

The Kingdom Illustrated: Parables

Author: Stephen Jones

For too long, we have allowed culture and society to define our faith in their own terms—terms that most often reflect a caricature of our movement, a gross exaggeration of secondary components, a colossal misrepresentation of what we're about.

Christ came to provide for the poor, to raise up the marginalized and disenfranchised, to set the prisoners free, to give sight back to those who are blind, to announce that God was *restoring creation* to His perfect design.

But the message and ministry of Christ was very simple. He inaugurated his kingdom with a simple sermon, one that he actually heard from John the Baptist.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17, ESV).

And all of Jesus' sermons were that simple—they weren't all easy to understand, but they were definitely simple. Jesus taught the truths of the kingdom in parables—short stories, anecdotes, and illustrations that were based on everyday life. Parables were simple analogies, similes, metaphors for truth—they usually involved everyday images, activities and people. Often, those parables used farming images and analogies.

Jesus' sermons and parables about the kingdom were radical. Those truths were totally different from anything they knew about kings and sovereigns, nations and powers.

But He used some simple parables to explain those radical ideas.

Consider the Parable of the Sower (or should it be called Parable of the Soils)—Jesus used the image of a farmer scattering seed to demonstrate the different kinds of responses his listeners would have to the message of the kingdom. The parable centered on the condition of the soils for effective growth, and brought fresh insights into Isaiah's warning that only those whose ears, minds, and hearts were receptive would find healing in his coming.

Notice the Parable of the Tares—the story of workers who weren't vigilant about their duties, and allowed the enemy to sow weeds in God's fields while they were asleep. Jesus observed that the sons of the kingdom will live in the same space as unbelievers, and that the enemy of the kingdom sows dissension and division.

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed—Jesus compared the kingdom to the tiny seed of a shrub, and observed that the kingdom starts in small ways, but grows into a towering presence, and a place of refuge.

And Parable of the Leaven—Jesus noted that the influence of the kingdom spreads rapidly, especially when you apply heat. Even though it begins as a small presence, it quickly changes its' surroundings.

All of these parables give us small glimpses of the truth about the nature and essence of the kingdom of God—but they're not exhaustive. They don't tell us everything, and the disciples had a real problem with that. They asked Jesus to explain the parables to them, especially the one about the Sower and the one about the Tares, and Jesus declared to them,

And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive."

For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:11–16).

The prophet was decrying the kind of people who would continue to soak up truth, but whose hearts were dull, whose hearing had become muffled to the words and there was no longer any pursuit of that transforming power that God's Word brings. But, for those whose hearts had been prepared, whose minds desired truth, whose ears were discerning and thoughtful, the kingdom's truths would come alive and bring healing, deliverance and transformation.

That same truth applies to us; we must do the same kind of searching, the same kind of pursuit to discover the nature of this kingdom that *Jesus* came to inaugurate.

All we can do is search the Scriptures—and I believe that's part of the reason why *Jesus* told this next parable.

"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" (Matthew 13:44).

"The Kingdom of Heaven..."

While many of us are more accustomed to democracy, capitalism and personal freedoms, the Israelites knew only kings and kingdoms. *Jesus*' declaration did not lack context for those people. In fact, their familiarity with it was part of the problem—they were so accustomed to kings and kingdoms that their ideas about who the King would be and what he would do were totally wrong.

John the Baptist broke on the scene as the last old covenant prophet, announcing that a new King was coming, and that he would install a new kingdom that would never fade away—a kingdom that was *already* in place, but *not yet* consummated.

Jesus followed him with incredible power over sickness, over death, over the elements, the forces of nature, and *Jesus* was preaching about a new kingdom.

He was providing bread for thousands, healing the sick, raising the dead, teaching the Law with grace and authority. It's no wonder *Jesus* had so many followers, at first—if he was the King of a brand-new kingdom, he would turn the world upside down. Who wouldn't want to

serve a King who knew no limitations, not even death itself? He would have the power to make Israel great again.

But their problem was their perception of his kingdom—Jesus' coming was not about overthrowing Rome or replacing Israel as the center of the world. The kingdom of God was about the rule and reign of God. Jesus was trying to explain how his kingdom operated in the first few parables—but in this one, he shifted from its' function to its' value.

"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" (Matthew 13:44).

Have you ever really lost anything valuable? If you have, you know with that loss comes a heightened sense of how important that item is once you don't have it. [ILLUSTRATION: This is a great place to tell personal stories about having lost something valuable, e.g., car keys, wallet and credit cards, wedding rings, etc.]

Have you ever found something you've been looking for? If you have, you know with finding that item, there's joy, there's relief, and there's a renewed sense of how much that something meant to you.

Losing something has a distinct way of making you appreciate its' value—maybe more so than possessing it.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom, he gave it infinitely more value than anything else a person could own. In fact, the rich young ruler became a prime example of Jesus' parable.

"And behold, a man came up to him, saying, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'All these I have kept. What do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Matthew 19:16–22).

The Kingdom Requires the Personal Surrender of Everything You Consider of Greatest Value

We tend to read these parables, especially the parts about selling everything, and then immediately discount ourselves from the immediate application because we think to ourselves, "Well, God hasn't called me to sell my stuff yet. He must mean *metaphorically*."

Really? Is that what you got from the story of the rich young ruler?

Was Jesus speaking only in metaphors, or did he accurately pinpoint the divided affections of that man's heart?

Or maybe it's more than that?

We can't be so narrow as to believe that the kingdom is only for the financially-poor. Being born into the kingdom requires surrendering that which is most valuable to us *on a global scale*.

Surrendering not just our possessions, but our sense of self.
Surrendering our dreams and ambitions.
Surrendering our fantasies and wishes.
Surrendering our future plans and our goals for accomplishment.
Surrendering our relationships and our desire for personal fulfillment.
Surrendering our need for security.
Surrendering our desires to be liked and admired.

It occurs to me that actual worth has nothing to do with an item's value. I've watched the very poorest hold on to scraps of clothing and drink sweet tea from McDonald's cups they found in the trash can. Those items were not worth anything, but they held value to those people.

I've seen rich people invest loads of capital into homes, vehicles, and hobbies without ever caring that those items would be fought over and sold by their children once they died. They had tremendous financial worth, but zero eternal value.

I've even seen people clutch their pain, their disappointment, their brokenness with a death grip, living life with that pain not because it was necessarily valuable, but because it was the only consistent part of their lives, and that consistency is worth something.

The call from Christ was to sell everything, to get rid of every possible distraction, to surrender every possible affection for the sake of making room to own the very promise that holds value not only for this life, but also for the age to come.

That's what the kingdom of God is like.

When you've received the truth of the kingdom with open eyes and ears and a receptive heart, you recognize there is *no greater value* than owning that kingdom for yourself.

And it's not extortion, or blackmail that forces the surrender. According to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, the man sold everything he had *out of sheer joy for what had been found* (Matthew 13:44). Nothing he had compared to all he had found.

So, he took the initiative to affect his destiny. He leveraged everything to which he had access.

He opened his hands and his heart and released those things that had no value in exchange for what had the greatest value.

Jesus said that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's finding something infinitely more valuable than anything you've ever found and selling everything to have it for yourself.