

A Kingdom Without Borders and Without Price

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 (text)

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Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ: The border wall is the hottest political topic today. The President and most Republicans support a southern wall to stop the flood of illegal immigrants. Democrats oppose it, saying it is “immoral,” not effective, and racist. But what many do not know or remember or ignore is that twice, 2006 and 2013, top Democrats then and now, approved building a wall. So, there should be no debate about the wall, since both parties overwhelmingly supported it just a few years ago.

What does the southern border wall have to do with our meditation today? This is the third Lord’s Day that we will be studying Matthew Chapter 13. This chapter has seven parables about the kingdom of heaven, including two that we have studied: The Parable of the Soils (Sower) and The Parable of the Wheat and Weed. Our texts today include five more parables: The Mustard Seed, the Leaven, the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Value, and the Net. The Mustard Seed and the Leaven are about the tiny beginnings of the kingdom of God and its expansion worldwide as one people of God from all nations. This is why I call it “A Kingdom Without Borders.” In the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value, Jesus explains that his kingdom is “Without Price”: a priceless, invaluable gem and treasure. The fifth and last parable, the Net, is both a promise to those who receive the borderless and priceless kingdom of God, and a warning to those who reject it.

Jesus taught in verses 10-17 that he teaches in parables to hide the secrets of the kingdom to unbelievers, and to reveal them to believers. But when Jesus spoke these five parables, he was teaching only his disciples, so these are somewhat self-explanatory.

So, our three points today are quotations from our text: **“Birds Come and Perch in Its Branches”** (verse 32); **“He Sold Everything He Had and Bought the Treasure”** (verses 44 and 46); and **“Angels Will Separate the Wicked from the Righteous”** (verse 49).

“Birds Come and Perch in Its Branches”

The Parable of the Mustard Seed does not need much explanation. The mustard seed is the smallest seed commonly used by people in Palestine. So Jesus was not saying that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world, because there are many smaller seeds outside of Palestine. This is why the NIV describes the mustard seed in verse 32 as “the smallest of all *your* seeds” (*emphasis added*), though the word “your” is not in the original Greek.

When Jesus started preaching, he said, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt 4:17). He started building his kingdom with twelve common men, many of them fishermen. He was an itinerant preacher without any funds, preaching and teaching in small, insignificant cities in Galilee. With great signs and wonders and miracles, thousands followed him, hoping that he was the promised Messiah who would free them from the cruel Roman oppressors. But Jesus’ weapons of war were preaching and teaching because his kingdom *“is not of this world”* (John 18:36). It was an

insignificant beginning compared with the huge, powerful Roman Empire. The King of the kingdom is one who was born in a manger, and its messenger was John the Baptizer, one who wore camel's hair and ate locusts. Its message was unpleasant to the ears, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" Its enemies were powerful Pharisees and scribes who plotted to kill its King.

But the mustard seed grows to a plant 8-12 feet high, "*larger than all the garden plants,*" so it is like a tree and functions as a tree. Jesus' disciples must have been amazed, or even in disbelief, that their small band of twelve would grow to be a big kingdom. Jesus then adds, "*the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*" He was referring back to Ezekiel 17:22-24, which says that God will take a small sprig or shoot or twig from a cedar tree and plant it in Israel. This small twig will become a new and noble cedar tree that produces fruit. Ezekiel then says, "*And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.*" In two passages, Ezekiel 31:6 and Daniel 12:4, 20-21, birds nesting on a tree refer to Gentile nations finding rest and safety under God's blessing. It is this rest, safety and blessing that those who belong to the kingdom of heaven – "*he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High – will abide in the shadow [of the wings] of the Almighty,*" his trustworthy refuge and fortress (Psa 91:1-2).

Therefore, both Jews and Gentiles, who used to be aliens outside the kingdom of God, will enjoy the blessings and fruits of being citizens of the kingdom under the tall mustard tree. That Tree is Christ, the King of the kingdom. And its citizens are "*a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" (Rev 7:9). You are a part of this multitude in this kingdom *now*, if you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Savior and King.

In the next parable, that of the Leaven in verse 33, Jesus explains further the growth of the kingdom. What is this thing called "leaven"? Leaven is not the same as yeast. In our Lord's Supper, we use bread which is made using yeast. But they are also unleavened. The difference is that in the ancient world, yeast was not common, so in order to get yeast, "leaven" was used. It was fermented dough, of which a tiny portion would be left from a previous dough. A household gets this little leaven, called a "starter," from neighbors, and then adds this to a new batch of dough, and so on. In this way, the household would never run out of leavened dough. In the parable, Jesus says that a woman took a little leaven as a starter and mixed it into about 50-60 pounds of flour. That's a lot of flour! She might be baking for a hundred people attending a big event, maybe even a wedding feast.

In Scripture, leaven or yeast is most often cited negatively, especially in reference to sin. Sin, like leaven, if left untouched and allowed to fester, will spread to many people. During the Old Testament Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, all leaven was removed from the house, including all bread that was baked from the old lump. So "unleavened" bread is not bread without yeast, but instead a fresh new batch of dough. This is the contrast that Paul speaks of between "old leaven" and "a new lump." In 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, Paul compares removing the openly unrepentant sinner from the church to the old ceremony of removing all leavened bread from all the houses of Israel. He commands us, "*Cleanse out the old leaven*" [because] *a little leaven leavens the whole lump.*" Like

the proverb, “One bad apple spoils the whole barrel.” Without church discipline, a little sin in the church will silently spread to the whole church, with serious consequences.

But “leaven” in our text is not referring to sin, but to the great expansion of the kingdom of God from its tiny beginnings. The kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus when he first came, preaching and teaching the gospel. It started as a tiny band of twelve disciples but expanded through the preaching and teaching of his gospel to all nations. Satan persecuted the kingdom for 300 years of Roman opposition. When violent attacks did not work, Satan worked inside the Church. For the next 1,200 years, Satan sent corrupt and murderous popes and clergy, so that the true Church was like a few small embers ready to be extinguished.

But in the sixteenth century, God again moved his true people to reignite the faith of his kingdom people. The Protestant Reformers led the Church back to the pure doctrines of the Scripture: Scripture is the final authority in the church, and salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone, not by works. So, in spite of all the persecution and martyrdom, today, Christian churches – whether open or hidden – are found in every corner of the world. Of all the religions of the world, Christianity has the most adherents.

Therefore, the kingdom of God is made up of people from all nations, tribes and languages of the world. It has no borders or walls. Its citizens may come from all ethnic races, but they are one people: God’s people, as Peter says, “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*” (1 Pet 2:9). Its language is one: the gospel of the kingdom. Its message is one: salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone.

When we gather in heaven for the wedding feast with Christ our Bridegroom, all Christians from all nations will be there: without need for passports, visas or any other travel permit. There will finally be a borderless nation, without the sinful leaven of racial, social, economic, political or any other kinds of discrimination. The only border or wall of this kingdom in heaven is the wall that separates the righteous from the wicked (Rev 21:12). Only righteous believers will be allowed to enter the gates of heaven. Outside the wall of the heavenly city are “*the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood*” (Rev 22:15).

But in the meantime, to advocate open borders, total equality in sharing resources, and worldwide peace is to dream like Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Adolph Hitler. These wicked rulers dreamt of heaven as Communist or Nazi utopia on earth in this age. But this dream will only be fulfilled in the age to come, when Christ returns from heaven, purges the world of all sin, and finally establishes his everlasting kingdom.

“He Sold Everything He Had and Bought the Treasure”

In the next two parables, Jesus explains that in addition to being without borders, the kingdom of heaven is a treasure without price. I’m sure all of us remember the 1989 movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.” What was Indiana Jones’ treasure hunt all about? It was about the “Holy Grail,” the cup Jesus used in the Last Supper and also the cup that was used to catch his blood at

the cross. All kinds of legends surround this cup and who possessed it, including Joseph of Arimathea, King Arthur, and the Knights Templar. Legend says that whoever drinks from this Holy Grail would gain eternal life. Indiana Jones wanted it. Can one put a price on eternal life?

But Jesus was talking about some other priceless treasure. The first was a treasure buried in a field that was found by a man. The man then sold all his possessions and bought the field. Why would a treasure be buried? In the ancient world, there were no banks to keep their treasures safely hidden. When there is war, for example, people would bury their treasures and flee. This is why there are so many buried ancient treasures. To make sure that he had everything covered, the man bought the whole field, instead of just unearthing the treasure. The second parable is about a pearl-collector who found “a pearl of great value,” and sold all his possessions to buy that pearl. Did you know that the most expensive natural single pearl is housed in Petaluma, California? It was discovered in 1990, weighs 470 carats and is valued at about \$9 million today.

But Jesus was talking about a priceless pearl, the kingdom of God. Why is the kingdom of God priceless? Because it involves life and death, and not just life and death, but eternal life and eternal death. Like Indiana Jones’ quest for the cup that gives eternal life, the kingdom of God gives eternal life to those who find it. Jesus also said, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*” (Matt 6:33). What do we seek in our lives? Is it delight in passions and riches, which will all pass away (1 John 2:15-17)? Do we worry too much about our basic needs of food, clothing and a roof over our heads? The antidote is not “Don’t worry, be happy.” The antidote is seeking first the kingdom of Christ and his righteousness.

And when we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, we will find all of Christ’s treasures, for Paul encourages us in Colossians 2:2–3 “*to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*” The only true and eternally-lasting treasure is found in Christ’s wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, Jesus commands us, “*lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matt 6:20-21). These treasures are serving Christ and his kingdom, his Church.

Therefore, our first priority is the kingdom of God and the righteousness of Christ, who saves us from sin and God’s eternal wrath in hell. And this brings us to our last point and parable.

“Angels Will Separate the Wicked from the Righteous”

Jesus says that at the end of this age, he will send his angels and gather every person who ever lived in this world. At that time, kingdom of heaven will be like a net that catches every kind of fish. The angels will then separate the bad fish from the good, throwing away the bad into the fiery furnace where they will be weeping and gnashing their teeth. This is unmistakable reference to eternal hell.

Who will be thrown into this eternal fire? Those who ignored, hated and rejected Christ and his kingdom by persecuting and murdering its citizens. This parable is like the Parable of the Wheat and Weed, where the owner of the field waited for the wheat and weed to grow and mature together

before he harvested it. And after the harvest, the weeds were separated from the wheat, and were thrown into a fiery furnace. They will include those who rejected and killed God's prophets and Jesus himself the way that his own hometown Nazareth did not believe and rejected him (verses 53-58). They will include those who persecute and martyr Christians in China, the Middle East and Africa. They will include those in the West who hate and blaspheme Christ and his Church today, and those who twist God's Word to approve of homosexuality and murder of unborn infants.

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ: The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom without borders and without price, for eternal life is priceless. But Jesus has a challenge to us in verse 52, *"Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* Christians are trained in the Scriptures, and the challenge for us is to share the treasures of the kingdom that we possess, both old and new, to our family and friends. Our old treasure is the teaching of the Old Testament, while our new treasure is the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles.

This is how we help them find eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. You don't need to have great faith like Abraham or the prophets or the Apostles to share the gospel to your neighbors. Jesus says that your faith can be as small as a mustard seed to move mountains (Matt 17:20). Your faith will always be mixed with worries, doubts and unworthiness, but in sharing your faith, the Spirit will accomplish what seems to be impossible for us: that of transforming unbelieving hearts. For in sharing the treasures of the kingdom, we are instruments of God in expanding his kingdom.