

SEEK. RECEIVE. INVITE.

SERIES: THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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Matthew 13:44-50

Eighth Message

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We're going to do a little imaginative exercise this morning. Imagine I called each of you up here and gave you a gift card. A \$100 gift card. A \$100 gift card to use for anything you want. It's one of those VISA gift cards that you can use anywhere. What would you do with it?

Some of you might use it for groceries, school supplies for your kids, or a tank of gas—in the case of my Suburban, half a tank.

Others of you may want to spend it on something special. It is, after all, a gift card. This is why gift cards stress me out. It doesn't feel right to spend them on groceries. I feel the pressure to find something meaningful. Maybe go out to dinner at a new place. Buy something you wouldn't get otherwise, or go to a movie or a show.

What would you spend a gift card on if you wanted it to be special?

Now think about your life. Consider your life as a gift card from God to the world. What are you spending it on? How are you spending the value of your life?

We've been in a series this summer looking at the stories of Jesus that the Bible calls parables. These are short narratives which embody some kind of spiritual truth. Jesus says that he hides the truth within these stories so that it can be discovered by those to whom God reveals it.

That means that some of you will leave here this morning completely unchanged by the stories we are about to encounter, while others will encounter God through them.

This morning, we're going to be reading a set of three very short parables. They come during a message where Jesus told six different parables to a mixed group of people. Some were his disciples, and some were just part of a crowd to hear what he had to say. These are the last three of the six.

He placed these stories in three different vocational contexts, which would have been very familiar to people in the first century: a farmer, a merchant, and a fisherman. He's speaking to them in a language that they can understand.

It's pretty amazing, but these simple stories embed a variety of themes, including sacrifice, joy, diversity, judgment, the future, angels, secrecy, economics, and patience. The main thrust of these stories is to get the hearers to consider how valuable the kingdom of heaven is and what they would exchange in order to receive it.

Whenever we read the Scripture, we have to begin by asking what was happening in the original context. Our first question is never, "What do these words mean for us?" Our first question is always, "What did these words mean for the original hearers?" Only once we've understood what these words meant *then* can we understand what they mean *now*.

So, we'll wrestle with the question of what Jesus was trying to say to his original hearers, but then we'll ask what that might mean for us. My prayer this morning is that some of you might be moved to see, in a fresh way, the incalculable value of the kingdom of God. When you know how valuable God's kingdom is, your behavior changes because you value it for yourself, and you want it for the people in your life who don't have it.

Value of the kingdom

We'll begin by looking at the first two parables. They are very similar, with some notable differences. Each has the same five elements: a valuable item, someone who finds it, goes away, sells all that they have, and returns to buy the item.

The valuable item is, of course, meant to represent the kingdom of God. It's not hard to see the main point of these stories: the kingdom of God is incredibly valuable. But there's quite a bit of important stuff in the details.

The first story has to do a farmer and a treasure.

Matthew 13:44:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

It's a simple enough story. It would not have been unusual for a treasure to be buried in a field in the first century. There were no banks like we would think of them, so keeping your wealth safe was tricky. Burying money in a field was a common way to protect it. Presumably, the treasure that this man stumbled upon was more valuable than everything else he owned, so his purchase was a bargain. He got more than he paid for. He ended up better than before.

His response is a great joy. That feeling you get when you get a deal—we all know that feeling well.

People in the first century could have easily imagined this happening to them. They would have done the same thing. This man found a bargain and made the most of it.

How many of you remember the crazy things we did to buy toilet paper during COVID-19? You couldn't buy it in any of the stores, and if you were like me, you knew how many rolls you had and insisted that your family ration their squares.

I used an online tool that scraped every possible online store selling toilet paper and immediately notified me when someone had it in stock. I know this because about a month after the toilet paper crisis ended, I received a box from Thailand containing four rolls of toilet paper that I had purchased for around \$40 because it happened to be available.

There was a moment not too long ago when toilet paper became extremely valuable. Why was it so valuable?

The whole idea of value is that you're willing to trade one thing of value for another thing which, at least in the moment, has greater value to you. When I'm hungry, I'd rather have a hamburger than \$15 in my pocket. When I'm bored, I'd rather be entertained by a movie than have \$20 lying around. When I'm terrified that my family will run out of toilet paper, I'd rather have four rolls from Thailand than \$40.

Jesus is trying to get his listeners to ask themselves what they would trade for the kingdom of heaven?

How valuable is it to you? Would you trade money? Reputation? Achievement? Comfort? Respect? Status?

These are the kinds of questions that make us uncomfortable. But in the following story it gets worse. In the first story, we understand what the person did. It makes good financial sense. In the second story, that's not quite the case.

Matthew 13:45-46:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

It's another simple story. Instead of coming from the world of farming, this one comes from the world of business. Another valuable object and another man who finds it, goes away, sells everything, and returns to buy it.

But there are some differences. The first guy stumbled upon his treasure. This one is “in search of fine pearls.” He finds exactly what he's looking for. And he does the same thing: sell everything to buy it.

But his decision makes less sense. Why would he sell everything he had just to obtain a single valuable pearl? The first guy got something useful—he could live off the treasure in the field *and* use the field to make a living on top of that. He found a bargain.

This character in the second story isn't a bargain hunter. He's a fool. Here's a man who is willing to impoverish himself just so that he can own a single pearl. He has no money to live on. His business is over. He can't even support himself. He has nothing... except a single exquisite pearl. And for some reason, that decision was worth it for him. He made a foolish and impractical decision with no regard for the future.

Yet something is compelling about this fool. There is something beautiful about his singular desire to obtain a beautiful pearl. This story isn't just about the value of the kingdom. It's about the degree of sacrifice someone will make to obtain it. That is, after all, how we measure the value of something. An object is worth what you would give up to get it.

Let's think about that \$100 gift card again. Let's say I told you that you can go to Costco a few miles away and buy a \$100 gift card for \$99. How many of you would do it? What if you could buy the gift card for \$90? Is it

worth it? \$80? \$70? \$50? \$20? When does the savings make the time and effort worth it to you?

Now think about this pearl merchant. Think about the decision he made. By his actions he is demonstrating how he values things in his life.

If you went to get the gift card for \$70, then your actions would demonstrate that a trip to Costco is worth \$30 to you.

These parables invite us to ask ourselves: What do your actions demonstrate that the kingdom of God is worth? Your values are evident in your life.

How do I spend my money? Look at my credit card. How do I spend my time? Look at my calendar. How do I spend my energy? Listen to my conversations—my joys, complaints and observations about the world.

We are always advertising to the world what we value. Is it the kingdom of God? We may believe there is nothing more valuable than the kingdom Jesus is building on earth. But our values are demonstrated by our actions, not our thoughts. What do you really value?

Please understand this isn't about a guilt trip or trying to shame you into changing your behavior. Jesus never plays those games. That's all nonsense. It's a simple economic observation. What you value is shown by what you will give up to obtain it. These stories are an invitation to reflect on what you really value.

These first two parables work together to expose our values. What are we willing to sacrifice? What do we think is worth losing to gain a deeper connection with Christ?

But the third parable goes in a different direction. Or at least, it seems that way at first.

Justice of the kingdom

This is a difficult parable. In truth, many of the parables are. The theme of judgment is the single most talked about theme in any of Jesus' parables. That judgment often involves separating two different groups. The wheat and the weeds. The sheep and the goats. Servants who use their talents in different ways. People who wear the wrong clothes to a wedding feast.

This parable goes to the world of the fisherman and addresses life from that lens.

Matthew 13:47-50:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's another simple story, but this one has an explanation and is far more challenging.

Honestly, I thought about preaching only those first two parables many times. Two is enough, right? We didn't really need to look at this last one. But I felt that God kept drawing me back to it. I think there's something here that we need to pay attention to.

The story would have been another familiar one. People in the first century who lived around the Sea of Galilee would have seen this play out almost every day. The image is that of a dragnet. Here's a picture showing how it worked.

[Image of a dragnet]

Typically, a boat would carry the net out to sea while a group on shore held one end. Then, they would pull in the net slowly and catch a ton of fish. But because they'd catch everything, they'd have to sort through it all and get rid of the fish they couldn't eat.

That was probably the equivalent of a catfish, which lived in the Sea of Galilee and wasn't okay to eat according to Jewish Law.

So Jesus takes this common experience of two kinds of fish and applies it to people. The evil and the righteous. These are categories you find all throughout the Bible. You see it in the Psalms. You find it in the prophets. Jesus talks about the evil and the righteous. All over the New Testament as well.

And for people living in the first century, those categories would have been very obvious. They would have had in their minds who was evil and who was righteous. They were desperate for evil people to be judged and the righteous to be rewarded.

So, what does Jesus want them to see? The big, unsettling idea in this story is that judgment can't happen until the end. This parable is very similar to an earlier one Jesus tells about wheat and weeds growing together on the field. It isn't until the harvest that you separate them and throw away the weeds.

The main thrust of this parable is not the fact that God will judge. The shock of the story is not the "what" of judgment. It's the "who" and the "when." And that's as relevant today as it is in the first century.

The cultural values that we live among include an odd hypocrisy. We have the notion of inclusion. We say that judgment isn't okay. Everyone should be viewed the same. But inclusivity is an impossible standard. Because then you judge people who aren't inclusive, and you're back to being exclusive by only including people who you label as inclusive.

The truth is that all of us judge people all the time. Ever since man and woman ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we walk around exercising that muscle. We label good and we label evil. We put people into categories of evil and righteous. We all judge. We just have different standard by which we judge.

That's the tendency that Jesus is addressing here. When it comes to judgment, we like to be the judge, and we like to judge now. The who is us, and the when is now. However, the point of Jesus' story is that the who is God and the when is at the end of the age.

What that means for us is that it is not up to us to judge. The kingdom of God does not include everyone—that much is abundantly clear throughout Scripture. Everyone is invited, but not everyone accepts the invitation. But it's not our place to judge who is really walking with Jesus, who is included, or who has it right. The evil and the righteous are categories that only God has the authority and information to determine.

Other places in Scripture help us redefine those categories of evil and righteous. The issue is not how good of a life you've lived but how you have responded to Jesus' invitation to faith. Only faith leads to righteousness.

This story doesn't address the definition of those categories. It's simply an indication that God will judge, and he will do it in his time, not ours.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world where people didn't assign other people into

categories of evil and righteous but trusted God to do that? What would politics look like? International relations? Elementary school playgrounds? Functional teams where you work? Churches with different worship styles? Maybe that one is a bit too tender.

The kingdom of God somehow manages to scoop up people of every kind. We don't know what is true of people's hearts. We can't tell how someone is responding to Jesus. Only God knows. And only He will judge.

The description of judgment here is a vivid one. Is it a description of hell? At the very least, it's a reference to the Old Testament book of Daniel—the language makes that clear. In Daniel, God rescues his righteous people out of the fiery furnace.

I don't think we have answers to all the questions this passage raises. But maybe we don't need those answers. The point is clear: there will be a judgment. God is a God of justice. The kingdom of heaven is that place where ultimate justice will arrive and continue for all of eternity. It's not ours to make that happen or decide what that looks like. It's ours to wait and trust God for justice.

Seeking and receiving

Having looked at these three parables, I'd like us to step back and consider them as a group. The stories are meant to tell us something about the kingdom of God. Taken together, we can observe that there is an active aspect to that and a passive aspect to that.

The main characters of the first two stories are a farmer and a merchant. They find the kingdom. They realize the great value of the kingdom. They sacrifice their own wealth in order to obtain the kingdom. They are all-in, sold out, totally committed to this kingdom of heaven.

But for the third story, the main character is the fisherman, who is later interpreted as referring to angels in heaven. The participants in the kingdom don't do anything in this story. They are sorted, judged, categorized as evil or righteous, and experience the appropriate consequences.

If we are the people who experience the kingdom of heaven—or want to experience it—then there is something active that we do and something passive that is done to us. We could say that we seek the kingdom, and we receive the kingdom.

As seekers of the kingdom, these stories challenge us to be all-in. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes his effort in seeking the kingdom. Philippians 3:8:

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

The apostle articulates the value of the kingdom that we've seen in these stories. But more than that, his actions and his life demonstrate that these words are true of his life.

Personally, I'm challenged by these words but also encouraged. Earlier this week, I was sharing how my relationship with Christ has changed. When I was younger, I would have said that I was all-in on following Jesus. And I was at that stage of my life. But when I think back to the challenges that I've faced—marriage, parenting, anxiety, relationships, my own ambition, pride, and selfishness—I can't imagine life apart from the kingdom of heaven.

I am so broken. I am so incapable of living life on my own. I have seen over and over again the incredible value of the kingdom of heaven—how it makes everything else pale in comparison to it. There really is nothing more valuable. That motivates me to orient my life toward Christ. Aim for everything that Paul calls “gaining Christ.” That's the challenge and the encouragement.

There is something to do. Seek the kingdom of heaven.

But there is also something we simply experience. We receive the kingdom of heaven. And there is something hidden about how each person interacts with God. Again, the apostle Paul explains it.

Romans 2:16:

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Notice the theme of secrecy. Only God knows what is true. And notice that God does judge. But the criteria by which he judges is not how good of a life you've led. It's not based on what you've done or whether you've

measured up. God judges the secrets of men according to the gospel. The only thing that matters is how you have responded to God's offer of salvation through Christ. Have you put your faith in Jesus?

Maybe there are some of us sitting here who aren't sure that we've done that. We're not sure that we have responded to the gospel. Maybe others have, but we aren't living in light of the value of the kingdom of heaven. In either case, the invitation is the same.

Seek the kingdom. Receive the kingdom.

These stories are an incredible reminder of the value of the kingdom in our own lives. But they are also a great motivation to think about the people in our lives who don't know about or don't care about the kingdom of heaven. If the kingdom is as valuable as Jesus says it is—and we believe it is—then this is something we want others to experience. We want to invite them into the kingdom of heaven.

That means we can add one more word to our list: invite. We seek the kingdom, we receive the kingdom, and we invite others into the kingdom.

Seek. Receive. Invite.

Conclusion

Let's go back to that gift card image. Instead of imagining that I've given you a gift card, I'd like to imagine your life as that gift card God gave you. You have resources: time, energy, education, personality, creativity, and relational networks.

How are you going to spend it? Is what you're spending it on now worth it?

Please know this isn't about spending it to earn your way into the kingdom of heaven. That's not at all what this is about. If you've put your faith in Jesus, you are in the kingdom. That's all it takes.

But having gained entrance into the kingdom, are you making the most of it? Are you experiencing the overflowing value of—as the apostle Paul puts it—counting everything else as rubbish so that you may gain Christ?

The kingdom of God is worth it. Every penny of sacrifice that you give up is worth it. For you and for those in your life who may not know.

Seek the kingdom. Receive the kingdom. Invite others into it.

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