

THE
GOSPEL
PROJECT[®]

Jesus the Savior

Daily Discipleship Guide

FALL 2020 | VOL. 9 | CSB



Unit 25

Jesus and the Kingdom

Gospels

Memory Verses

“Simon Peter answered, ‘Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’”

—JOHN 6:68-69

Jesus Tells the Kingdom Parables

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Jesus used parables to teach what the kingdom of heaven will be like while we wait for Christ's return and His full reign in the world.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Matthew 13

Have you ever seen one of those Magic Eye® images? You might have encountered a display of them for sale in a poster shop or at a mall walkway kiosk. The images work based on some elusive trick of human optics. At first glance, they simply look like an abstract swirl of colors. No discernible image can be seen. But if you stare at the image long enough and in the right way, a concrete image of some definition comes through. Not everyone is able to see this hidden image though. It can be frustrating when others marvel at the sailboat or the unicorn while all you can see is a whirlpool of neon.

The parables of Jesus work a little like that. At first glance, it can be difficult to discern what they mean. All we might see is a field, some seeds, or a pearl, but then, when we look at them the right way, a beautiful picture of the kingdom takes shape.

? When have you felt like the only one in a group of people not to “get” something? Why might you have found that experience unsettling?

Group Time

Point 1: Word of the kingdom of heaven will be sown on different kinds of soils (Matt. 13:1-9).

¹ On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying, “Consider the sower who went out to sow. ⁴ As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn’t have much soil, and it grew up quickly since the soil wasn’t deep. ⁶ But when the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good ground and produced fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Let anyone who has ears listen.”

Jesus used a lot of agrarian imagery, the common language of the culture, both in His sermons and in His stories. But He used these images in a different way than His hearers would have expected. In this parable, for example, the portrait Jesus casts of a sower throwing seed everywhere, almost willy-nilly, wouldn’t make sense to the seasoned farmer. But we have to read these stories with spiritual eyes.



Why are stories so effective at teaching truths?

Jesus explained this parable to His disciples in Matthew 13:18-23. The seed sown is the word about the kingdom, or we could say, the gospel. A person’s response to the gospel depends on the nature of the soil, or the state of his or her heart. The human sower has no way of knowing which hearts will be receptive and which ones won’t. So the sowing of the seed—the preaching and sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ—must be done anywhere and everywhere because the responsibility for the growth is not our own but God’s.



Why should believers be encouraged that the growth of the kingdom is God’s responsibility and not our own?

Point 2: Growth of the kingdom of heaven will permeate the world (Matt. 13:31-33).

³¹ He presented another parable to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It’s the smallest of all the seeds, but when grown, it’s taller than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened.”

In these parables, Jesus was helping His disciples to see the kingdom of God differently, to see it in faith. He did not want His followers to despise the day of small beginnings or to be offended by the unassuming start of His kingdom or its seeming defeat. For even Christ’s death brought freedom for the captives of sin, and His burial was but the precursor to His glorious resurrected life and ours. What Jesus was getting at in the double imagery of a small mustard seed and a little leaven is that the growth of the kingdom will, in the end, seem utterly unlikely and impossible.

A small mustard seed becomes the biggest tree; a little leaven affects the whole batch of flour. These parables illustrate that the kingdom’s growth will not only be unlikely but all-encompassing. The gospel of Jesus’ cross and resurrection will be the down payment, as it were, for the coming of the new heavens and new earth. What Christ began in His first coming He will consummate in His second with the kingdom of God in its fullness.

Church and Kingdom: The church’s

_____ is to witness to

God’s kingdom, proclaiming God’s

_____ of salvation through

Christ and demonstrating the power of the gospel through _____

_____ so that others may be brought to live under God’s reign.



How should knowing Christ’s kingdom will prevail affect your viewpoint on earthly kingdoms?



Voices from Church History

“All the Scriptural metaphors about the death of the seed that falls into the ground, about losing one’s life, about becoming the least in the kingdom, about the world’s passing away—all these go on to something unspeakably better and more glorious. Loss and death are only the preludes to gain and life.”¹

—Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015)

Point 3: The worth of the kingdom of heaven will compel the forsaking of all (Matt. 13:44-46).

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one priceless pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.

Perhaps the man and the merchant in Jesus’ short parables could represent those who wear themselves out in the pursuit of what is “better and more.” Then one fateful day, they find *it*; they find the one treasure that makes all their previous treasures pale in comparison. Suddenly, *everything* they own holds no more value except to be sold to buy the one thing worth trading *everything* for. This, Jesus said, is the proper perception of the kingdom of God.

True _____, true eternal _____, are found in _____ alone.

Jesus Himself embodied the point of these parables, not in searching for the kingdom but in bringing the kingdom to us. He gave up *everything* because the kingdom of heaven is worth it. He knew His kingdom must come through His making atonement for sins and being resurrected for eternal life. Therefore, ushering in the kingdom of God was worth Jesus giving up His very life. Because of this, then, the kingdom of heaven is worth our lives as well.



How can Christians live to demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven is their greatest treasure?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

As you read this right now, there are cares and worries in your life that can steal your joy in Christ if not submitted to His care. You may not be going through anything especially difficult, anything “big,” that could distract you from kingdom fruitfulness, but the danger to get off mission is always there. In fact, it may be during times of relative ease that we are most in danger. Suffering and hardship typically have a way of pushing us closer to God in faith.

So think of your day, your week, and your upcoming plans or obligations. They could feel perfectly routine and ordinary. But in your preoccupation and planning, are you forgetting to meditate on God’s Word, to pray, and to apply His Word to your life?

These kingdom parables help us see everyday life with spiritual resonance. Events in the news or in the neighborhood may look bleak, but Christ is upholding the universe. His plans will be fulfilled. The proliferation of evil seems inevitable, but Christ’s church is continuing and will continue to bear fruit.

So today can be the day of repentance and a fresh start. Don’t underestimate the power of the gospel in your life to re-center your mind and re-focus your gaze on the author and perfecter of your faith—Jesus.



What steps do you take to make sure the thorns of daily life do not choke out the seed of the kingdom in your life?

Day 2: Read Matthew 13:10-17

Jesus said He used parables just as much for obscuring as for unveiling, as much for concealing as for revealing. What an odd thing to say.

This is a reminder, first of all, that truly seeing the kingdom of God depends upon God's revealing power. Think of Paul's enlightening words in Romans 8:7: "The mindset of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it is unable to do so."

Second, however, these words are another reminder of just how polarizing the person and work of Christ is. It explains why when you share the gospel with one friend, he or she leans in to know more, but when you share with another, he or she becomes uncomfortable or offended. The message is the same, but the way it "lands" can be different. This is a reminder to believers that when our minds are set on the cares of the world—on pleasure, on accumulation, on popularity or reputation—we can miss the work of the kingdom in our midst.



How can you be more mindful in your everyday life of the reality of the kingdom of God?

Day 3: Read Matthew 13:24-33

It seems counterintuitive to keep the two main thoughts of these two kingdom parables together, but doing so can be an immense encouragement to us. First, the parable about the wheat and the tares is a lesson for the church that just because someone identifies as a Christian or with the Christian religion doesn't mean he or she has become a true believer in Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that until the end of the age, some unbelievers will masquerade as believers—often themselves self-deceived about their spiritual state.

If the wheat and tares grow side by side in the world until the end, then the number of the "wheat" must end up depressingly lower than expected. Yet the second parable tells us that the kingdom will continue to grow and flourish. At the end of days, there will, in fact, be an innumerable count of genuine believers eager to worship Christ for all eternity (Rev. 7:9). The Lord will not fail in bringing many to Himself.



What does the parable of the wheat and the tares mean for your understanding of the kingdom of God in the world?

Day 4: Read Matthew 13:34-43

It is not popular these days to speak of hell. Hell, in America, is more of a curse word than a real danger faced by every person who has ever lived. But even in the evangelical world, the concept of hell has begun to lose its resonance. The age-old errors of annihilationism (the view that those not in Christ simply cease to exist after death) and universalism (the view that God will save all people regardless of their faith in Christ) continue to poke their heads up in the church's landscape. And even those who still believe in hell rarely mention it.

In Matthew 13:34-43, Jesus points to a stark reality that every person must reckon with: There is such a thing as “evil” and such a thing as “lawlessness,” and the end result for both is a place of eternal conscious torment. Hell is real, and it will be a place of unending and excruciating judgment, the unending experience of God's wrath. In the light of this important truth, the last line of His exposition of the parable is gripping: “Let anyone who has ears listen” (v. 43).



How does knowing hell awaits every unrepentant sinner motivate you in prayer and evangelism?

Day 5: Read Matthew 13:44-58

At the end of Matthew 13, just as Jesus had been predicting through His parables, the people in His own hometown rejected Him. They were offended by Him.

One reason for their rejection was their inability to fathom how anything mighty of God could come from their own surroundings. They knew Jesus' family. They knew His earthly father's trade. They could not see how any of that could amount to anything glorious.

The truth for today is that Christ plans to redeem His creation. He can (and will) take what is ordinary and use it for His own glory. Just as He Himself was born into a poor, ordinary family that had to lay Him in a feeding trough after His birth, Jesus is still using ordinary, unassuming people to spread His kingdom throughout the world. What remains for us, then, is that we do not become distracted by the ordinariness and routines of life so that we do not drift into unbelief.



What do the circumstances of Jesus' birth and upbringing say about God's plans and priorities?

UNIT 25

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