To Tell a Tale: The Householder Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:17-20

September 1, 2024 Memory Verse: Revelation 21:5a

**SLIDE 1**

Today we reach the end of Matthew 13 and we consider the final parable that Jesus shares with his disciples. It is a parable that is easy to overlook. As we have seen, each of the preceding parables revealed some truth about the kingdom of heaven and began with Jesus saying the introductory phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is like”…Here in Matthew 13:51 the setup is a little different. Instead of the kingdom of heaven phrase Jesus opens with a question:

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“Have you understood all these things?” Now by “all these things” Jesus is referring to his litany of parables that he has just told them. “All these things” refers to the various facets of the kingdom of heaven that they have just heard. That same kingdom of heaven that, we as humans, will never fully understand. That same eternal, infinite kingdom that we experience in this life, but yet not in full. That same unfailing kingdom that is the Church and yet as the Church, sometimes we fail. That same kingdom of which we are a part and yet, at the same time, we are stuck in this world. And to make matters worse, Jesus has decided to let us know all about this kingdom through a series of confusing stories that are really only meant to be understood by those who have ears to hear. So like a calculous professor who just flew through the final chapter of the textbook, Jesus looks at his students and asks, “You got all that?”

“Have you understood all these things?” The disciples said to him, “Yes.” Now I imagine when asked the question, “Have you understood all these things?” each of them began to subtly glance around at the others to see how they might react. Maybe Peter was nodding his head confidently. He’s known for his lack of hesitation. Andrew sees this and he thinks, “Whaaat? If Peter gets it, well then so do I.” Then sure enough James doesn’t want to be left behind to take the class again, so he needs to project confidence. And just like that the disciples answer “Yes” to Jesus’ question. “Yes Lord, we understand these things…all these things.” Liars! All of them! I think it’s safe to say these disciples did not fully comprehend the material Jesus presented them about the kingdom in this one day of teaching. We have spent eight weeks now in this chapter and we are still scratching our heads. And I don’t think Jesus was fooled by the disciples’ overconfident affirmation. You know, earlier in this chapter, verse 10, the disciples ask Jesus, “Why do you use parables when you speak to the crowds?” They want to know why Jesus does not speak in a more straightforward manner. And Jesus replies.

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“Because they haven’t received the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but you have.” “The secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven” sounds like a special investigative report you might see on TV, but what does Jesus mean by this? These disciples have been given special information that is simply not readily available. Information about this kingdom can easily go unnoticed and the meaning can easily be missed. But the disciples have a key that sort of unlocks these secrets. And that key is faith.

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They believe in Jesus, they trust in his words. They have established a relationship with him. And because of this faith, they have a perspective that others do not. Spiritual truths about the kingdom of heaven cannot be comprehended without the eyes of faith. So as people of faith, we are privy to certain things that the crowds do not know or understand. Now, despite our faith, we do not, nor did the original disciples fully understand *all* these things…but perhaps they understood enough. Perhaps enough of the main point entered their ears that wanted to hear and made its way into their minds that wanted to understand and seeped down into their hearts that wanted to respond. Perhaps these imperfect and sometimes bumbling disciples were good enough.

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Good enough is a phrase that I employ quite often. When I don’t have the time but I find myself having to hang a giant mirror in the bathroom…the end result might not be completely level, but it staying attached to the wall and it reflects like it should…good enough. When you find yourself having to prepare food for a large quantity of guests and the main course comes out with a little extra smoke and char…it’s still food in a technical sense….good enough. I have even heard these words applied to parenting, and it’s true! No parent can hit all the notes and do all the events and have all the conversations perfectly. Failure is a part of the deal…but are you available and feeding them and pointing them to Christ?...good enough. Good enough is a reality that we must accept. And Jesus, our perfect king, somehow understood that his disciples, both present and future, would have to be good enough. He himself would carry the weight of perfection.

So with everyone on board and apparently tracking, Jesus comes to the final, most important, climactic parable of the day.

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He says, “Therefore,” since you all get it, or at least say you do… “Every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest.” Then verse 53,“"When Jesus finished these parables, he departed.” Okay, the bell rang and the professor is off to his summer vacation. And the disciples are left to sit, together mind you, they can look on each other’s papers, they can make this a group project, but they are left to sit with this final story that contains three distinct terms: we’ve got a legal expert, a disciple and the head of a household. If these three were walking into a bar, we might have the makings of a joke, but what are we to make of these three figures? Well, let’s consider them one by one.

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The legal experts, also known as scribes tended to be at odds with Jesus. In fact, even in our reading today, Jesus basically deems the scribes to be unrighteous. He says we must have a righteousness even greater than that of the scribes if we want to enter into the kingdom of heaven. One of the main reason for the angst is that Jesus did not seem to be as careful as they were when it came to following God’s law. And by law here we are talking about the Law of Moses, the Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible. The scribes loved God’s law. They conformed their whole lives around it and they tried to teach others to do the same. And when people failed, the scribes were there to keep accountability. You wanted to be on your best behavior when a scribe was around. But sometimes this piety, this zeal for God’s righteousness bled over into a seal of self-righteousness. I follow the law, I care about it and so I am good, those lawbreakers over there, they are bad. Jesus certainly had a problem with this kind of pride. He also deplored the extra man made rules the scribes tried to add to God’s law. The law says that you cannot work on the Sabbath. A good rule that makes sure God’s people set apart one day as holy and dedicate their time and attention to Him. But, by the time of Jesus, there was much added to the law…For example on the Sabbath, a person was only allowed to walk 2,000 cubits, that’s about two thirds of a mile. Any more than that would be considered “work”. So while it is good to not plan a long trip on the Sabbath, this restriction was not actually a part of God’s law. You might recall the story where Jesus and his disciples were in trouble for picking heads of wheat on the Sabbath as they were walking through a field. That could be considered harvesting which would be work and, according to the scribes, that would be unacceptable.

But the legal expert Jesus mentioned here is set apart from someone with the mindset I just described. Here Jesus speaks of a scribe who has been trained as a disciple.

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We understand a disciple to simply mean follower. In that day, students of a certain rabbi would literally follow them around wherever they went. They did not learn in a classroom or from lectures, but by seeing what the rabbi did and hearing how the rabbi talked. They learned by example. But just like we can earn degrees from prestigious schools, so students of a well-respected rabbi could drop that name and exercise some clout. Paul does this in Acts 22 after he is seized by a mob of angry Jews, Paul defends himself in verse 3 he says,

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“I’m a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia but raised in this city (Jerusalem). Under Gamaliel’s instruction, I was trained in the strict interpretation of our ancestral Law. I am passionately loyal to God, just like you…” So Paul’s teacher was well-known and credible. And here we have the students of Jesus, his disciples, who are following a rabbi who seems to have a very tenuous grip on the Law as other, more important rabbis see it. But, in the end, these disciples will have completed three years at, as Herbert Lockyer calls it, the *College of the Feet.*

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It’s the same school Mary attended while her sister Martha was so concerned about getting the tea on the kettle and hors d’oeuvres properly served. But Martha sat at Jesus’ feet and listened. And Jesus tells us that Mary has chosen the better thing. These students, these followers, learned the Law from the One who understands it best. They are indeed scribes who have been trained as disciples. These disciple/scribe hybrids are then compared to a householder.

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Who is a householder? Well, in Jesus’ day he would have been talking about a father, a patriarch, one who runs a household, the one who makes the income, is in charge of the servants and generally takes care of his family. Now, of course, times have changed, cultures are different so the idea of a householder might vary in different contexts, even in different families. But the idea that we can highlight here is the notion of provision. A householder provides for their home and the people in it. They function as parent, caretaker, shepherd and when it comes down to it – ruler. The buck has to stop with someone. Somone’s name is on the deed. Someone has to receive the bills. Someone has to take responsibility and be in charge of the way the household is going to operate. Therefore the householder ought to take authority and be given respect. This is why God commands us to honor our father and mother. They are taking care of us or have taken care of us, not perfectly, but hopefully, as he discussed, good enough. In turn, we respect their God-given authority.

So what are householders supposed to do?

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According to the parable, they “bring old and new things out of their treasure chest.”

From the previous parable of the treasure that was hidden in the field, Jesus seems to indicate that the treasure itself is the kingdom. But here, in this story, it seems Jesus is referring to the Word of God, the very word by which we know of and enter into the kingdom. This makes sense of Jesus’ use of scribes. The standard scribe knows and studies the Word of God but they tend to only ever pull out and rehash the old things. The scribe who is a disciple of the kingdom can find in the old treasure new things to teach and to apply.

Now notice Jesus does not say that the householder should bring out new things and old things…he is not talking about two different classes of things. He talking about different aspects of the same thing. It like a refurbished piece of furniture.

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Something that is old and antiquated may appear to be outdated, it may appear to be useless. But in the hands of a scribe/disciple/householder who operates in the kingdom of heaven, something that seems destined for the dumpster can be revived and put to use again. It might take a little doing, and it might be appear to be different upon first glance, but the bones are the same.

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Think of an apple tree, it produces new fruit every season that is fresh and tasty, but where did the fruit come from? The fruit itself is new, but the roots of the tree are old. The old tree does not become something else in order to produce fruit, in fact the only reason we can have new fruit is thanks to the old tree with it’s old root system. Even at the end of time, when Christ returns in his glory, as we read in Revelation, he will come and he will proclaim,

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“Look! I am making all things new.” Jesus does not say I am making all new things. He is not going back to the drawing board and starting from scratch. He is renewing what is, restoring it into what it ought to be. He is refurbishing. He makes all old things new again. In the same way, we don’t lay aside the law or any of the Old Testament, we fully understand and acknowledge that every single sentence of the New Testament is born out of the intricate and immovable root system of the Old Testament. New fruit comes from an old tree. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the same story that begins in Genesis 1:1. “In the beginning God created…” and that line runs all the way through the entirety of God’s word until we get to the end of Revelation when Christ says, “Look! I am making all thing new!” We have creation and it’s refurbishing, it’s renewal, it’s transformation.

But as householders of faith who live and operate in the kingdom, this task falls to us. I hope you consider yourself to be a student of Jesus.

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I hope you are willing to sit at his feet and listen carefully. I hope you are up for the task of taking old truth and finding new ways to apply it’s fruit. It is not an easy job. It is not a job for the faint of heart. But we do not have to try to do it alone. We are the Church, we are the body of Christ, we are the householders of faith. We take care of those around us and teach them the old truth in new ways. Again, it’s not an easy job, but maybe just maybe, like the disciples, we can do it “good” enough.

Amen!