allow so many bad things to happen in the world? If God is good and loving and powerful, he wouldn’t let people grow up in homes where there is abuse, or allow families to suffer from starvation, or allow injustice at the personal level or the global level. People could understandably look at this world, with so much pain and suffering and then look at God, and say, “You aren’t good at what you do. You planned this worldly poorly. No perfect God would let this happen.” But like the farmer told the people who observed his field, which was sprinkled with good crops as well as weeds planted by a foe, God says, “I’m not the source of that evil and pain. There is an enemy at work. He has come to tarnish and ruin all the good things I created. But if I got rid of all the evil now, it would pull the good up along with it. But if we wait, if we are patient, it will all be sorted out on judgment day.” It’s a brilliant explanation of good and evil at work all around us.

The parable of the weeds: The kingdom coexists with the world.

#3 The Parable of the Mustard Seed

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-32)

Jesus says the kingdom is like a mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds on earth and certainly the smallest seed anyone living in first century Palestine had ever seen. We’re familiar with different types of seeds: coconut seed, peach pit, pistachio seed, cherry pit [view the online sermon to see the photo]. The cherry pit is the smallest seed in this comparison picture, but it’s still about fifty times bigger than a mustard seed [view the online sermon to see the photo]. Mustard seeds are so small so they’re nearly imperceptible. You almost need a magnifying glass to get a good look at it. But even though they start out so small, they grow like weeds on steroids! They grow to over ten feet in a single season and, if left unattended, will quickly take over your entire garden. Jesus is saying that just because a seed starts out small doesn’t mean it’ll stay that way. Think about an acorn—the potential for a million-acre forest rests in a single acorn.

What’s true for a seed is true for the kingdom of God. When Jesus was raised from the dead in the spring of 33 AD, the church consisted of about 120 people. By summer 33 AD, it included about 3,000 people. By that fall, there were about 15,000 people in the church, and this was all within the city of Jerusalem. But then it spread, not only numerically, but also geographically. It

spread to hundreds of thousands of people all over the world. Different countries. Different cultures. Different continents. By 350 AD there were about 33,000,000 people, and now in 2025 AD there are about 2,400,000,000 people in the church. They may not all have personal faith, but these are the people who would at least say they believe in Jesus.

It started so small. So small, like a little mustard seed. But it grew! The kingdom growing in numbers, spreading around the world, rapidly taking over, is a picture of what the kingdom does in our lives, too. We think, “I’m just going to believe in Jesus, and add faith as a new part of my life.” No! It’s going to take over. And it’s going to be glorious.

The parable of the mustard seed: The kingdom grows exponentially.

#4 The Parable of the Yeast

Hold onto that thought while we look at the next parable. “Jesus told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough’” (Matthew 13:33).

Here Jesus shifts his metaphor from agricultural language to culinary language—from the field to the kitchen. He talks about bread, which was the dietary staple for people living in first century Israel. They ate more of it than anything else. Bread has a few rather simple ingredients: flour, water, eggs, sugar, oil, and salt. You can put all this together to make dough, but in order for the dough to rise and become soft, fluffy, delicious bread, you have to add yeast. Yeast is a living organism that causes dough to expand, double in size, and when cooked, become bread. You could have a very large amount of dough, more than sixty pounds like Jesus talks about here, but if you add even a small amount of yeast, it works through the entire batch. As the yeast works throughout the dough, it changes the dough at a chemical level. Jesus says that’s what the kingdom of heaven is like in this world. Once it gets in, it works through everything! Think about the way Christianity has worked its way into life as we know it. Even secular, non-believing historians and sociologists recognize how Christianity has shaped the world.

In the first few centuries Jesus’ followers were credited with ending the widespread practice of infanticide, the grotesque murders of the gladiatorial games, and the blatant discrimination against women. In the modern era, great advances in technology came from devout Christians like Johannes Gutenberg, Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, Alexander Graham Bell, George Washington Carver, and the Wright Brothers. Their contributions changed the world. Scientific breakthroughs came from devout Christians like Nicolaus Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, and Louis Pasteur. They loved the natural world and wanted to study it because they believed creation was a window to the creator. Christians have been social reformers like William Wilberforce who led the movement to abolish the slave trade, Abraham Lincoln who helped eradicate slavery in America, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who raised the banner cry for liberty and justice for all. Some people want to misconstrue Christians as backwards, low-minded and socially regressive, but look throughout history and be intellectually honest, and you’ll see nothing could be further from the truth!

Did you know that of the first 108 universities in America, 106 of them were founded as Christian institutions? Harvard's founding charter is:

Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ—which is eternal life and therefore to lay Christ as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.

The kingdom has worked its way into everything, so much so that Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan said:

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of the history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?

The answer is almost nothing. That's the very thing Jesus said would happen in this parable.

The parable of the yeast: The kingdom permeates everything.

#5 The Parable of the Treasure

Let's look at #5: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field” (Matthew 13:44).

At first, finding treasure in a field seems like a rather fanciful hypothetical scenario, but it wasn't that uncommon in the ancient world. Imagine the dual scenario of living in a society without a bank and living in an age in which armies came marching through regions on a regular basis, often taking whatever loot they could find along the way. That was the situation in the ancient world. So what did people do with their money? Not always, but often, they buried it in their fields, hoping that when the armies came through, they would survive and their valuables would be safe. But oftentimes they died, the entire household was killed, and what was buried in the ground was left in the ground, until decades or centuries down the road some unexpected farm hand is tilling up the soil to plant that year's crop and finds it. What does he do? He sells all that he has to buy the land so he can get that treasure.

Imagine the conversations in town:

- Did you hear Joe just bought that field on the edge of town?
- Wait. Which field?
- The one right past the big sycamore tree on the left?
- That field! Why would he do a thing like that? Horrible soil. He'll have a measly yield. It's next to the dump, it will smell to high heavens. He can't build anything there because when the creek rises it floods. What a horrible decision. He must have lost his mind.

- That's not the worst of it. You'll never guess what he paid for it? Twice the going rate! I mean, it's his money, but he's clearly gone crazy!

It wouldn't make sense to anyone else because everyone else only saw what was on the surface, not what was underneath. They had walked by that field countless times, never having any idea that life-changing, generational wealth was just twelve inches beneath their feet. It looked like a normal field, a non-desirable field, while in reality, it was a priceless field. That's what the kingdom of God is like. People can be exposed to it their entire lives and never realize its immense and incomparable worth. But once you realize it, once you see it, once you dig a bit beneath the surface, you'll give anything for it.

The parable of the treasure: The kingdom has hidden value.

#6 The Parable of the Pearl

That leads naturally to the next story: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46). Most of us aren't jewelers, we aren't in the pearl business, so I like to think about this in modern terms. If you had the chance to go back in time and buy bitcoin when it was worth 10 cents each rather than \$100,000 each, what would you do? You'd sell everything you have to get every dime you possibly could, knowing its exponential ultimate worth. If you were the general manager of a football team and could go back in time to when Peyton Manning was coming out of college, you would trade every single draft pick you had, you would leverage your entire organization and roster to bring him on your team. That one pick would change your franchise forever! Jesus says that's what the kingdom of God is like: not everyone sees its value, but once you do, it's worth trading in and giving up everything for!

The parable of the pearl: The kingdom has incomparable value.

#7 The Parable of the Net

Most of these parables are not only informative, but they are also encouraging, inspirational, and challenging. But this final parable we are going to read is a bit alarming. Yes, it's informative, but it's also sobering and severe.

"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When 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. This is how it will be at the end of the age. 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. (Matthew 13:47-50)

Jesus, the one who tells the parable, turns right around and interprets the parable for us. He tells us what it means, and it's not about bass and crappie and bluegill. Jesus is lovingly and graciously reminding us that there will be a day for every one of us where we take our last breath. Our time on this earth will be complete. When human history reaches its climax, every

person who has ever lived will stand before him and there will be a judgment. Like some fish are kept and others are thrown away, some people will enter into heaven and be given eternal life, and others will face judgment that will last for eternity. The importance of this reality cannot be overstated.

The parable of the net: The kingdom of God has eternal implications.