

# Utopia

Romans 8:26-39 | Psalm 119:129-136 | Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

## **MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52**

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' <sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.' ... <sup>44</sup> 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. <sup>45</sup> 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. <sup>47</sup> 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>51</sup> 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Sir Thomas More, Utopia was a 200-mile wide island in the West Indies. For Sir Francis Bacon, in his novel *New Atlantis*, Bensalem is an island in the Pacific. For Sir Walter Raleigh, El Dorado is apparently somewhere in Colombia. According to James Hilton, Shangri-la is a valley in western China. And in German fairy tales, Schlaraffenland is simply somewhere. Human beings love to contemplate the ideal—the ideal society, the ideal state of being. We love to imagine what life could be, what it looks like to not worry, to not suffer, to not lack or need or have trouble of any kind. Any survey of literature will tell you this is our collective fantasy. And any survey of philosophy or religion will tell you this is our collective aspiration. For many of us, the Christian tradition is not any different. We talk about the Promised Land or the kingdom of heaven as far off, idealized, unattainable figments of imagination. They might as well be an island in the Pacific or a valley halfway around the earth. But indeed, the kingdom of heaven is not. Uniquely in the Christian tradition, our ideal society is a reality—a present reality—comingled with the less-than-ideal. From the arrival of Jesus Christ on the scene, the kingdom of heaven has arrived. It has not arrived fully, but it is here. And it is worth our consideration. As we noted the last two weeks, we are in a cycle now of seeing parables in Matthew's Gospel. The last two weeks saw one parable each. This week, however, we have six short parables that are, as it were, the leftovers of the Parable Discourse in Matthew 13. And from these parables, we see three important aspects of the kingdom here on earth, the ideal expression of God's people in this life. The kingdom is unmistakably useful, unimaginably worthwhile, and unapologetically just. Let's take a closer look.

## **1. THE KINGDOM IS UNMISTAKABLY USEFUL**

In the first two parables we heard, we find a mustard seed that grows and a yeast that leavens. I don't know where Klaus is, but if he were here, he'd definitely want me to point out that the mustard is not the smallest seed in the world. There are smaller seeds. Of course, the text doesn't say 'in the world,' so let's go with it being the smallest seed commonly planted in the

Levant. Either way, the point of the parable is that the seeds are very small and yet grow—producing plants that are eight or nine feet tall. Likewise, leaven causes dough to rise, making bread considerably larger. But both parables, I would suggest, interestingly don't limit themselves to size. The branches of the plant in the first also provide shelter and support for the birds. And of course, leavened bread is not just bigger, but better. The kingdom of heaven is growing—and with that size, it is unmistakably useful. Remember the context of these parables mentioned last week. The disciples in Jesus's audience are wondering what's going on. 'If the kingdom of heaven has already come, why aren't all of the problems solved? If Jesus is the Messiah and the kingdom is already here, why hasn't Rome been overthrown and the new political kingdom of Israel been established under the rule of Jesus?' Jesus is saying that the kingdom is here, but it is small right now. It will grow and grow and grow to usefulness. And he was right. Today, there are 2.9 billion Christians in the world, more than any other religion by a half billion. And there are schools and hospitals and social services that are helpful to the world that come out of commitments to the Christian faith. The kingdom of heaven is unmistakably helpful.

## 2. THE KINGDOM IS UNIMAGINABLY WORTHWHILE

The second pair of parables, the treasure in the field and the great pearl, demonstrate that the kingdom is unimaginably worthwhile. The point is rather straightforward. The kingdom of heaven is worth sacrificing everything to gain. In both parables, the protagonist goes and sells everything in order to obtain it. He sees the value of it. And its value is worth every effort.

## 3. THE KINGDOM IS UNAPOLOGETICALLY JUST

The fifth parable—the fish in the net—gives us a third characteristic. Like the parable of the wheat and the weeds last week, it involves the concept of eschatological judgment. Like fish from a catch being separated, people will be judged—evil and righteous, they will be separated. It even uses the same language of final judgment, in which angels come and collect evildoers and throw them into a fiery furnace. This picture, of course, will trouble many of us. And yet, we must understand that New Testament consistently depicts Jesus Christ as a judge. And just as we tend not to have a problem with a federal judge here in Austria requiring restitution and punishment from those who break our criminal and civil laws, we should consider what this picture of judgement really indicates. We hope for a just society. Indeed, we pray for it every week in the Book of Common Prayer: that the authorities may “indifferently minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue.”<sup>1</sup> It is, likewise, our aspiration in the Eucharistic Prayer we will again say today, when we pray for “that day when... justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.”<sup>2</sup> The kingdom of heaven is a place where justice is perfectly executed, where evil is punished and righteousness is lauded. It is a place that is unapologetically just.

## 4. THE KINGDOM IS HERE

These five parables paint a picture for us of what the kingdom of heaven is and can be here in earth. Yet, we must consider if and how we are becoming a part of it. Do we really mean it when we pray “thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven” each week?

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<sup>1</sup> 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 302.

<sup>2</sup> “Lord of all life, help us to work together for that day when your kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.” The Archbishops' Council 2000, *Common Worship*, 197.

Because the kingdom of heaven is large, and it is useful. Are we, the church, making it so? Are we sharing the good news of the kingdom that it may grow? And are we contributing to its service of all the people on earth, to the wellbeing of all? Perhaps now is the time to join in the mission of the kingdom, the work of the kingdom, to spread its message and goodwill.

The kingdom of heaven is also unparalleled in value. Being a part of it is worth every sacrifice. All our investments in our safety and security pale in comparison to the Christian faith. And for some of us, it will mean real sacrifice, letting go of treasured sins and taking real risks. There are Christians across the globe who risk their lives for faith, who give all that they have to give, for the sake of the gospel. Perhaps now is the time to commit yourself to the notion that we have something invaluable in this kingdom and it worth the greatest of sacrifices.

The kingdom of heaven is just. And so, we must be committed to justice. But this is not the brutal justice of a dictatorship, but the merciful justice of the cross. For in true justice, we deserve the penalty, the fiery furnace. Yet, in the cross, Jesus Christ took our penalty. As Paul, in the Romans reading we heard, puts it: “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”<sup>3</sup> He moves the Father to show us mercy by exacting the just punishment against Jesus. And this creates two imperatives for us. We must stand for justice—doing what is right even when against our interest, calling out injustice where we see it, even systemic injustice, and upholding what is righteous in every circumstance. Perhaps it is time we are committed to the right justice of the kingdom.

## CONCLUSION

The kingdom of heaven is useful and worthwhile and just. And it upon those of us—the faithful, the citizens of this kingdom—to help make it so. For in so doing, we may those trained for the kingdom, as the sixth parable puts it, those who bring out both old and new.<sup>4</sup> This is the gospel life of the kingdom. As I conclude, listen to how Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome from 590 until his death in 604, summarized it:

It was the old fate of the human race to descend into the gates of hell to suffer eternal punishment for its sins. But something was changed by the coming of the Mediator. If a person really desired to live uprightly here, one could attain to the kingdom of heaven and, even though earth-born, can depart from this perishable life and be given a place in heaven. The old fate was such that by way of punishment humankind could perish in eternal punishment. The new fate was such that, having been converted, humankind could live in the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Brothers and sisters, let us live in the kingdom.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, may we follow your Son, living in his kingdom, understanding its usefulness, worth, and justice. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:34.

<sup>4</sup> The parable here is most likely referring to the Scriptures as the “treasure,” in which case the whole of the discourse suggests the kingdom is realizing the idealized society of the Bible itself.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 11.5.37.