

Secrets of the Kingdom: Unlocking the Parables of Jesus

Our Father in heaven,
may you be honored as holy.
May your Kingdom come.
May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.

That prayer is found in Matthew chapter 6, where Jesus, teaching his followers how to pray, urges us to pray, "Father, may your *kingdom* come." Countless millions have prayed that prayer. It's beautiful. But what does it mean? What is God's Kingdom? And what does it look like for his Kingdom to come?

I want you to see something you may not have noticed before. Matthew chapter 6 and verses 9-13 are where this prayer is located. As you scan the balance of this chapter, you see that Jesus addresses the many reasons we *worry*.

Worry, or seek God's Kingdom

Skip down to verse 25. Jesus urges:

*"Therefore I tell you, **do not worry** about your life, what you will eat or drink; or [worry] about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?²⁷ Can any one of you by **worrying** add a single hour to your life? [You can *lessen* your lifespan by worrying, but not lengthen it!]*

*²⁸ "And **why do you worry** about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?³¹ So **do not worry**, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** ³⁴ Therefore **do not worry** about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

His emphasis is unmistakable: Don't worry. Stop worrying. Let go of worry. Here's why: you have a heavenly Father who knows what you need. When worry comes knocking, "**Seek God's Kingdom first**, and all these things will be given to you as well." The things we tend to worry about, God promises to provide.

This is one of the most precious promises in the Bible. It logically leads to the same question we began with, what is God's Kingdom? And what then does it mean to seek God's Kingdom as your first and highest priority?

That's what this new series addresses—the secrets of God's Kingdom, which are found most powerfully in the parables of Jesus.

The secret Kingdom

Today I want to set the series up for you with the question of why Jesus taught in parables. If God wants you and me and everyone not to worry but to trust our heavenly Father by seeking his Kingdom first, then why is the majority of Jesus' teaching wrapped in parables?

- Jesus tells parables about lost cash;
- About the various results you get when you try farming;
- About finding buried treasure;
- About how dragnets work in the fishing industry;
- About solid and shoddy construction plans;
- About an invitation to dinner;
- And more.

He tells parables about common things, to communicate unseen truths about God's Kingdom.

Listening but not hearing

A few years back, there was a phone ringtone that high school and college students were using. It was called the "Mosquito Tone." You can find it online.

Inside our ears, we have tiny hairs that move with the impulses of sound waves. It is those hair movements that send electrical signals to our brains so that we hear. As people age, those hairs get worn down. They get damaged, so that hearing becomes less and less sensitive. With that comes the loss of ability to hear high frequencies.

The highest note on a piano keyboard is at 4 kilohertz, and people over 25 can't hear over 16 kilohertz. The Mosquito Tone is 17 kilohertz.

The reason the Mosquito ring tone became so popular among students, then, was because it's too high for anyone over the age of 25 to hear—meaning students could text and make phone calls without any teacher, parent, or boss over 25 years of age knowing about it.

As we read the Gospels, it becomes clear that sometimes, some people didn't hear what Jesus was saying. They heard, but they didn't really hear. They either missed it, or they outright didn't want to be challenged. This is why Jesus switched to teaching in parables.

Flip ahead and look with me at Matthew chapter 12.

The day that changed how Jesus taught

Matthew 12 recounts an amazing day in Galilee, up north in Israel where Jesus grew up. Some call it an ominous day. It was on this day that Jesus had such a strong clash with those who opposed him, that how he taught suddenly changed. I want you to see why, because this has everything to do with how we hear what Jesus is saying about God's Kingdom.

The day begins with Jesus and his twelve closest followers walking through a farm field on Saturday, the Sabbath. They're hungry, so as they walk, they pull a few heads of grain, rub it across their palms to break out the grain, and enjoy a bit of an impromptu snack.

Immediately, the religious police pick a fight. Way back when, the Pharisees may have started out with great motives. But somewhere along the way, they turned God's commands which are intended for our good and for blessing into a crushing load of burdens.

Foremost among the commandments was to enjoy a weekly Sabbath—a day to rest and worship, fellowship and serve. Take a break from the daily grind. That was God's intention. Instead, the Pharisees developed an exhaustive list of all the things you couldn't do on the Sabbath lest you inadvertently break the commandment. Farming was among them, and in their narrow-eyed view, that's what this snack was: farming. Work. A violation of God's command!

Having been publicly accused, Jesus publicly corrects them. Verse 9 introduces the turning point. Jesus arrives at the local synagogue and there sees a crippled man. The Pharisees, suspecting Jesus might heal on the Sabbath, try to catch Jesus in the act.

Having been publicly tested, Jesus publicly corrects them—and heals the man. Shockingly, verse 14 tells us their reaction:

“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.”

Jesus restores a dead hand to full function, but their response is to want to kill him! Now here comes the turning point. Verse 22:

“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute...”

Here's a man who has been beat down three different ways:

- He has become for some reason unknown to us demon-possessed;
- He is completely blind, without sight;
- And he cannot speak, he is mute.

A trifecta of suffering. This is who Jesus has come for. He's about to reveal yet again the kind of King he is. Matthew says it so concisely:

“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.”

A trifecta miracle met by murderous opposition

That's it, Matthew?! Commentators like to say that Matthew gives us the black and white, while Luke tends to give us the color version.

Today we could say Matthew tweets, while Luke posts the whole video.

I want you to imagine what this moment would have felt like if you and I had been there that day.

- If there were a soundtrack playing, you can imagine the dark brooding tones as this man is led to Jesus. He looks tortured in spirit.
- His eyes are milky white with blindness.
- His free arm sweeps the space before him, lest he slam into something as he has doubtless done many times before.
- Perhaps he's feeling through his feet for indications of movement or sound, since he can't hear anything.
- This man is unable to see, unable to communicate, and is trapped in demonic possession.

But then he feels a hand touch and enfold his hand. *And in an instant, he knows not how, everything is new!* An undeniable act of God's power on his behalf.

What do you suppose that felt like for him, and for you if you had been watching and listening?

An image that comes to my mind is a scene in the latest Star Wars movie—hang in there with me!—when what we'll call the good guys' captain unexpectedly turns her ship toward the enemy who is destroying so many of her people. And with the push of the throttle forward, her ship slices through the enemy ship, releasing her people from certain death.

In that moment of the movie, the producers did something I've never experienced before. With all the sounds of battle and chaos leading up to that moment, the split second that her actions created a breakthrough for her people, the entire movie soundtrack...went silent. Across the theater, hands reflexively covered mouths, and the whole place went silent, in awe at the sacrifice that had just played out.

In my mind, I imagine the first reaction to this trifecta of healing would be just like that: absolute awe, at the power of God. Hand to mouth. Jaw dropped.

And what would have quickly followed were shouts of praise and acclamation, celebration and hugs, maybe dancing and song! People were astonished.

But not the Pharisees. Verse 24:

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

Jesus, knowing their thoughts (!), yet again publicly confronted their absolute refusal to acknowledge that this was God in their midst. Common people heard Jesus gladly. But there were some who came so closed-minded that it made no difference what Jesus did or taught, they were determined not to believe. Having determined to kill Jesus, this is the turning point after which Jesus switched his public teaching from plain and open, to parables of the Kingdom of God.

From saying it plainly, to hiding treasure in parables

Look at the beginning of the next chapter, Matthew chapter 13. It says that same day, Jesus began teaching the crowds in parables. We will dig into that parable next week. But for now, I want you to see Jesus' own explanation for why he taught using parables. Matthew 13:10. Jesus has just told a parable about farming. We read...

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

*11 He replied, "Because the knowledge of the **secrets of the kingdom of heaven** has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables:*

"Though seeing, they do not see;

though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;

you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

15 For this people's heart has become calloused;

they hardly hear with their ears,

*and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'*
*16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For truly I tell you,
many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you
hear but did not hear it.*

The turning point from Jesus teaching clearly, then, to hiding the secrets of God's Kingdom in parables, was a triple miracle met by murderous opposition. For the final year of Jesus' ministry, his public teaching was almost always in the form of parables.

Here's why: for those who come open and eager, hungry for truth, the parables showcase powerful truths about God's Kingdom. The parables open windows for us into who God is, what he is like, and what it means to seek God's Kingdom first.

But these same parables also serve to hide the truth from those who refuse to seek out the meaning, with an intention to put into practice what God reveals. Those who come closed-minded, miss the treasure hidden within the parables of Jesus.

Again, Jesus' parables hide the truth from the self-satisfied, while they reveal truth to those who come eager and hungry to hear from God.

Three options for responding to Jesus

By deliberately rejecting the truth Jesus presented, his enemies lost the privilege of clearly hearing any more truth from his lips. That's what Jesus meant when he said, *"Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."*

That's one option for how some people respond to Jesus—with vehement resistance. Happened then, still happens today. For whatever reasons, some people come to the discussion fingers jammed into their ears and their eyes clamped tightly shut. They don't want to hear. They're not open to being challenged, or to changing. That's a dangerous place to be.

There are two more options for how you might respond to Jesus, and specifically the Kingdom parables of Jesus.

One is represented by a simple grocery bag. Imagine on Christmas morning, you tip-toe into the living room to see what's beneath the tree, and you see a plain plastic bag from Dollar Store or Goodwill. Blech.

The risk is that because of the plain wrapping, you might dismiss it as worthless. The problem is that you don't know what's inside! You haven't looked closely. You've made up your mind without taking a closer look.

That's where many go when it comes to Jesus' parables. They hear them merely as nice stories. Brief and harmless. Oh, but they haven't really leaned in to hear. There's treasure in Jesus and in his parables of the Kingdom of God. Don't miss the treasure.

And then there's a gift-wrapped box. It's much more intriguing to receive a gift when it is wrapped attractively. It's more intriguing even to receive a gift wrapped in newspaper than to be handed a Dollar Store bag! The wrapping and bow beckon, "Look inside! Look inside!"

This is what we see in the disciples.

- Where the Pharisees stuck their fingers in their ears and clamped their eyes shut to the mysteries of God being laid out by Jesus;
- Where the majority took a pass on Jesus, not bothering to lean in and listen yearning for truth;
- The disciples instead came back to Jesus asking for insight. And he gave it. God revealed to them what remained mysteries for the majority. They remain undiscovered by many even today—life-changing insights into who God is, what he values, what he's like, how he works, and what it means to see God's Kingdom first.

Which one have you been up to this point?

1. Closed-minded and resistant to Jesus, not open to learning and changing?
2. Uninterested, imagining there's not much treasure in the teachings of Jesus?
3. Or hungry and leaning in to hear—really hear—the secrets of God's Kingdom?

May God stir within you an unquenchable desire to seek, until you find, the secrets of God's Kingdom.