

The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like...

Focal Text: Matthew 13:10–17

Today we begin a 6-week series on the parables of Jesus as we will take a quick look at two focal points of parables. First the Kingdom of God, then the individual hearer and his relationship to God's Kingdom. We will also consider how sin leaves one deaf to God's voice, and see God's glory on display in his elective purposes — he overcomes spiritual deafness and blindness. And his glory on display in righteous judgment of sin. Let's read from the beginning of Matthew 13. I won't deal with the Parable of the Soils, but we'll just hear it, as they did in the 1st Century. Our focus is vv. 10–17.

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

10 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ 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.’

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

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PRAY — Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to hear. Bless us with spiritual insight and wisdom. And above all, pour out mighty, converting grace and bless each of us with a new heart so that we are citizens of your Kingdom on your mission.

The Call to Worship this morning, in Isaiah 6, is a passage that we memorized together about a year ago. Our memory passage, as you may recall, ended in the commissioning of Isaiah to take the message of Holy God to his rebellious, wearisome people. Let's see how much stuck in your mind:

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." ⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

That's where our memory work stopped. Do you remember specifically what Isaiah was to say? This:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive."

¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

That seems an odd message, does it not? Not very encouraging. But if you think that's bad, read the first 5 chapters of Isaiah and see how things got to this point. The people were rebellious. They forsook the Lord. They despised the Lord. They rejected his rule and reign, and his law. They did not want to hear from him — they *would not* hear from him, despite his pleas to return to him. To make it worse, they continued with a pretense of *YHWH* worship, going through the motions of sacrifice as if they truly loved and served God. But they actually trusted their fortune tellers, and their horses and chariots, rather than eternal, all-knowing, almighty God. So God executes judgement in keeping with what they wanted all along. They wanted to express themselves without interference from God, and God said, "OK. I'll give you what you want. You don't want to see evidence of me? I will make the eyes that you squeeze shut toward me to be blind so that you can't see me. You won't hear me? I will cause the ears that you have stuffed your fingers in to be deaf and you will not hear me or experience the fullness of my grace. Your sin has created so many layers of separation and dullness... I will quit penetrating the seared layers of sin and leave you in your sinful hardness."

That's a devastating judgement. God stops overcoming their spiritual blindness and deafness, and deadness, and gives them up to their sinful lusts, causing them to wander from his ways.

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Through Jesus' telling of parables, we see a piece of the gracious undoing of this monstrous judgement pronounced through Isaiah. Many who hear Jesus' teaching will remain in the hardness and grip of the sin they love. But in Christ's overcoming, enlightening, revealing grace, God undertakes to give his elect children the blessing of a new heart that no longer loves sin and hates God, but loves God and hates sin. He reveals what the Kingdom of heaven looks like: that sin is conquered by healing, life-giving love; disoriented values are oriented to his values. He opens blind eyes that cannot see the beauty of the rule and reign of Christ and his kingdom. He unstops deaf ears that cannot hear the call of the Good Shepherd to enter and follow. He gives understanding to sin-darkened minds that on their own cannot grasp, or weigh, or be transformed by truths of God's kingdom. The parables aren't just stories because stories make good teaching tools. These are powerful spiritual tools that reveal realities of God's kingdom, and reveal our spiritual condition.

So in rather short order, let's look at these two essential purposes: God's Kingdom, and our hearts — or to personalize it: God's Kingdom, and *my* heart. So each week as we hear and study a different parable, what are two questions we should answer:

What is being revealed about his Kingdom?

What is being revealed about me?

The Kingdom of Heaven

Let's define terms so we have a good understanding of where we are heading. Jesus may begin a parable of similitude with some form of the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." You see it in vv. 44, 45, and 47, in Matthew 13.

The Kingdom of heaven is not a domain or political construct. The Kingdom of heaven is referring to the *rule and reign* of Christ. It is transcendent. It is ultimate. It is a picture of what recovered communion looks like with Christ seated in his session, as described in **Colossians 3:1** — If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

The Kingdom of God is juxtaposed the kingdoms of this world. The world is set against the rule and of Christ. Often when the New Testament uses the term "world" it is referring to the system of rebellion arrayed in mutinous defiance against Christ and his reign. The contrast is sharp and clear. Parables reveal the beauty of Christ's rule and reign which is opposite the world in which we live. The

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lesson of the parable typically runs radically — evening shockingly — opposite of the rebellious world.

That brings us to the second issue the parables reveal. These sharply contrasting stories are weaponized Gospel truths that penetrate the heart, exposing what's in it. It forces me to see which kingdom I'm serving. Am I living in rebellion to Christ's kingdom, or I am serving Christ's kingdom? What is the parable revealing about me? Do I belong to Christ or not?

Which brings us to a major diagnostic aspect of the parables related the condition of the human heart. **v. 10–11** — “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [meaning those who have not been given a heart — those who remain lost in sin] — **it has not been given**. The parables deal with (1) the glory of God in his elective purposes in salvation, and (2) the holiness of God in judgement. God is glorified in both. Some are spiritually awakened to hear, and some are left in their sin. “But that's not fair,” someone might say. Why would God open some eyes and not others?

Let's think again about the judgment pronounced in Isaiah 6. God had delivered his people from slavery, brought them into the promised land; provided for, and protected them. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. They forsook God — they did not want to be bothered by him — and they chose idol worship. Their hearts were already hardened by their own sinfulness, and the judgement pronounced through Isaiah was that God was not intervening in their sinfulness, but actually hardening them all the more. Through the prophet Amos, who was a contemporary of Isaiah, God pronounced similar devastating judgment in **Amos 8:11** — “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. You have not wanted to hear... so you will not hear.

Spiritually dead hearts do not, and cannot understand spiritual truth unless God intervenes to reveal it. **1 Corinthians 2:14** — The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Sin has an insurmountable deadening impact on all aspects of who we are.

- Sin is blinding. (Isaiah 6:10; John 12:40)
- Sin is deafening. (Isaiah 6:10; Jeremiah 6:10; Matthew 13:13)

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- Sin kills love for God. At its core, sin loves self and hates God. **v. 15** — For this people's heart has grown dull... (the heart is the center of the affections, of love and will.)
- Sin heaps up God's wrath. **Romans 2:5** — But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.
- Sin darkens the mind, or the capacity to perceive God and his truth. (Ephesians 4:18)

This is not an exhaustive list, but just an overview of what sin's impact. And the human heart loves its sin. It is the transformation from the love of sin to the love of God that marks a Christian heart.

All sin — the least rebellious thought — merits death, regardless of the intention or motive. The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23) Why does sin produce death? Because it is a treasonous assault against God's holiness and his sovereign rule and reign.

In **Numbers 15:32–36**, a guy is picking up sticks on the Sabbath — he's picking up sticks. And he is executed by stoning — because he is picking up sticks! Wait, what? Why such a monstrous penalty for picking up sticks? Because what he was doing was in direct defiance to God's Sabbath law. His stick collecting was a deliberate, clear-minded assault against the sovereign rule and reign of God. And Holy God glorified himself and exalted his word above the law breaker in the penalty that is earned by all sin: the death penalty.

In **2 Samuel 6**, Uzzah, was attending the unauthorized cart that carried the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the very throne of Holy God. As the cart was being pulled by oxen, one of them stumbled and the ark became unstable on the cart. Uzzah reached up to steady the Ark so the throne of God presence wouldn't fall into the dirt. When he touched, God struck him dead on the spot. What? He was trying to keep God's throne from getting soiled! There was a long list of sinful violations concerning the Ark that preceded the death of Uzzah, but Uzzah's sin was that his sinful hand touched what God defined as holy. His intentions, his motives — however good they were — were still deeply stained by sin. And God struck him dead because of the assault on his holiness.

I could go on with Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Saphira... The point is this: God is far more "other" — far more holy than we can conceive. And we are far more sinful and rebellious than we dare believe. Holy is who God is. Sinfulness is objectively evil, impure, rebellious, and corrupting. It's defined by its lack of conformity to God's character. Sinfulness is the hostile antithesis of holiness.

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Because all sin is an assault against God's holiness and his sovereign rule, he not only has the right to punish sin, his holiness consumes sin. **Hebrews 12:28b–29** — Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

I have labored the point for this reason: When Jesus says it has not been given to some to understand these spiritual truths, if we dare think it is not fair for God to leave some in the grip of their love of sin and its incumbent blindness, while he chooses to give others, according to his elective purposes, a new heart and open spiritually blind eyes and deaf ears, we have failed on a massive scale to grasp both the holiness of God, and the magnitude of our sinfulness. God does not owe a single sinner anything but death for the least sinful inclination against him, and that is what we all are. The parables expose the heart and its loves, and the mind and its spiritual discernment.

If God chooses to intervene and open blind eyes, overcoming their rebellion against him; if he chooses to open deaf ears in spite of efforts to block out and ignore the word of God, he is glorified in redemption. But he has done no wrong by *not* intervening in those who have refused to see and refused to hear anymore than a police officer who stops pursuing a fleeing suspect is responsible for the suspect's continued reckless flight. God has left them pursuing the sin their heart craves, and they will have no charge to bring when His sin-consuming holiness breaks out against them. But for others, in overcoming darkened minds and spiritual blindness, his mercy and grace are on blazing display in addition to holiness, so he is glorified in salvation. In both cases God is glorified: Even through the life of the unrepentant sinner God is glorified in his righteous judgement of their sin which puts his holiness on display. And God is glorified in the life of the one whom he redeems and causes to be born again by putting his sovereign grace and mercy on blazing display.

This destroys pride and should stir up worship and thankfulness. Do you hear him? Then he intervened in your heart, through zero merit of your own, and opened your eyes to behold the beauty of Christ and turn to him in repentance from sin.

One might ask, well if God shows mercy, does that mean he ignores the sin? Does he just absorb the attack against his holiness? Does he simply ignore the treason committed against his rule and reign? No. The wages of sin is death. That is absolute. There is no escaping the death penalty of sin. For the one who comes to Christ, the death penalty is paid by a substitute. The penalty for your sin,

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which is exponentially greater than picking up sticks on the Sabbath, will be righteously measured out, either against you — or against Christ, who died to pay the penalty for my sin. Christ took the blame and bore the wrath for the one who comes to him in faith.

Do you hear his voice? Is the Holy Spirit bringing a deep awareness of the holiness of God and a crushing sense of the darkness of your sin? This is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring the dead, rebellious, blind, dull treasonous sinner to new life in life. Hear him, and run to Jesus.

A warning: God is under no obligation to continue to call. He is long-suffering and abundant in mercy. But he has fixed a limit known only to him concerning how long we will call, and pierce the hardness of a sin-loving heart to call you to repentance. Do you presume that you will again reject his demand to follow him, resist the Holy Spirit's conviction of your sin, and simply have more time to love and indulge your sin, then wake tomorrow when you will again ignore God's call to come and be made new? Judah continued with heartless, worthless worship, loving their sin, trusting themselves, and were shocked when Isaiah proclaimed God's judgement that he would no longer interfere in their love of sin, but bring judgement. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart, but run to Christ, who is calling you. You are not owed another minute. Hear and believe these words:

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.