

# Parables of the Kingdom

## The Dragnet

When Jesus started his ministry, his first recorded theme was the same as the one that John the Baptist had been proclaiming; *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (**Matthew 4:17**). For us, these may be familiar words, but what did they mean to those who first heard them?

We probably think of a **kingdom** in terms of countries on a map. The older ones among us remember when many, or even most, countries had a king or some similar ruler, so in our minds a 'kingdom' means a country which has a monarch as the head of state. The word Jesus used meant much more than that - the rule, the authority, the sphere of power of a king.

Also the word for **heaven** had a much simpler meaning. We tend to think of 'heaven' as a strange sort of place, or a 'state of being' which we enter when we die. In the Hebrew and Greek languages, the word simply means 'the heavens', the vast space 'up there', out of the world, what we would probably call 'space' or perhaps 'the universe'. In fact, the word translated here in **Matthew 13** as 'heaven' is actually in the plural - 'the heavens' ! (Although it is sometimes used in the singular, in most places in the Bible the word in Hebrew or Greek is plural.)

For us, the phrase 'the kingdom of heaven' is strange, without a very clear meaning, though we often attach other ideas to it, such as using it to mean 'the church' or 'the power of the gospel'. But the words of John and Jesus left their listeners in little doubt - they were talking about direct rule on earth from 'up there', from God himself !

The Jews were expecting something rather different to happen, or at least desperately hoping that it would. Life under Roman occupation was not enjoyable and they were not free to live as the people of God. Wouldn't this be an ideal time for the LORD to send the long-awaited Messiah, so that he could kick out the Romans? No wonder Jesus had to take some trouble to explain that his coming kingdom was not like that, it was not political. He even made sure that Pilate got that point! (**John 18:36**).

So he told the 'Parables of the Kingdom'. The parable of the dragnet is the last of these parables which Jesus presented to the people in **Matthew 13**. Apart from the ones about the treasure and the pearl, all the parables are about living things - seeds of various kinds, yeast and fish - and we get an overview of the priorities of the Kingdom. **The Sower** is about how to receive new life. **The Tares** is about the importance of life from the right source. **The Mustard Seed** says that we don't need to worry about that life having small beginnings. **The Yeast** is about the power and spread of even an invisible portion of that life. **The Treasure** and **the Pearl** both point to the absolute top priority of this new life under the rule of God. (These are, of course, just the 'headlines', as you will know from looking at the previous parables.)

And so to **the Dragnet**. Jesus has already referred to the fact that the angels *"will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness"* (v. 41). Here he re-emphasises the fact with another illustration, showing how there is a difference between two sorts of people.

Let's not get confused, though. The dragnet catches all different sorts of fish:- big and small, colourful and drab, slow and fast, ugly and handsome. But then the catch is sorted, not according to the **type** of fish but according to whether they are 'good' (which means sound or whole) or 'bad' (which means rotten or putrid).

Again the picture is of **life**. Those with the 'soundness', the 'healthiness' of new life are selected to be in the kingdom. Those whose whole nature is rotten and decaying are rejected and ejected. Jesus calls the two sorts 'the righteous' and 'the wicked', both words that relate to how their lives work out in practice.

How righteous is righteous enough to be accepted into the Kingdom of God? Many people still believe that if they do enough good things to outweigh the bad ones, they will get in. By that reckoning, the Pharisees should have had it completely sorted out, but Jesus says that is not good enough (**Matthew 5:20**). Sounds a bit hopeless, doesn't it?

The sort of righteousness Jesus talked about starts with **new life**. See **John 5:24** and **1 John 5:12**. Through the death of Jesus in our place, we can share God's own righteousness as a gift - that is really amazing! (See **2 Corinthians 5:21** and **Romans 3:21-24**)

Why is it important for us to know about the kingdom of heaven?

Firstly, because it is not chiefly about 'going to heaven' when we die. It is much more about the coming to earth of the rule of the heavens. In other words, God directly ruling the world.

We need to get a few things clarified. There is a common idea that God rules the world already, and this causes lots of confusion when people see the world today so full of evil and injustice. Where is God, and why doesn't he intervene, stop the evil and put things right? "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world" may sound nice and reassuring but it doesn't seem to match our experience and the Bible has a different story.

Satan is called 'the ruler of this world' (**John 12:31** and **14:30**) and 'the prince of the power of the air' (**Ephesians 2:2**). We even read that "*the whole world lies in the evil one*" (**1 John 5:19**).

Yes, God created the world and it was good, but Satan has usurped authority through man's disobedience and, as a result, the world is in a mess. No wonder Paul says that the whole of creation, which God originally put under the authority and supremacy of mankind, is aching and groaning for the time when the kingdom of heaven will be restored on earth and the 'sons of God' will be in visible control! (**Romans 8:18-23**)

So, is the 'Kingdom of God' or the 'Kingdom of Heaven' only something in the future? In the fullest sense, yes. According to the Bible, a time is coming when an announcement will be made that "*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 then, it will be the start of a process by which Jesus will abolish all other authority until he has "*put all his enemies under his feet*" (**1 Corinthians 15:25**).

The Kingdom of God is not just some nice little religious idea - it the whole direction of the plan of God down the ages. How amazing that he has decided to allow human beings not just to be part of it, but to share the inheritance of the Son of God. When we begin to appreciate more of this, we are likely to find fresh understanding of many parts of the Bible!

But what about here and now? Yes, we can be part of the Kingdom of God even in the midst of the evil-soaked world in which we live. It is not all in the future.

Paul says (**Colossians 1:13**) that God the Father *"rescued us from the domain (literally, 'authority') of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son . . ."* He is writing to those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. So the transfer has already been done; if we belong to Jesus, we are under the rule of God, like citizens of one country living in another.

A growing understanding of the Kingdom of God will help us to see the role of the church, the Body of Christ, which consists of all those (and only those) who have received forgiveness and new life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the company of others who have received the same new life, we can start to learn to live as the Lord wants, under his rule ('kingdom'), and to function together as parts of one body, one 'household' where God and we can begin to see a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God on this earth (**Ephesians 2:19-22**). That certainly should help us to focus beyond the routine and the meetings and get a better idea of the plan and purposes of God!

We have only scratched the surface with this study. The Parables of the Kingdom in **Matthew 13** are just part of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. Let's go on discovering, by the Holy Spirit's revelation, more and more of our Father's plans for us!

*Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old."  
(Matthew 13:52)*

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