

Today

Jan/Feb 2019

refresh, refocus, renew

JESUS ON
MAIN STREET



ALSO: KINGDOM LIVING

Friends:

Last Christmas, I saw an image on the Internet showing Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus sitting on the sidewalk in front of a convenience store. The image was intended to give us a sense of what the first-century family might look like as refugees today. We know they were travelers in Bethlehem and exiles in Egypt, but what would they look like in Denver or Vancouver?



As an adult, Jesus of Nazareth spent a lot of time in various towns and villages. He taught on the mountains and plains, but also on the streets among the crowds. What if that happened today? What would Jesus look like on Main Street in your town as he talked about the kingdom of God?

This January, Beth Fellingner examines the stories of Jesus on a number of city streets, reflecting on the ways he encountered and dealt with everyday people going about their business.

Then in February, Dale Melenberg explores with us one of Jesus' favorite topics: the kingdom of God. We'll consider what God's kingdom might look like in our contemporary world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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"Jesus on Main Street"
Beth Fellingner



"Kingdom Living"
Dale Melenberg

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ReFrame
Media

february

Kingdom Living

Dale Melenberg

I was recently asked what I understood by *the kingdom of God* as it appears in the Bible. It was a good question—after all, people in the Bible had lots of different opinions about *the kingdom*. Even Jesus' followers had different expectations about it before Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Only when the Spirit of God came into people's hearts on Pentecost did they really begin to understand. In these devotions I'll aim for an answer that is not only biblical but also inspirational—to live out God's good and perfect will here “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Dale Melenberg is a second-career pastor. He received a theology degree through Calvin Theological Seminary and a doctorate of ministry degree at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is married to Gloria, and together they have raised three sons and are enjoying their four grandchildren. Growing up in an immigrant community shaped Dale's view of family, church, and community in a profound way that continues to inform his life-view toward kingdom living with God, neighbors, and the creation.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN US

"The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst." —Luke 17:20-21

Jesus began his ministry by saying exactly what John the Baptist said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2; see 4:17). And then later in his ministry Jesus added, "The kingdom of God is in your midst."

Let's take a few moments to reflect on that statement.

What does Jesus mean when he says, "The kingdom of God is in your midst?"

What do you see? Is it here? Within you? Among us?

What does the kingdom of heaven look like here and now?

Is what you are thinking similar to or different from what Jesus said: "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

By reflecting and talking about this, we begin to stir up wonder in our hearts and minds—what exactly does Jesus mean?

This month, let's join together in discovering what Jesus means in his many teachings about the kingdom, and how each of us can engage in kingdom living. We'll see how the kingdom of God is very important—even crucial—in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

Our Father in heaven, holy is your name! "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In Jesus, Amen.

ABLE TO RESPOND

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows. . . ."
—Mark 4:26-27

Four pictures hang together in a church I served as pastor. The pictures show the growth of a seed, as described in our verses today: the seed sprouts, the stalk grows, the head forms on the stalk, and eventually the full kernel develops. These pictures remind the church that we all grow in the Lord.

Jesus' parable of the growing seed is well illustrated in the growth of the early church. In 1 Corinthians 3:6 the apostle Paul says, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow."

A person can plant a seed, tend it, and watch it grow—all without knowing just how that happens. Even though scientists today can manipulate some things about plant genetics and growth, the process remains mysterious and can't be forced.

Similarly, we cannot force spiritual growth; we cannot make people grow spiritually. The way God works in the heart of an individual is mysterious. A person can read God's Word and be taught, but God's work in someone's heart is independent of human effort.

This kingdom parable illustrates for us that, by God's power, we are able to respond and grow. Because we are made by God, we are able to respond to his prompting, able to respond to God's Spirit. We can let the Holy Spirit work in our lives so that we will grow in him.

Father God, we thank you for the way you work in our lives. Grow us, Lord, through your Spirit and Word. In Jesus, Amen.

FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 5:3, 10

Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount begins with the blessing statements in our reading today. These have become known as the Beatitudes (from the Latin for "blessed"), and they are not only for the crowd Jesus spoke to that day, but also for us. Here Jesus declares that to some belong the kingdom of heaven: to "the poor in spirit" and to "those who are persecuted because of righteousness."

I like to think of these two groups as the forlorn and the forsaken.

Forlorn: All is lost—it's hopeless! What am I going to do?

Forsaken: Pushed beyond our limits, we feel like we are all alone.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes of the forlorn: "You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With

less of you there is more of God and his rule [in your life]." And of the forsaken he says, "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom."

None of us wants to be forlorn or forsaken, but it is often in the valleys, the trying times in our lives, that we find God finding us. As Psalm 23:4 says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We are blessed, knowing that the King is for us and his kingdom is within us.

Lord and Savior, thank you that you never leave us or forsake us, but instead have already given yourself for us. Amen.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

"Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands . . . will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 5:19

The heart of God's law is love. The law is a set of guidelines, given by a loving Father to his children for living in this world. In his teaching about the law, Jesus begins by telling people that he came to fulfill the law, not to do away with it. He came to show everyone how to live by the law of love.

He explains that it's important not to do away with even the smallest part of the law. And then he raises the bar by saying we should not only live by the law but also teach it. Jesus wants everyone to know how to live the best way, and that the best way is love.

Do you know the two greatest commandments? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31). These two com-

mands sum up the whole law of God for the best way of living.

Practice and teach God's law of love, and you will be great in the kingdom of heaven. May we find ourselves living and teaching by the radical love of Jesus. Life in the kingdom of heaven means not just believing in God's great love but also living by it.

Father God, thank you for revealing to us how to live in your kingdom here on earth. Help us to honor and show your amazing love in all we do. In Jesus, Amen.

SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM

"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."

—Matthew 6:33-34

We worry about our health and our wealth. We worry about our children and our parents. We worry! It is second nature to us. We worry because we care. We care about ourselves and about others. Who can fault us for that?

But Jesus says, "Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Seeking God's kingdom on earth is to love God, love neighbor, love self. Seeking God's righteousness means accepting all three—accept that God is Lord, that our neighbors are his children too, and that we are loved by God. Accepting and acting on these three aspects of the two great commandments brings peace in our hearts. If everything we do is seen and lived through

this lens, then we know that our days are in God's hands.

So focus first on the God who loves you, and who cares for the people you love. Seek first his kingdom and his way of righteousness every day. "'Seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

Lord God, we hold our hands open, entrusting all that we are and all that we hold dear to you as we seek you, your kingdom, and your righteousness. Help us to live with bold trust. In Jesus, Amen.

SURPRISE IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

"Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 8:11

We have a tendency to divide the world we live in. We divide it by race, by beliefs, by gender, by sexual orientation, by political party—and the list goes on. Sometimes Christians can be tempted to divide people by who they think is "in" the kingdom of heaven and who is not. But this story shows that God's ideas about who is included may not be what we expect.

Notice how Jesus responds to the faith of the centurion. He is amazed that this person shows more faith in him than any of his own people. "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith," says Jesus.

Jesus' encounters with the people of Israel in matters of faith often included individuals like the Pharisees, who tended to be self-righteous (Mark 7:5) and tried to test him (Luke 10:25). Then there were the

people of his hometown, who doubted he could be a prophet (Mark 6:1-6). There were also other skeptics who demanded a miracle to prove who he was (John 6:29-31). Even Jesus' disciples had weak faith at times in the midst of storms or other difficult circumstances (see Mark 4:40-41; Luke 9:40-41).

Jesus encourages us to have faith in him regardless of the circumstances we are in. He also reminds us that anyone who has faith in him, even those we might not expect, belongs to his kingdom.

Jesus, give us faith like that of the centurion, who saw that you have great authority. Indeed, you rule over all things in heaven and on earth. In your name we pray. Amen.

IS THE KINGDOM HERE?

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it."
—Matthew 11:12

John the Baptist was alone in prison, and he was wondering, "Is Jesus really the Messiah?" So even John wasn't always certain about the purpose of Jesus' mission.

King Herod had put John in prison, and that would have been a despairing place to be (see Mark 6:17-20). Despair can do strange things to people. It can lead us to question everything we have ever known as we wonder why we might be in the mess we are in.

Jesus' response to John's question takes us back to the prophet Isaiah, who foretold what would happen when the Messiah would come (Isaiah 29:18; 61:1). Jesus' answer also recalls that John's mission was to call people to repentance and prepare the way for the Messiah of God's kingdom, whom Jesus truly was. And

through the ministry of both John and Jesus, the kingdom of heaven was making advances, even though it was assaulted with violence.

The work of the kingdom continues despite opposition. Jesus does not promise that participating in the kingdom of God means having a comfortable life. John the Baptist died in prison. But we can expect that the kingdom will keep advancing. We may not be able to point and say "Here it is" or "There it is," but we do know it is within each of us, despite our circumstances.

Lord, even in our trouble and despair we are thankful that you have overcome the world. Continue to bless us in hard times and good, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

KINGDOM CONTESTED

"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." —Matthew 12:28

Have you ever paid careful attention to political elections, and specifically the political debates leading up to an election? Most often we see candidates putting one another down, even resorting to name calling. These leaders recognize and are motivated by the fact that their future depends on being the chosen one.

Jesus heals a deaf and mute man, a man with an evil spirit. The people who are watching begin to wonder if Jesus is the Messiah. The Pharisees see that this could affect their position of influence and power, so they automatically discredit Jesus. They realize that if indeed the Spirit of God is at work and the kingdom of heaven has come, then the Messiah-King is present and they are no longer in charge. So they suggest that Jesus is only able to do this miracle

because he is part of Satan's kingdom.

Notice how Jesus responds. He makes clear that the choice is significant; there is no middle ground. If the people are not for him, they are against him. The kingdom of God shares no ground with the devil.

In the way we interact with others each day, in the way we use our resources, we show whether we are for or against Jesus. It's important that each of us take time to consider which team we are a part of.

Lord Jesus, thank you for being our King. We are excited to be part of what you are doing here on earth. In your name we pray. Amen.

BUT NOT TO THEM

"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." —Matthew 13:11

Our verse for today is stated in a slightly different way in the gospel of Mark. In Mark 4:11, Jesus states, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables."

Have you ever tried to learn another language? That is not an easy task, but you can become fairly fluent if you put in the effort to learn. It is quite another challenge, though, to learn the subtle nuances and humor of a language. To get to that level, you usually need to immerse yourself in the culture and talk with the local people every day.

Jesus called his disciples, and they followed along with him as their teacher. They were willing to spend time with him and learn from him constantly. In fact, they spent all their time with him, and eventually they

learned and began to understand his purposes.

To those who are willing to live fully in his kingdom Jesus gives the secrets of the kingdom. But all who are not willing to turn to Jesus, and to ask and learn why he has come, will stand on the periphery, unable to understand the nuances, the mysteries.

Do you need to press further in? Do you need to spend more time listening to the whispers that Jesus speaks to your heart? He wants us to turn to him and be forgiven, and to have life to the full! This is the only condition for life in his kingdom.

Lord Jesus, I am willing.
Help me to press into you
and immerse myself in the
full life of your kingdom.
In your name, Amen.

SOWER, SEEDS, SOILS

"When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart."
—Matthew 13:19

Jesus begins this parable with a farmer scattering seed. The seed is good seed, the message of the kingdom of heaven. The seed falls into many different soils: pathway soil, rocky soil, thorn-infested soil, and good soil.

Though Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, we still wonder about many things. What exactly does it look like when the seed falls on good soil and produces a crop, "yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown"? The reader, the listener, wants to know if they are the good soil, producing the bountiful harvest Jesus describes.

Throughout his ministry Jesus gives many clues on what a life that produces a significant harvest might look like, but we can also consider the mission Jesus claims in Luke 4:18:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."

Because we are called to be like Jesus, his mission is our mission. And the Holy Spirit has been given to us, so we are called to go out and do the same.

Jesus, thank you for your Word! Thank you for your Spirit! I pray that my life will produce an abundant harvest for you, and that I may serve in your name. Amen.

SOWER, SEEDS, WEEDS

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field." —Matthew 13:24

Here we have another parable about sowing seed. This time the focus is on the kind of seed that is sown—and the plants that grow from it. Good wheat seed is planted in a field, and weeds are also sown. Given the choice to remove the weeds, the owner declines; wanting the wheat to grow, he decides to let the weeds remain. If the weeds were uprooted now, the wheat would also be uprooted.

The owner knows that at harvest time it will be easier to separate the wheat from the weeds. In the meantime, the wheat will grow as wheat, and the weeds will remain weeds. Let them grow to maturity, and then the two can be separated easily; the wheat's fruit is obvious in contrast with that of the weeds.

This is a picture of how God's Word and life grow in us while

we live each day in the field of his world. It is easy to fit in, to be like people around us. And when we are surrounded by the sin and evil of this world, we can be overcome with uncertainty. But our Lord knows us, and he chooses not to remove us from the field. He allows us to stand in contrast to the weeds, as we produce the crop we are intended for.

This parable comes to us as a message of encouragement: Trust the field owner; his love will see you through to maturity.

Lord, thank you for loving me. In all situations, help me remain confident of being who you created me to be. In your name, Amen.

MUSTARD SEEDS

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field."

—Matthew 13:31

In today's verses Jesus tells another seed parable—this time about a mustard seed. It is among the smallest of seeds.

We tend not to like things that are small. In many ways, we think "Bigger is better." The person with the big house and big bank account is seen as more important. The larger the portfolio or the position in society, the more attention we give and get. Everyone wants to be part of something big. Small is not valued, not to be taken serious. Small is inconsequential.

Though the mustard seed was the smallest of seeds known to Jesus' listeners, what would it do? Jesus said, "When it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree." Surprise! The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven may present itself

like a small seed, but it has the potential to grow huge—and even to spread everywhere.

We might think that the efforts of people presenting the kingdom are insignificant, but let's not overlook God's power potential. We are called to marvel at even the least presentation of the kingdom—to marvel and wonder what power and potential God has poured into it.

Remember that God changed the course of history with just a few believers, who shared the good news of Jesus with others, who spread it further and further. To God be the glory!

Lord we look eagerly for more and more delightful signs of your kingdom growing everywhere. Give us eyes to see, and hearts that rejoice! Amen.

TREASURED!

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."
—Matthew 13:44

Many of us have a box or drawer that we keep mementos in—photographs that bring back fond memories, cards with kind and meaningful words written on them, trinkets given by a loved one, or maybe a ribbon, a lock of hair, or a pressed flower. What is in your treasure box?

The Israelites had a history of being conquered and plundered by neighboring nations. Whenever war broke out and the enemy advanced, farmers would hide their valuables in a field in case their house was raided. Often, sadly, the family was swept away by the invaders and their treasure remained hidden until someone might discover it years later—usually while plowing the field or digging for some other reason.

Jesus used that scenario as the backdrop for this parable about

the kingdom. And when the man found the treasure, Jesus said, "He hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought the field."

So what is the value of the kingdom? To the one who finds it, says Jesus, it is worth more than everything he or she has.

Now consider this: The kingdom of heaven's value is your life, paid for by the life of Jesus. In his joy, upon finding the lost treasure that is you, Jesus went and sold all he had so that he could have you!

Lord Jesus, thank you that you treasure me so much that you gave your life for mine. In your name, Amen.

GREAT VALUE!

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls."
—Matthew 13:45

Pearls are something my mother wore on occasions that called for her finest dress. There is something elegant about a string of pearls. Hers were not real pearls, since our family could not afford that luxury, but my mother still wore her pearls with grace.

A merchant looking for fine pearls, Jesus says, is like the kingdom of heaven. If you are a merchant, your business depends on the skill of knowing the value of the goods you buy and sell.

Jesus says this merchant is looking for fine pearls. Do we look for fine pearls, or do we settle for what the world tells us we need: bigger houses, more exotic vacations, more and more stuff—all of which decays or is soon forgotten? If a merchant is someone who profits from the buying and selling of things, then why would the merchant

in our verse for today sell everything he had in order to buy just one pearl of great value?

Again, this is about setting all your other values aside and putting God's kingdom first in your life. Is the kingdom of heaven more valuable than the life you have now? Absolutely, for it means full, flourishing life forever! Do all you can to obtain this pearl of great value.

What's more, it's a free gift through Jesus by God's grace!

Lord, I see the pearl you are offering, and you have already paid the price for it. Thank you! I want to seek your kingdom and your righteousness, and I want my family and friends to see that there is nothing else like it. In your name, Amen.

THE NET

"The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish."
—Matthew 13:47

I remember fishing with my brother-in-law on his commercial fishing boat. It was a gill netter, and we were fishing for salmon. We laid out the half-mile-long net into the water across the current and then spooled it back into the boat, anticipating that we had caught our salmon. But on that day the tide must have been very low, because we caught mostly mud sharks (dogfish). The ratio of mud sharks to salmon was forty-two to one. We placed the mud sharks in a pile off to the side, while the prized salmon went into a special container to keep them fresh.

Jesus says that "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish." Then he says that the net was found to have both bad fish and good fish—

like a catch of both mud sharks and salmon.

Fish do not know if they are going to be kept or discarded. But Jesus knows his fish. He can see through our facades; he knows our hearts; he knows the righteous from the fake-righteous.

Good fish and bad fish, wheat and weeds—Jesus uses these images to remind us that he sees what is in our hearts.

Jesus, break our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. Put your Spirit in us and save us, we pray. In your name, Amen.

A STOREROOM OF OLD AND NEW TREASURES

"A disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

—Matthew 13:52

"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked his disciples. This question is meant for us too. Have we understood all that Jesus has spoken about the kingdom of heaven?

After the disciples say they have understood, Jesus tells them that a disciple in the kingdom of God is like the owner of a house.

In first-century Israel, the owner of a house was the patriarch who took care of his whole family and his entire household, including all the servants who lived under his roof. This owner was responsible for providing whatever was needed for his whole household to prosper and flourish.

If we think of the Scriptures as a storeroom, we can quickly see that its old treasures are time-tested lessons. But what are the new treasures? Well,

in Matthew 5:17 Jesus states that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And in his Sermon on the Mount he ramped up the expectations of the law's commands.

Jesus reveals the heart of God the Father, who wants his children to live well and flourish. So he reminds us that it is our turn to use both the old and new treasures from his storeroom.

In what ways can you do that today?

Jesus, we seek your wisdom as we take on the responsibility of sharing your new and old treasures with the world around us. Help us to support the flourishing of the world with those treasures. Amen.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." —Matthew 16:19

Jesus tells his disciples they will be given the keys of the kingdom. Amazing! When you are given the keys to someone's house, it means you have access to all the resources that are locked within—and you are responsible to take care of them.

It's interesting that, just before this, Jesus tells his disciples that the gates of hell will not be able to stand against the building up of Christ's church. What does that mean?

Jesus wants us to know that his kingdom resources of love, generosity, forgiveness, peace, kindness, and more are available for us to use as he builds his church in this world. As we use these good things on earth, no evil force can withstand their power. Jesus also wants us to know that as we freely use his resources on earth, the

powers of good will be loosed in heaven and poured out on earth. But if we restrict their use on earth and do not freely share them, they will also be held back in heaven.

May the kingdom of heaven be on earth as it is in heaven.

We have been given the keys to the resources of heaven. How thrilling! And what great responsibility! How will you use them today?

Lord, thank you for the keys of the kingdom. May we be generous stewards of your resources so that the barriers of evil will literally fall before our ongoing acts of kindness, love, forgiveness, patience, and goodness—by the power of your name. Amen.

THE SON OF MAN COMING

"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

—Matthew 16:28

Jesus encouraged his disciples to give up their lives for the kingdom. Do that, he says, and you will live.

These words are intense—even harsh, like bad-tasting medicine. But the effect is life-altering—the gaining of our soul.

What can we possibly give in exchange for our soul? We must deny our own pride and ego. We must deny that we can manage this life on our own. We must deny our sinful impulses to do things our way. We must deny our very selves. We must take on ourselves the cross that Jesus bore for us—and follow him.

Jesus went the way of the cross to die, to lose his life—only to take it up again. We are invited to do the same. And we will be saved. For whoever loses their life of sinful human impulses—pleasures, pursuits, pride—for

Jesus, will find life to the full. (See John 10:10.)

Jesus asks us to receive his grace, the Father's love and mercy extended through him, and to simply follow after him.

Maybe it's not as difficult as we think.

Jesus, we want to see your kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven. We want to witness to the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, revealing the Father's glory for all to see. In your powerful name we pray. Amen.

ATTITUDE AND ACTION

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants."
—Matthew 18:23

This parable presents a stark story of how not to act in the kingdom of heaven. In fact, acting like the unforgiving servant would prevent us from entering or remaining in the kingdom! This teaching is harsh indeed—but that is mainly a reflection on the actions of the servant who refuses to forgive another.

The parable starts out with the words "The kingdom of heaven is like a king," and it ends with "this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless . . ." So although this may be called the parable of the unmerciful servant, it is actually a parable about the forgiving King and Father of us all. The king is merciful in forgiving the large debt, which reminds us that the Lord, our King, has canceled our debt of sin. This parable reminds us that God is both merci-

ful and forgiving, and Jesus is teaching that we should be like the King. We are to be merciful and forgiving—from the heart—just as God is merciful and forgives us.

God knows this is a challenging and difficult task! When we have been hurt by others, we usually want to hurt them back. But, as we are reminded in Romans 12:19, God says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay."

So we are called to forgive. And when we forgive others, we are actually freed to love and care about them too.

God, our King, forgive us our debts, we pray, as we forgive our debtors. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S FREE GIFT

"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard."

—Matthew 20:1

In the city where I live, there's a place where unemployed people gather every morning. It's often called "Cash Corner." The unemployed need some income to make ends meet, and they are willing to work. Construction managers drive their pickup trucks to Cash Corner and select from the unemployed when they need some additional workers for the day. The managers typically select the biggest and strongest first, hoping for an honest day's work.

This is similar to the scene Jesus describes as he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard." The surprising part of this story is that the landowner went back to select more workers—not once, not twice, but three more times. And the last time he went,

there was only one hour of work left in the day! There was also not much promise of strength and ability in the last workers to be chosen.

Jesus wants us to know that no matter when you enter the kingdom, and no matter what your own strength and ability are, each person receives the same benefit at the end of the day. Jesus, the landowner, gives each of us the same gift of grace. And this is not something we can earn or pay off by working in God's kingdom. The gift of grace is a true gift! And we are called to share God's love and grace freely with others.

Thank you, Lord, for your gift of grace. May we accept it with gratitude for your amazing love, and may we learn to share it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE SURPRISING SPIRIT

"I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. . . . No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."
—John 3:3-5

Jesus speaks with Nicodemus about being born again through the Spirit of God. He says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"Nicodemus," Jesus seems to be saying, "the Spirit is working in you; otherwise you would not be able to see the kingdom of God and its works of power." And yet, twice in this passage, Jesus' words go right over Nicodemus's head.

Still, as Jesus explains his work as the Son of Man, his words to Nicodemus are clear: "Everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

This leads into what may be the best-known verse in the Bible: John 3:16—"God so loved the world that he gave his one and

only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

That day Nicodemus learned about the Spirit of God, who gives new birth to eternal life—all made possible through the work of Christ. The Spirit gives us faith (belief and trust) in Jesus as Savior and helps us see that God loves us unconditionally and extravagantly. This is the way God calls us to participate in his kingdom, enjoying full life forever!

Father, thank you for your Son and for your Spirit! We pray that by your gifts of grace we may have full life with you and with all who believe in Jesus—and also with this world that you love so much! Amen.

HEAD AND HEART

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered."

—Matthew 21:31

The chief priests and elders of the people figured that they had all the authority for teaching in the temple, so they did not want to recognize Jesus' authority.

Questioning authority can get sticky. The ones questioning authority are not going to accept the truth even if they are proved wrong, because they won't believe that the person they are questioning has due authority! It is a no-win situation.

Nonetheless, Jesus answered the religious leaders with a question about the work of John the Baptist, and that put them in a bind. Jesus painted them into a corner. But not wanting to leave them there, he also asked, "What do you think?" Then he told this story about two sons.

Jesus pointed out that the problem here was about obedience rather than authority (note that obedience is a response

to someone in authority). He asked, "Which of the two sons did what his father wanted?"

The elders and priests recognized that the first son obeyed his father. Then came Jesus' authoritative response: prostitutes and tax collectors who were obeying God in repentance were entering the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders. Moreover, like the second son, the religious leaders were being disobedient. They refused to listen to God's Word and repent.

Jesus wants us to know that obeying God and recognizing his authority is what counts in his kingdom—and with the Spirit's help, we can be faithful.

Father, may we love and serve you with all that we have and are. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son."
—Matthew 22:2

The food was prepared for the feast. Everything was ready. And everyone who was invited was told it was time to come. But they chose not to.

What if we were invited to the banquet of a great leader or king? Would we decide we were too busy to go? Would we decide not to go because we didn't like that leader's policies?

The king in the parable then invited everyone else in the kingdom—the nobodies, the good and the bad, homeless people, illegal immigrants, the working poor, criminals, traveling tourists—everyone his messengers could find on the streets. All were invited—and the wedding hall was filled!

This parable about a wedding feast for the son of a king is about Jesus. The Lord Jesus is speaking about his heavenly Father inviting everyone to

a banquet of great blessings to celebrate the joining of his Son, Jesus, as a bridegroom, with his church, the people of God, for everlasting, abundant life together.

The question to ponder is this: Are you going to accept the invitation?

You are invited! Everyone has been invited! All we need in order to have full, abundant life is to accept the King's invitation.

Heavenly King, I pray that my priorities will be kingdom priorities. I do not want to miss your invitation! I want to be at the banquet for your Son, Jesus. Thank you for inviting me into your kingdom. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PREPARED AND FAITHFUL

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom."

—Matthew 25:1

Another wedding, another feast. In this parable, ten girls wait eagerly to meet the bridegroom. When he arrives, the banquet will begin. The girls wait, and wait, and wait . . . and then fall asleep—all ten of them.

When the call finally comes, "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" the girls awaken from their sleep, rub their eyes, and trim the wicks on their lamps. They want to help light the way for the bridegroom to enter the wedding festivities. They want to be part of the procession, part of the celebration, part of the big entrance.

But five of them have to drop out of the gathering crowd. They are not well prepared; they have run out of oil, so they have to go and try to buy more.

This parable is about being prepared and faithful. Are you prepared and ready to meet

Jesus, the bridegroom who is coming? You can be assured of saying yes to this question if you believe and trust in Jesus himself.

And are you able to wait and persevere in faith for the Lord to come? We cannot rely on a friend's faith, or the faith of our parents. We can only truly rely on the strength of faith that Jesus provides, and he gives that through his Spirit—in abundance, as much as we need!

Lord Jesus, I want to be a light for you, prepared and faithful in all I do. Help me through daily conversations with you to stay fueled and trimmed and bright, until you come again. Amen.

COME AND SHARE

"Again, [the kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them."
—Matthew 25:14

"Come and share your master's happiness!" That is what the master says to the two servants who managed their talents well.

In this parable the master not only says "Well done," but he also adds a reward, an invitation: "Come and share your master's happiness!"

That's quite the invitation for a master to extend to a servant! The servant is not likely even to expect praise for a job well done; after all it is his duty to serve to the best of his ability. But to also be welcomed in to share in his master's happiness—that is unheard of!

Yet that's the way it is for us. Our Lord and Master expects us to live faithfully and loyally as stewards of the resources and talents he has provided us. But, even more, he also gives us the ability to do these

things. Have you ever made a meal for someone who needed support? Or have you visited a person confined to their home? Or have you housed someone who needed a place to sleep? That was the work of the Spirit of God in you, showing others his love.

God even gives us a feeling of well-being when we do something good for someone. How awesome that he still shows us we have done well and that he invites us to share in his happiness now and forever.

Share God's love with a neighbor today, and share in God's blessing and happiness!

Lord, thank you for your love, and guide us to share it freely. In Jesus, Amen.

THE UNKNOWNING

"The King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'"

—Matthew 25:34

In this parable we see a picture of the end times. We listen as the King, Jesus himself, returns and gathers all the nations before him. Then he separates people individually as a shepherd would do with sheep and goats.

And we wonder, of course, "Am I a sheep or a goat?"

Jesus says to the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." Notice that the sheep are astounded by the reason they are given this great reward. They fed the hungry, clothed the naked, invited the stranger, comforted the sick and imprisoned, and it seems they didn't even realize they were living out Jesus' kingdom values as they did those things.

Perhaps showing Christ's love everywhere had become so natural that they didn't realize they were doing it.

This parable also shows that Jesus isn't fooled by false people who only call him "Lord" and do not live by his values.

Here we are reminded that when we truly believe in Jesus as Savior, his Spirit, who gives us that belief and faith, motivates us to share his love also. With the Spirit at work in us, doing good becomes almost second nature—and this is all by God's grace!

Jesus, you came from heaven to earth to show us the way. Guide us each day, we pray, to serve you by showing your love to others—all by the power of your Spirit in us. Amen.

FOLLOW ME

"Go and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."
—Luke 9:60, 62

Throughout the Old Testament we see God shaping his children, asking them to follow his lead, instructing them to obey, requiring their commitment.

Jesus does the same here. "Follow me," he says to the disciples. "Follow me," he says to a man walking alongside him. "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God," he says to a man who says he must bury his father.

Jesus calls for commitment. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Jesus asks us to be all in, to invest ourselves fully. There's no turning back, no second thoughts.

Have you made commitments and then backed out? Relational commitments, job commitments, volunteer commitments? Sometimes when

the going gets tough, people just drop out.

God challenges us up front: Commit now, fully. He wants to make sure we know that this is a serious commitment. He is not calling us to be rude to our loved ones or to abandon our family members who might depend on us. But the commitment to live for him is not something we can do half-heartedly. Jesus has given his all for us, and he calls us to live for him with all of our being—with our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Do you hear him saying, "Follow me"?

Lord Jesus, give us the strength to commit fully to you, and the courage to follow you, no matter the cost. In your name, Amen.

A KINGDOM AND PRIESTS

[Jesus Christ] has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.
—Revelation 1:6

Jesus now sits at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. Jesus is “the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Jesus oversees his kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

It is Jesus who loves us and frees us. It is Jesus who tells us that the kingdom of heaven is near. It is Jesus who tells us it is here! And it is Jesus who gives us the kingdom and makes us priests within it.

What is a priest? A priest is a mediator between others and God. Priests live between God and humanity: representing God to humanity, and representing humanity to God. That is our role in the kingdom here on earth. We are go-betweens who can introduce other people to God and help them grow in their relationship with God.

Let’s close with this prayer that Jesus, our Mediator, taught us, and think about how we can share Jesus with others.

Our Father in heaven, worthy and holy is your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day what we need for today.

Forgive us our faults and sins, as we forgive those of others.

Let us not stray from you, but keep us from temptations and all the deceptions of the evil one.

For yours is the kingdom, on earth and in heaven, and yours is the power and the glory forever. Amen!



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