

The Gospel Many People Have Never Heard

July 17, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 13:44-52

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out 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 furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

For most of my life I had heard about only the first half of the gospel. The first half of the gospel goes something like this: God created a good and beautiful world. We humans messed it up by being disobedient to God. Because of that original sin, we are born with the tendency to sin. We are helpless to save ourselves from the penalty of sin, which is death. Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. To accept that salvation we need only to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That's pretty much the first half of the gospel in a nutshell. I have known churches that have based their existence on this first half of the gospel. The unfortunate false narrative that living out only half of the gospel is that people think that the Christian life is all about being saved so that you can die and go to heaven. For them salvation is the end of the road, whereas the second half of the gospel is based on salvation as the beginning of the road that lasts the rest of this life and continue on for all eternity.

You see, we are not saved only so that we can die and go to heaven. We are saved so that we might have a good and beautiful life with God here and now, a life that is fulfilled when we die and go to be with God for all eternity. In other words, salvation leads to both abundant life and eternal life. Heaven isn't just something we have to look forward to once we die. Heaven is something we can experience now. As James Bryan Smith

writes: “The good news about entering heaven when we die has overshadowed the equally good news that we enter heaven now.”

We tend to think of heaven only as the place where we go when we die, whereas Jesus made it a central part of his proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Matthew 4:17 states: “*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*” Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven in parables, some of which was shared in today’s Scripture reading. Actually, nearly all of Jesus’ parables were about the kingdom. Jesus is the King. And the kingdom is wherever the king is. Those who follow Jesus as their King are subjects of His kingdom. Right here. Right now. Oddly enough, there are very few times I have found myself preaching on the kingdom of God. Come to think of it, there are few times that I have heard any preacher preach specifically on the kingdom of God. Yet that is what Jesus proclaimed all the time.

The first half of the gospel deals with getting to the point of salvation. The second half of the gospel deals with, now that we are saved, how we are going to live out our lives as kingdom people. This living out our lives as followers of Christ has been referred to as sanctification, becoming more holy, striving to live more like Jesus would have us to live. However, so many well-meaning Christians are satisfied staying at the birth stage of their faith journey. Once they are saved, that’s all they need, they think. The rest of life is just a waiting time until they can enjoy heaven once they die. Yet the kingdom of heaven is not only about the future; it is about the here and now.

Some might complain that all the troubles of this world are an indicator that the kingdom of heaven is not with us now. Jesus began the kingdom of heaven by entering into our world. He died that the kingdom of heaven would be available to all who receive him as Lord and Savior. The kingdom of heaven is not just a future thing. The kingdom of heaven is available to us now, and the kingdom will be fully consummated at the end of time when God creates a new heaven and a new earth.

Everything Jesus said about the kingdom is true in our lives. Yes, one day it will be the governing power over the entire universe, but for now it is intended to be the governing power over you and me. Jesus never said, “My kingdom teachings—especially all of those parables—are not applicable to you. They are about a future time when I come back in victory.” While he did teach about the kingdom coming in its fullness, he primarily taught about the kingdom in the present tense. He not only taught about it, he ministered by its power. And by its power Jesus’ disciples changed the world, not only in the first century, but in every century since.¹

So, how do we enter the kingdom of God?

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

In three places Jesus tells us what we must do to enter the kingdom of God:

I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:15)

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (John 3:5)

The first stipulation for entering the kingdom seems daunting: our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, who were very religious people and highly respected for their piety. How can my righteousness possibly exceed theirs?

Jesus was very critical of the scribes and Pharisees because their righteousness was primarily exterior. They focused on outer actions (hand washing, sabbath rules) and not on the inner condition of their heart. The righteousness we need to enter the kingdom is humility, purity of heart and a desire to work on those aspects of our soul that are most important, such as integrity, gentleness, respect and mercy.

The Pharisees kept their outer life, which people could see, clean, but their inner life was filthy (Matthew 23:25-26). To enter the kingdom, we must work on our inner life. [Working on our inner life will be the focus of this sermon series.]

To enter the kingdom of God, the second requirement is to become as a child. Jesus was fond of the attitudes and character of children. Pointing to a child in his midst, he quipped, *“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 18:4). Children are innocent, trusting and have little self-consciousness. They do not naturally judge others or hate people. Those are learned activities. Love comes naturally to children. Of course, children convey more than innocence and love and trust; they can be petty and selfish and fearful. But children do not need to be in control. They have very little authority or power, and live each day in dependence and trust, receiving everything as a gift. And this, I believe, is what Jesus is advocating.

Being childlike does not save us, nor is it meritorious in itself. One can be childlike and be very far from the kingdom. Jesus is telling us that in order to enter the kingdom we need to have the trusting disposition of a child in order to experience the fullness of the kingdom. If we insist on maintaining our power and our control, we cannot enter the kingdom. The kingdom requires submission.

The third prerequisite to enter the kingdom is to be “born of water and Spirit.” This is not a reference to water baptism. “Born of water” was formerly used to describe the birth, because infants live in the water of their mother’s womb before being born. Every living person has been born of water. “Born of the Spirit” describes a second birth, which puzzled Nicodemus, who asked Jesus how it is possible to be born a second time (John 3:9). Jesus explains, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).²

² Ibid.

We are born once in the water of a womb. Then we must be born again in the Spirit through accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Once we enter the kingdom, it becomes a life-long journey that will one day be consummated through being with God forever, when God's kingdom will reign in its fullest. In the meantime, Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit to empower us to live out the kingdom of God in the present.

Jesus' primary message was the availability, presence and power of the kingdom of God, which is the central teaching of the New Testament. The power of the church rests in the kingdom of God. The good news is that we are invited into this life with God. We enter the kingdom through surrender, humility, trust and a willingness to begin working on our hearts in order to become the kind of person God desires us to be. God is creating an all-inclusive community of persons whose hearts and character are shaped by Jesus. This can happen only in the kingdom of God. Fortunately, all of us are invited, regardless of our past.³

³ Ibid.