

■ LIFE OF JESUS

June 6, 2021 | Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- How does your life show the value you place on the kingdom of heaven?
- Read Matthew 13:44-52.
- How does God's judgment at the end of time influence your life today?
- Pray God would prepare your heart to sacrifice for His kingdom.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Participating in the kingdom of heaven will be worth any price we have to pay.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

We need to prepare now for the kingdom by living sacrificially.

■ MEDITATE

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to guide you through the interpretation of parables.

Q: *Do you find the word “sacrifice” to be alluring or foreboding?*

Q: *Describe how Christianity influences your daily life?*

One of the most alarming changes within Christianity over the past couple of generations has been the development of therapeutic religion, which presents Christianity as a sort of therapy to help you through life. It provides support for dealing with loss, inspiration when you feel discouraged, and steps to help you through addiction. Who wouldn't want therapeutic Christianity?! The problem, of course, is that it offers only a faint glimmer of what biblical Christianity promises. Christianity will help you as you encounter struggles in life, but it also offers a comprehensive worldview. Christianity tells us where we came from, what went wrong, and where everything is heading. Therapeutic Christianity offers helpful tidbits for life. Biblical Christianity explains what life is all about.

The difference between these two visions of Christianity becomes clear in texts such as Matthew 13:44–52. Therapeutic Christianity has little use for rewards that will not be recognized until the end of the age. The concepts of sacrifice and self-denial do not appeal to those who are only looking to get out of a rut. Yet these are the subjects at the heart of Matthew 13:44–52 and its message of the coming kingdom of heaven. Biblical Christianity offers more than just help for today. It offers us something for tomorrow that is worth sacrificing for today.

Q: *How are you preparing for the kingdom of heaven?*

Q: *How do you see therapeutic Christianity at work in your culture, your church, and yourself?*

APPLICATION POINT – This lesson will challenge you to live for the kingdom of God. If, however, therapeutic Christianity is the extent of your faith, you will have great difficulty in living for the kingdom. Make an honest evaluation of your Christian faith. Can the things you find most appealing about the Bible and Jesus be marketed on dish towels and wall art? Could the concepts of sin and Jesus's death on our behalf be easily extracted from your beliefs without much notice? If so, you may have fallen into therapeutic Christianity. If this is the case, pray that God would help you receive the message of Matthew 13:44–52. This is a challenging text, but as it claims, eternity is in the balance.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Matthew 13:44–52 contains several parables about the kingdom of heaven. This lesson will consider the parable through these broad themes:

1. THE INCOMPARABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD
2. THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD
3. TRUE DISCIPLES ARE STUDENTS OF THE WORD

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Matthew 13:44–52 in more detail and show how it portrays the kingdom of heaven.

1. THE INCOMPARABLE VALUE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

■ MATTHEW 13:44–46

Q: *How can we avoid drawing the wrong conclusion from parables?*

Q: *What are the benefits of teaching with parables?*

Jesus's parables were an effective approach to teaching His disciples, but sometimes parables, by their nature, can be easily misunderstood. In these parables, Jesus introduced two rather unscrupulous characters. The first is someone who found a treasure on someone else's land. Rather than telling the owner of the treasure's existence, he hid the treasure and bought the property, and the treasure on it, for far less than it was worth. The second is a merchant who was looking for pearls. Upon finding an extremely valuable pearl, the merchant sold all he had to acquire it. The problem is that the merchant apparently deceived the owner about the pearl's true value. This parable in no way commends the behavior of these men. Jesus was not suggesting His followers should engage in shady business dealings. The actions of these men only serve to illustrate the main point He was making.

Q: *Why is it important for believers to behave with integrity?*

Q: *Why are we often tempted to sacrifice integrity for money?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians are called to be faithful witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, our actions and behavior are closely tied to the reputation of our Savior, and when we are unscrupulous in what we do, we portray our Savior in a negative light. Furthermore, our honesty, especially in monetary matters, reflects how we value our salvation in Jesus Christ. If we feel the need to cheat, lie, and steal, we evidently do not think Jesus is able to save us in the ways we need. As followers and representatives of Jesus Christ, and we need to be beyond reproach (1 Timothy 3:2).

Q: *What do the treasure and the pearl represent in this parable?*

Q: *What does the phrase “sells/sold all that he has/had” represent in this parable?*

These parables demonstrate the incomparable worth of the kingdom of heaven. No treasure on earth or any pearl in the sea can compare to the value of the kingdom of heaven. Like the two men in these stories, we must be willing to give up all we have to participate in the kingdom. Notice how Jesus described the attitude of the man in the field. He did not begrudgingly sell all he had. He did it with joy. He could abandon everything because he knew what he would receive was far better than what he had. The same is true for us. We can give up everything with joy because we know the kingdom of heaven will be far better.

Q: *What is the relationship between faith and selling personal goods in this parable?*

Q: *If you were to trace how you spent your time and finances over the past month, what would it reveal that you value most?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is crucial that we maintain a biblical relationship between faith and works as we seek to apply this passage. Unlike the examples in these parables, the kingdom of God is not something we can purchase—for any price. Nor is the kingdom something we can earn through good works. We can only enter God’s kingdom through faith. Jesus’s parables get at the concept of value. Those who have confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior have declared that nothing else in this world compares to knowing Him as Savior. They can freely give of their time and possessions to serve His kingdom because His kingdom is what they value most. This parable shows it is a wise investment of their resources, because nothing else can compare to the kingdom of heaven. This week examine how you are spending your time or how you are spending your money. Do your spending habits demonstrate the value of the kingdom of heaven? If not, pray that God will help you strengthen your faith and transform the way you use your resources to reflect your faith and your confession in Jesus Christ.

2. THE EXCLUSIVITY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

■ ■ MATTHEW 13:47–50

Q: *What do the fish represent in this parable?*

Q: *What determines whether the fish are kept or thrown away?*

With this parable, Jesus continued teaching about the kingdom but drew out a much different point. The previous parables teach the value of the kingdom. The parable of the fish teaches the exclusivity of the kingdom. The current age is like the fishing net, which is far less discriminant than a rod and reel. The net is cast into the sea and whatever is hauled in must be sorted. Just as a net captures both good and bad fish, the world contains both the righteous and the unrighteous. The unrighteous, however, will not remain once the kingdom of heaven dawns.

Q: *How should Christians respond when they witness injustice in the world?*

Q: *What challenges emerge from living with unbelievers in the world?*

APPLICATION POINT – Injustice is a sad reality in the world and will continue to be as long as sin reigns in God’s creation. The reality of injustice in a fallen world demands two responses from the followers of Christ. First, whether our efforts are successful or not, we must call attention to injustice in the world and seek to resolve it. Standing against injustice is seldom popular in a fallen world, even among unbelievers who also claim to be standing against injustice. Yet, if we are to be the light of the world, we cannot help but oppose darkness wherever it occurs. Second, we must recognize that injustice will remain until the end of the age because God does not free the world of sin until then. When injustice prevails, we must retain a steadfast hope this will not always be the case. God will one day intervene and rid the world of sin, and injustice will disappear. Our task until that day is to remain faithful to our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Q: *What do the men sorting the fish stand for?*

Q: *What does this parable teach us about the role of angels in the coming judgment?*

God’s angels will take an active role in dividing humanity between those who will be judged and those who will be spared. Angels occasionally carry out God’s plans on earth (Luke 1:11–19; Acts 8:26, 12:23), and they will accompany Christ at His return (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Here and in Matthew 13:41, the angels judge on Jesus’s authority. This shows Jesus to be filling the role of the divine judge.

Q: *How do angels help us understand our role in God’s creation?*

Q: *How can Christians develop an unhealthy obsession with angels?*

APPLICATION POINT – Angels have become somewhat sensationalized. You can find a broad range of depictions of angels, from cute cherubic Christmas ornaments to burley, macho, rebel-without-a-cause types. There is something awe-inspiring about angels. John felt compelled to worship when he encountered an angel (Revelation 19:10), but the angel refused and instead directed John to worship God. Rather than prompting an unhealthy obsession with

angels, we should follow the angel's instruction and redirect our attention from angels to Jesus, the only one worthy of worship.

Q: *What happens to the evil ones who reject God's reign?*

Q: *What is implied by "weeping and gnashing of teeth"?*

Jesus declared that evil ones will be thrown into the fiery furnace. Since this is part of Jesus's own explanation of His parable, there can be little doubt of what He was saying. Unbelievers will experience eternal condemnation and torment in a place we know as hell. The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" indicates hell to be a place of conscious torment and misery. Ironically, unbelievers reject God's rule in this life but will realize in eternity that they have rejected the one thing which makes joy and flourishing possible.

There are numerous attempts to alleviate the horrifying reality of hell in our culture, even among some who maintain the label "Christian." Some people challenge the concept of hell based on a misguided understanding of God's love. Others claim it is merely a place of frustration and anxiety, but this is clearly ruled out by Jesus's words in this passage. Some people have argued for what is known as "annihilationism," which claims that unbelievers will suffer for a time before being completely annihilated from conscious existence. The idea of a "fiery furnace," as seen in Matthew 13:50, could be taken as support for this position since what is thrown into a furnace eventually disappears. Extending Jesus's metaphor to this extent is not supported by the rest of Scripture, however, including the remainder of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 25:46 states, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." We should also consider Matthew 25:41, Mark 9:43, and Revelation 20:10.

Q: *How should the reality of hell shape the lives of believers?*

Q: *In what sense should the reality of hell be a comfort to believers?*

APPLICATION POINT – The doctrine of hell should incite a passion for evangelism among believers. There are eternal consequences for everyone who dies in rebellion against God. The doctrine of hell should also bring

some measure of comfort to believers. On earth, many evil deeds go seemingly unpunished, or what punishment can be identified pales in comparison to the evil committed. Horrific crimes often go unsolved and some even unnoticed. Even when those who commit these evil acts are caught, we are hardly capable of providing adequate and complete justice. For example, even if a mass-murderer is given capital punishment, he only has one life that can be taken even though he has taken multiple lives.

The doctrine of hell, however, shows us that God is concerned with justice. Any act of sin is ultimately against Him and will be subject to God's perfect judgment. No injustice is left undone. The doctrine of hell should liberate believers from the burden of righting every wrong, as if we could accomplish this anyway. We can freely forgive others who have sinned against us personally because we know God will judge every wrong deed. While we should seek justice to the degree we can, we need not ever think this responsibility rests only upon us. We can trust in God's commitment to justice and let go of a burden we were never able to fully bear.

3. TRUE DISCIPLES ARE STUDENTS OF THE WORD

■ MATTHEW 13:51-52

Q: *Who were the scribes Jesus mentioned?*

Q: *What do "treasures new and old" represent in this parable?*

This passage concludes with a short parable describing true disciples. After the disciples affirmed that they understood these parables, Jesus described a true disciple for them. His description centers on the disciples' relationship with God's Word. Jesus's comments concerning a "scribe" may seem cryptic at first. Why have "scribes" suddenly entered the equation? Scribes were responsible for copying God's Word and were therefore well acquainted with it. Jesus was telling His disciples that true disciples are familiar with God's Word. For His disciples, God's Word included what we know as the Old Testament as well as Jesus's own words. As we look to apply this passage to our own lives, we include the entire New Testament as well. Jesus says true disciples are like the master of the house, who brings out both old and new treasures. For the disciples, this meant being committed to both the Old Testament and the new revelation coming from Jesus. We must be committed to both the Old and New Testaments. True disciples are also adept at applying God's Word to life. They can articulate the teachings of our ancient text and apply them to situations emerging in our contemporary moment. Thus, true disciples bring treasures both new and old from God's Word.

Q: *How would you gauge your confidence in applying God's Word in your life and to others?*

Q: *How could you become more confident at applying God's Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – Before offering two practical tips to become more confident in applying it, the importance of reading and studying God's Word for yourself must be noted. If you never read and study the Bible for yourself, you will always struggle with this mark of discipleship. If you want to become more adept at applying God's Word, become a copious note-taker during your church services. Your church has recognized your pastors as being especially gifted at applying the Scriptures. Take the opportunity to learn from them when they are teaching God's Word and write down the things you learn. The great thing about this is it will cost you essentially nothing. You just need to become more attentive to what you are already doing. Another way to become better at applying God's Word is to read books about the Bible and your Christian faith. Exposing yourself, with discernment, to more applications of God's Word will naturally make you better at applying it yourself.


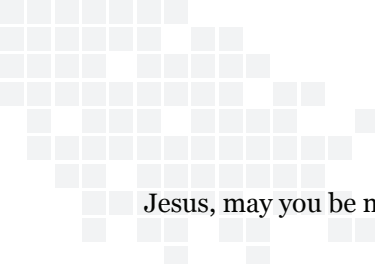
NEXT STEPS

This lesson began by challenging you to live for the kingdom of heaven by moving beyond therapeutic Christianity. If you are only interested in therapeutic Christianity, you will not be interested in living for the kingdom, because it will demand sacrifice. The applications in this lesson will demand sacrifice. No one naturally wants to abandon everything in pursuit of the kingdom, leave justice in God's hands, or spend the time it takes to become a true disciple of God's Word. Those things take sacrifice. They will not happen on their own. Is God leading you make one of these sacrifices? If so, write down several action steps to take. Doing so may be your first step out of therapeutic Christianity and into true discipleship.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, forgive me for limiting my faith to a self-help exercise.



Jesus, may you be my example in living sacrificially for the kingdom of heaven.

God, thank you for being a God of justice. Help me to lay down my burdens at the foot of the cross.