

THE RADICAL RABBI: RADICAL SNAPSHOTS (Matthew 13:24-53; Mark 4:26-34)

5.16.21

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary defines a “snapshot” as “an informal photograph taken quickly.” We are going to be looking at some “snapshots” today that Jesus made, through His parables, to help explain the kingdom of heaven in a quick and simple way. This was not some seminary theology class, but rather simple everyday people gathered around Jesus as He taught the truths of His Father’s kingdom by means of the “snapshots” we call parables.

Now, just by way of reminder, there are certain things we need to keep in mind when looking at Christ’s parables:

- 1) A parable is “a story in which something familiar explains something unfamiliar.” The Greek word for “parable” literally means “to place alongside,” suggesting some level of comparison between two things that are alike in some way; in the case of Christ’s parables, the idea was to tie something commonplace with a deep, profound spiritual truth, and to do it by means of a picture of something to which everybody in His audience could immediately relate.
- 2) The parables that Jesus created were always grounded in reality; there were never any fantasy elements or talking animals or anything like that. All of Jesus’ parables, no matter the point, were always placed in real life.
- 3) Parables became pretty much His only means of teaching once the religious leaders had publicly rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah.
- 4) The parables always came with a promise from Christ to His audience: **“Whoever has ears, let them hear”** — **Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:43b**. The idea was that, if people were perplexed by a parable, they could pursue the meaning of that parable from Christ Himself. Jesus, by His use of parables of His primary form of teaching, was wanting the parables to entice people to want to know more. People who rejected Him — particularly the religious leaders — would feel no incentive to investigate further.

So, as we prepare for a look at some of the “snapshots” of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus continued to present, **let’s look first to the Lord in prayer.**

TEXTS (Matthew 13:24-53; Mark 4:26-34)

Now, before we go any further, we also need to make sure we know what we are talking about when we mention the “kingdom of heaven.” This is the kingdom that began to make itself known when Jesus began His public ministry with the words: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”** — **Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:17b** — the period of time we are focusing on in our look at the “Radical Rabbi.” Through Jesus Christ, the kingdom of heaven came into human history, forcing Satan and his evil kingdom into retreat. This kingdom anticipates the eventual complete triumph of God and the arrival of the perfect, eternal kingdom of heaven ruled by God over a new heaven and a new earth.

Now Jesus is in full-on teaching mode (having just completed the parable of the sower and the seed) but, as He tells these latest wonderful stories, it is almost like He has pulled out a photo album to show everybody; this particular album is called “The Kingdom of Heaven.” Now imagine Jesus coming into a room full of His followers. They notice that He seems to be carrying something. As they look closer, they see that it is a photo album. Now only Jesus knows the photos inside; only He knows what they contain and, more importantly, what they mean. So, as He sits down and carefully opens the album, people start gathering around Him, closer and closer, so that everyone can see. As they begin to train their eyes on the beautiful pictures inside, first one, then another, points and asks, “What’s this picture? Ooh, look at that one! Hey, what do you think’s happening there? Please, Jesus, tell us about these pictures; we’ve never seen anything like them.” So, one photo at a time, as everybody crowds around to hear His descriptions, Jesus begins explaining each picture, in simple ways that His audience can understand. That’s what parables do. So now, let’s join the crowd, and listen as Jesus shares His “snapshots” of the kingdom of heaven. Christ strings several “snapshots” together so that His audience can get some very clear ideas of what the kingdom of heaven is really all about.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn’” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:24-30.

Snapshot #1: Jesus begins telling the stories about the “Kingdom of Heaven” with a “snapshot” centered around a farmer who sowed some Grade-A wheat seed into his field. As he retired for the evening, he was already excited about the crop he expected to harvest. But while he and the rest of his household were sleeping, an “enemy” sneaked into his field and sowed weeds into the same soil that had received the wheat seeds. Then that enemy left, as quietly as he had arrived. Now his evil work wasn’t even discovered until the wheat began to emerge from the soil. The farmer’s servants noticed that, along with the wheat sprouting, weeds were sprouting, too. They ran to the farmer to tell him. “You planted good stuff, sir; where did these weeds come from?”

The farmer, surveying his fields, answered simply: “An enemy, somebody opposed to what we are trying to do, did this.”

“So, what do we do now?” the servants wondered. “Should we just go ahead and yank the weeds out?”

“No,” said the farmer. “In the process of getting rid of the weeds, you might damage the wheat as well. Why wreck the good in the process of getting rid of the bad? Tell you what;

here's what we're going to do. Let's just let everything keep growing. Then, when my harvesters come, I'll tell them to gather up the weeds first; I'll have them tie them into bundles and then have them burned. Then I will have them harvest the wheat and store that in my barns."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:31-32.

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." — Jesus Christ, Mark 4:30-32.

Snapshot #2: A second snapshot of the kingdom of heaven concerns the tiniest seed the people of that day would have known: the mustard seed. A mustard seed is incredibly small and, yet, some Galilean mustard trees growing from that tiny start have been measured as tall as 15 feet. Even at its usual height — about four feet — it was large enough to allow birds to build nests, or at least to rest in it as a perch.

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:33.

Snapshot #3: A third snapshot of the kingdom involved a woman kneading yeast into a large quantity of dough until the yeast completely permeated every bit of that dough.

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open My mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world" — Matthew 13:34-35 (quoting Psalm 78:2).

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when He was alone with His own disciples, He explained everything — Mark 4:33-34.

Because of the leadership's public rejection of Jesus, He clothed His teachings, so to speak, in the guise of parables — simple little illustration of profound spiritual and heavenly truths. This had been prophesied in the OT, where the writer of Psalm 78 was inspired to make note of this particular aspect of the coming Messiah's ministry. But for all those who wanted to understand, both the Twelve as well as any other followers, Jesus was more than ready to "lift the veil" on the parable to reveal the hidden meanings in every last bit of glorious detail.

Then He left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The

Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear” — Matthew 13:36-43.

Now this particular picture of the farmer sowing his seed, and an enemy trying to destroy that crop by sowing weeds, was so vividly beautiful, so exquisite in its detail that, after the initial crowds had left, the disciples wanted to know more. In His response, Jesus identified all the “players” in the story: The farmer was the Son of Man. His field was the world, and the good seed was the people of the kingdom. The weeds were the people of the evil one, and the guy doing that sowing was the devil. The harvest represented the end of the age, and the ones doing the harvesting were angels. At the end of the age, the Son of Man will send out His angels into the field, and they will find and weed out everything that causes sin and does evil. Their destination? The blazing furnace, described as a place of incredible pain, signified by weeping and gnashing of teeth. But what is left will be glorious — the righteous, shining just like the sun, dwelling forever in the kingdom of heaven.

Now the next parables appear to be ones told only to the disciples that followed Jesus into the house so, following His explanation of the parable of the weeds, He continued, showing more “snapshots”: ***“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” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:44.***

Snapshot #4: The fourth snapshot this incredible album told about a man who discovered a treasure in a field. Now history gives us some interesting background to this particular parable. Back in the day, due to the constant unknowns of wars, changes in governments and so on, it is thought that the wealthy would have dealt with their wealth in three (3) particular ways: They would use part of their wealth for doing business, another part would be converted into precious stones in case there was ever a need to flee the area and, lastly, they would bury a part of their wealth in a safe place. However, if the wealthy one passed away, it was possible that the exact location of their “buried treasure” would be lost. So, when this man stumbles upon this treasure, he does everything he can to make that field, and its treasure, completely his.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:45-46.

Snapshot #5: This parable focuses on a businessman, a merchant, and his discovery of a pearl beyond anything he has seen before. Now this guy knows value when he sees it; it is his profession to seek the most excellent of pearls wherever he can find them. Great skill was required to accurately judge the value of a pearl in areas of shape, tint and smoothness, as well as inspecting it for any defects. In the ancient world, pearls were viewed with profound admiration, so this guy is trying to find pearls that will impress the most cultivated tastes. But in this case, he comes across a pearl whose brilliance is so

absolutely stunning to him, that he, like the man stumbling across the buried treasure in the field, does whatever he has to, to claim ownership of this pearl.

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 13:47-50.

Snapshot #6: The sixth snapshot that Christ shared that day told the story of a great catch of fish and of how, following the catch, the fish would be sorted. Any fish that were judged to be too small or inedible were thrown away; only those of value, those found to be pleasing to the fisherman — those that could be sold for profit or eaten — were kept, to be collected in baskets.

“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, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come” — Mark 4:26-29.

Snapshot #7: The last snapshot reveals that, whether they are being watched or not, planted seeds produce a crop that is eventually ready to be harvested. It is a process that essentially runs all on its own.

And now Jesus directly addresses His followers, much like a teacher may address the class after an intense session of instruction: ***“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked. “Yes,” they replied. He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become 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.” When Jesus had finished these parables, He moved on from there — Matthew 13:51-53.***

Christ is defining a “teacher of the law” not as would have been understood as part of the religious leadership, but rather as one who’s being a teacher is founded on being a disciple of the kingdom of the heaven. Jesus makes a point of telling the disciples that their understanding of these things He’s been teaching is not the end of the process. Rather, it is a beginning, where they now become “the owner of a house,” who will bring out teachings, some old and some new, to display to those around them, to the growth and extension of the kingdom, for the honor and glory of the King Himself.

APPLICATION

What a wonder it must have been to hear Jesus describe these wonderful snapshots that He shared with that crowd. But that being said, what does it all mean? Well, let’s look again at those “snapshots” and see what is really behind them:

Snapshot #1: In the kingdom of heaven, God knows every detail of what is happening in His field. There are actually recorded examples in history of the very thing happening to somebody that Jesus tells of in this parable — of someone attempting to sabotage

somebody's good crop with a secret planting of weeds; today we would probably call this "bioterrorism." The seemingly curious response of the farmer to his servants that, even after correctly identifying the culprit, to simply let the weeds be, that at the harvest they will be dealt with, speaks to the fact that the Son of Man is intimately aware of everything that has gone on in His field; nothing will catch Him by surprise. While people may fool the family of God, Christ sees every counterfeit growth in the family. He knows what's real, and He knows what's fake; as God Himself had said through the prophet Jeremiah: ***"My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from Me, nor is their sin concealed from My eyes"*** — ***God speaking, Jeremiah 16:17***. And the weeds, intended by the enemy to do damage, will do nothing to the harvest the Son of Man intends. The weeds will wind up in flames; the harvest, in the King's barns, to be treasured forever.

Snapshot #2: In the kingdom of heaven, growth is always amazing — because God is the grower. The parable of the mustard seed is such a great picture for the growth of the church. The kingdom of heaven initially started out as only 12 guys. Three hundred years later, it was the religion of the world's greatest empire. Today it is the largest faith on the planet. Because God is the "engine" that drives the growth, we should not be surprised by the growth that Christianity has attained. As Gabriel expressed to Mary: ***"[W]ith God nothing will be impossible"*** — ***Luke 1:37 (NKJV)***. And yet, we know that Jesus did not come to this world to start a religion; He came to establish a relationship between each human being and God Himself. Jesus would be the means through which that relationship would be established and, in that context as well, what starts out so small, can grow into a faith that can even move mountains — including mountains of stubbornness or pride, or selfish, sinful behavior. God can grow in anybody something extraordinary!

Snapshot #3: In the kingdom of heaven, God wants to fill every bit of everyone with Himself. This little one-sentence parable presented such a common picture that nothing more needed to be added. But while the parable of the mustard seed highlighted outer growth, the parable of the yeast highlights inner growth. Particularly notice Christ's line that the yeast was kneaded ***until it worked all through the dough,*** very much the idea that Paul presented to the Colossian church when he said: ***[I]n Christ you have been brought to fullness*** — ***Paul, Colossians 2:10a***. The idea is of complete fulfillment, that there is no part of the dough that has not been infiltrated by the yeast, to allow it to do what the baker has in mind. It brings up an appropriate question: Have we allowed God to fully, completely infiltrate our lives? Have we allowed God to fully, completely touch every area of our lives? If we compartmentalize our faith to be only what happens within these walls on a Sunday morning, that is religion. The idea is of being completely worked over by the Holy Spirit, that we may be in every moment becoming what God has intended — building a relationship. To use another analogy, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to be the filter through which every moment of our lives are viewed. That's the goal — is that what is happening? Is that the greatest desire of our relationship to God through Jesus Christ, that we would become His most pleasing handiwork?

Snapshot #4: In the kingdom of heaven, God's word is a treasure beyond comprehension. This parable speaks of the riches of the word of God. Many are the people who have walked through this field and remained completely oblivious to the treasure that is available for all to find. It is not the buying itself that should be focused on; rather, it is the excitement of the discovery of riches that prompts this man to do all he can to ensure that he will never be separated from this treasure. As Jesus said so appropriately: ***“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” — Jesus Christ, Luke 12:34 (KJV).*** Christ by this parable is also asking us: How valuable to us is God's Word? Do we recognize it as the infinitely rich treasure that it is?

Snapshot #5: In the kingdom of heaven, God Himself is a treasure beyond comprehension or comparison. This parable is the picture of somebody who knows what he is looking for; he is a man familiar with the “finer things” of life. But his value systems become completely undone when he discovers this pearl, representing a treasure like none other. No matter what he has known and thought valuable, his discovery makes all those other ideas fade away. His only focus now is on doing whatever is necessary to acquire this greatest treasure of life. Paul related that same experience to the church at Philippi: ***[W]hatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ — Paul, Philippians 3:7-8.*** Again, the question presents itself: Is God, is Jesus Christ, our life's greatest treasure? How are we living each day to reflect that?

Snapshot #6: In the kingdom of heaven, God will be judge. There is a coming judgment, where everybody will be “assigned” to eternal destinations based upon their righteousness (being indwelt by Jesus Christ) or their wickedness (being indwelt by their sins alone). That sorting, that judgment, is promised by God Himself to take place. As King Solomon wrote at the very end of Ecclesiastes: ***God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil — Ecclesiastes 12:14.***

Snapshot #7: In the kingdom of heaven, God's growth is always under God's control. This final little parable brings with it a wonderful message: We don't have to think about anything as seed planters other than with being faithful to the moment, being faithful with the seed which the Lord has presented to us. No matter where God has planted ministry, through the entire history of the church, as Paul said so simply to the Corinthian church: ***[Whoever] planted the seed in [the] hearts, and [whoever] watered it, but it was God who made it grow — Paul, I Corinthians 3:6 (NLT).*** But because God is the one who brings the growth, that growth happens on His schedule, in His timeframes — meaning that results are a matter of trusting God to be true to His word versus our looking for immediate results and demanding progress.

CONCLUSION

As we close, just a brief picture of how this all comes together. It was a little bit of chaos at home this week: Kyle wound up going to the ER followed by two nights in the hospital, which obviously had Hayley a bit on edge. Then there are all the concerns about aging

parents that are ongoing. As I was driving someplace during my time home (I don't even remember, I did so much driving over those two days), I was letting myself get caught up in the chaos more than I should. Anyway, I have satellite radio in my car, so I turned on a station called "The Message," which features contemporary praise music. And what came on was a song I had never heard before: "See the Victory" by a group called Elevation Music. And even though the song was a new one to me, the lyrics of the chorus grabbed me:

*"I'm gonna see a victory,
I'm gonna see a victory
For the battle belongs to you, Lord."*

So much cool in that moment. First of all, such wonderful lyrics of promise: I absolutely will be seeing a victory. Why? Because the battle belongs to You (present tense), Lord. It's His possession. The victory's already won, the war's over. And second, God met me where I am. Did you hear that? God met me where I am. I didn't have to be in a great mood, or cleaned up, or even seeking Him in that moment. He sought me. Wow!

How can I not be excited to serve a God like that? How can I not be excited to be a member of the kingdom of heaven serving a God like that? He's a God who knows every detail of what is happening, a God who creates amazing growth throughout His kingdom, a God who seeks to fill each one of us in the kingdom with Himself, a God who authored both a word and a life beyond comprehension, a God who will fairly and with complete justice judge everyone — no exceptions, and a God who has everything completely under His perfect, sovereign, loving control. How could I ever imagine a King, a Lord, a God, greater than that?

That's some of what is found in a photo album called "The Kingdom of Heaven." And like the old hymn says: *"To God be the glory; great things He has done!"* But there is still so much more to be found, to be treasured, to leave us in awe. In two weeks, we'll be back. Let's pray!