The Kingdom’s story in a modern world

yeast | mustard | wheat weeds | treasure | pearl | vineyard | talents | unmerciful servant | great feast
“Who are you, and where are you? I repeat those questions often because repetition is one of the keys to learning. I am looking for these responses: “I am a child of God, one in whom Christ dwells, and I am living in the unshakeable kingdom of God.” When a person grasps those two realities, many of the problems that plague him or her begin to diminish.

We live in the **unshakeable kingdom** of God, so that even when we are tested, we never fail. This is why I am confident that our world is perfectly safe. **Safe?** you may be thinking. **Are you kidding? This world is scary and dangerous!** That is true if you are on the throne of your life, living outside of the kingdom of God.

As long as we live in fellowship with our good and beautiful God in his mighty kingdom, we have nothing to fear, not even fear itself. For nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8: 38-39). When we know this to be true, we can let go of worry and begin living with confidence and joy.

*Smith, James Bryan. The Good and Beautiful Life*
The Kingdom of God is like… - so starts many of Jesus’ parables. Jesus wants us to understand what the Kingdom of God is, what it is like, and how we get to belong to it. And He teaches in a series of parables. Matthew comments on Jesus’ parables when he tells us that they fulfil “what God had spoken through the prophet: ‘I will speak to you in parables. I will explain things hidden since the creation of the world.’” Mt 13:35

The thing is, that Jesus’ parables are not always very clear. True: sometimes they are easy enough to understand (the Good Samaritan for example), other times the meaning is less obvious, leaving us scratching our heads wondering what Jesus means. Preachers and scholars alike try to shed light on the difficult passages and suggest ways in which we might live in the light of the parables, but it seems that Jesus Himself is not worried if we do not understand every last detail.

An added complication is that His teaching is set in a bygone age with illustrations and language that may not be as familiar for us as for the original hearers. We know how language has changed even in our own lifetime (remember when ‘wicked’ meant ‘evil’, not ‘great’?!) and so we are at a disadvantage when we consider stories written to an ancient Mediterranean culture. We have some work to do to understand them well.

We should remember, though, that the parables are stories, not doctrine. They are tales with a point or a punch which give us a snapshot, or an impression about what the Kingdom of God is like. No one parable tells us everything, but together they build up a picture, in story form, of the rule and reign of God.
When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, those who heard in first century Israel understood the concept. Tom Wright writes, that “when Jesus spoke of the ‘reign’ or ‘kingdom’ of Israel’s God, he was deliberately evoking an entire storyline that he and his hearers knew quite well.” (Jesus and the Victory of God) But the twist in the tale of the parable, or its topsy-turvy nature, forces the hearer to think again; its meaning may not be what was originally thought. We too, need to ensure that we come with fresh eyes and an open mind or we might just miss Jesus’ point.

So there are a couple of things that we need to bear in mind:

- **The Parables illustrate the Kingdom.** Scott McKnight tells us that “We need to shed our unearthly and nonsocial and idealistic and romantic and uber-spiritual visions of kingdom and get back to what Jesus meant. By kingdom, Jesus means: God’s Dream Society on earth, spreading out from the land of Israel to encompass the whole world.” (The King Jesus Gospel)

- **Not everyone will get the point!** In fact, the very people who think they will (the spiritually smug) will miss the point and those with child-like faith (who can embrace its truths) will understand. Jesus Himself said *You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. Mt 13.11-12*

So humbly we approach the Parables, longing to be those who hear correctly and understand profoundly. We will mull over. We will think deeply. We will consider and question what Jesus’ original audience would have thought; but more than anything, we will ask that the Holy Spirit teach us what it means to live in God’s unshakeable Kingdom.

*God’s dream is the kingdom, that’s already clear. But what is not always clear is that God’s kingdom happens when human beings are empowered by God’s Spirit to do God’s kingdom work in the shape of a new community.*

Scott McKnight, The King Jesus Gospel
We have tried to write these notes in community—that is, I have worked closely with John R on the themes and fifteen others on the content of these study notes. It has been great to muse together, wrestling at times with the scripture, all the while trying to get an understanding of life in the Unshakeable Kingdom. I have tried to incorporate our discussions, and I hope that if you were part of this process, you can see your fingerprints on the pages that follow! Thanks, as ever, go to John R for providing companion daily notes to help our reflections too.

Many thanks to all who have worked on these notes, from the writing to the editing to the folding and stapling. A great example of body ministry in action—THANK YOU!

Grace and peace

November 2016

The context of our times together is not education (we’re here to learn) but worship (we’re here to worship God and become more like Him). GATHERING sets the scene.

We read, reflect and consider Scripture together—we ask questions of the passage and LISTEN to the Spirit.

We bridge the gap between the first century word and our world and as questions about the Bible’s relevance to our lives today. UNDERSTANDING is the step before obedience.

We decide together the steps we need to take towards Christ: practical, measurable steps which help us to become do-ers of the Word, to LIVE it.

We leave, challenged by the Word, encouraged by our time together and we pray for one another and the lives that we lead, before we are SCATTERED again.
Yes, the fullness of the gospel is a pearl of great price worth any effort.  
Joseph B. Wirthlin

Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars... The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. Mt 6.21 The Message

GATHERING

O Lord, we wait for You in hope;  
You are our help and our shield;  
in You our hearts rejoice,  
for we trust in Your holy name.  
Let Your unfailing love rest upon us Lord,  
for we put our hope in You. AMEN.  
Michael Perry based on Psalm 33

LISTENING

Read Matthew 13.44-46

What does the treasure and pearl point to?

Notice how in one case the treasure was discovered (stumbled upon), and in the other it was sought after. What does this tell us about the way people find faith and entry into the Kingdom?

What about you? Did you ‘stumble’ upon faith or go looking for it? Spend some time telling your story. Each one tell another person and then have that person tell the group.

UNDERSTANDING

In both cases that which is found has great value. What is the Kingdom’s value?

In both cases the value of the treasure (or pearl) was so great the man (merchant) sold everything. What does this tell us about the value of the Kingdom?

What did you sell for the Kingdom?
Was it worth it?

What other treasures are there to be had in the world?

According to this parable, the Kingdom and other treasures are mutually exclusive. Is that your experience? (i.e. can you have both?)

What attracted you to the treasure of the Kingdom of God? Does it still attract you?

What would you say to the successful, happily married, settled person who has no need for the Kingdom?

**LIVING**

Jesus said “The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.”

**Consider carefully where your treasure is.** How we spend our time, money and energy speaks volumes about our priorities and what’s really important to us. We must be careful not to convince ourselves that we can add a belief in Jesus to an otherwise unchanged life. His Kingdom welcome comes at a great price; He expects total compliance to His will and surrender to His purposes.

Spend some time asking yourself, what would my friends and family say my treasure is?

**TRY THIS!** Give something away this week, and if possible, do it anonymously. Make a physical response to the challenges in this week’s study—let’s put our money (or possessions) where our mouths are!

**SCATTERING**

Call: Lord, teach us how to fear and follow you and in doing so be wise.

Response: Show us how to make every day count, living every moment in your presence.

Call: Give us your peace and satisfy us with your goodness. The peace of the Lord be yours this night (day)

One by one say: The peace of the Lord be mine this night

Call: The Peace of the Lord be ours, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Amen
The wrath of God is simply the shadow side of the love of God for his wonderful creation and his amazing human creatures. Like a great artist appalled at the way his paintings have been defaced by the very people who were supposed to be looking after them, God’s implacable rejection of evil is the natural outflowing of his creative love. N T Wright

You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Matthew 13.11 The Message

God, of Your goodness, give me Yourself, For You are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, to be worthy of You. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In You alone do I have all. AMEN
Julian of Norwich

Jesus’ explanation could be more helpful couldn’t it?! He seems quite happy to leave the story ambiguous and doesn’t feel the need to explain every last detail.

Consider Matthew 13.14-15 too. Jesus shows us that it is not education that we need but the Spirit’s revelation. Stop right now, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your conversations this evening.

Resist any temptation to share your encyclopaedic knowledge of gardening and of weeds- this is not a gardening lesson! Also, watch out for the member of the group who’ll try and convince you that weeds can become wheat! This is not about people coming to faith (weeds becoming wheat) but the reality of evil and good living side by side in our world.

Consider the two crops. In what ways are they similar and different?

Jesus accepts that good and evil co-exist in our world. Why doesn’t the farmer ‘weed as he goes’? What does it mean pulling up the weeds would ‘uproot the wheat’?
Where do you see good and evil living side by side?

Do you ever wonder: does God know what He’s doing?

What does it mean to you that:
  • there is a harvest day (judgement day) when God will do what’s right?
  • Judgement day is entirely the farmer’s concern, not ours?

What does it take to live a godly life daily among the weeds?

The Kingdom of God starts here - this is God’s world. Yet good and evil live side by side; they are enemies. This struggle between good and evil dominates all of our literature, our news, our movies and our television shows. It dominates because it’s one of life’s most real characteristics. To the extent we don’t stand guard daily, the other side plots ways to break down the walls of our resistance.

*The Man in the Mirror, Patrick Morley*

**LIVING**

What messages or narratives do you hear that you need to counter?

Talk about what helps you live a godly life?

**TRY THIS!** Write ONE sentence (or a Bible verse) which sums up your desire to live a godly life. Tie a piece of string to your keyring or something that you use frequently. Resolve to recite the sentence or verse as a prayer as a constant reminder of our desire to be more Christ-like.

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Amen
RELATIONSHIPS.IN.THE.KINGDOM

Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.

Oscar Wilde

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

C.S. Lewis

In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can’t get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God’s part.

Mt 6.14 Message

GATHERING

Breath of God,
fill me with presence divine
overwhelm me with Your love.

Fire of God,
cleanse me from all wrong
purify my heart
melt away all that is not of You.

Power of God,
give me Yourself that I might
find rest in You,
find peace in You.
find the One who will understand me
and my words
and my thoughts.

LISTENING

Read Matthew 18.21-35. Compared with some of the other parables, this one is fairly easy to understand. Even so, spend a moment or two allowing it to sink in before moving on.

Why is forgiveness so important in the Kingdom of God?

What happened to the servant who refused to show mercy?

70x7 is synonymous with God’s eternal forgiveness. Jesus isn’t telling us to forgive our brothers 490 times, or 70 times, or 77 times. He’s telling us we should always forgive our brothers when they have sinned against us. God in heaven has forgiven us all of our sins. Forgiveness is the currency of the Kingdom.

‘Forgiveness is the currency of the Kingdom’

What does this mean on a moment by moment basis for us?
Notice Jesus’s use of the word REFUSE (v35). Is there something different about those UNABLE to forgive and those UNWILLING?

The second servant’s debt was small – what does this tell us about the nature of the niggles and grudges that we sometimes hold against others?

Read these quotes about forgiveness. Which one most resonates with you?

- **To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.** Lewis B. Smedes
- **Forgiveness is the final form of love.** Reinhold Niebuhr
- **The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.** Marianne Williamson
- **To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.** C.S. Lewis
- **Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.** Corrie ten Boom

Choose one of the phrases above and resolve, with God’s help, to apply it to specific situations where you need to forgive. None of us are perfect, but let us strive to do all we can to let go of the hurts others have inflicted on us - we forgive as we have been forgiven. Jesus’ teaching goes further still. In **Mt 5:44** He teaches us to do GOOD to those who offend us.

**TRY THIS!** There are sure to be people who you struggle to love or understand. Determine to SPEAK WELL OF THEM, genuinely, to three different people this week. Big them up, and as you do so, allow the Spirit to soften you up too!

**SCATTERING**

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Amen
No matter when a man enters the Kingdom, late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the midday, or when the shadows are lengthening, he is equally dear to God. *William Barclay*

Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It’s God’s gift from start to finish! We don’t play the major role. If we did, we’d probably go around bragging that we’d done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. Ephesians 2.8-9 *The Message*

**GATHERING**

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven; To His feet thy tribute bring. Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, Who like me His praise should sing Praise him! Praise him! Praise the everlasting King.

Praise Him for His grace and favour To our fathers in distress. Praise Him still the same for ever, Slow to chide, and swift to bless Praise him! Praise him! Glorious in His faithfulness.

**LISTENING**

Read *Matthew 20.1-15*. Once you have read the story, be still for a minute or two. Put yourself in the shoes of the landowner, then the one employed first, and finally the one employed last. What questions or feelings does the story elicit?

Try and sum up in one sentence:
- what the parable says
- what the parable means

**UNDERSTANDING**

Is it not reasonable for the worker who has worked the longest to receive more than the one who came at the eleventh hour?
What does this teach us about grace?

Does this story reveal how we perceive grace? The reward of grace cannot be added to. However, how might Christians try to ‘add’ to the grace that God has given them?

Talk together about the quote below:

All human merit shrivels before his burning, self-giving love. Grace, amazing grace, is the burden of this story. All are equally undeserving of so large a sum as a denarius a day. All are given it by the generosity of the employer. All are on the same level ... Nobody can claim deserved membership of the kingdom. There is no place for personal pride, for contempt or jealousy, for there is no ground for any to question how this generous God handles the utterly undeserving.

The Message of Matthew, Michael Green

Consider in a few moments quietness the verses from Ephesians 2 at the top of the previous page.

**LIVING**

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you and remind you of your constant need of His grace in your life.

Finish by praying for one another in twos.

**SCATTERING**

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Amen
The Reach of the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God does not always behave how you think it will, or it should. In the topsy-turvy Kingdom, it seems the usual understanding of things is reversed.

The kingdom of God doesn’t come by counting the days on the calendar. Nor when someone says, ‘Look here!’ or, ‘There it is!’ And why? Because God’s kingdom is already among you. Luke 17.21 The Message

Lord, I have a noisy heart. It’s part of my noisy life. Help me to understand that I must listen to you, and be prepared to stop, being still long enough for you to speak to me.

Help me to learn to hear your voice; To sift out distractions:
From within
From without.
Speak to me and I will be blessed indeed!

AMEN

Read Matthew 13.33 slowly. It won’t take long. Be still for a few moments to let the words sink in.

Resist any temptation to share your encyclopaedic knowledge of bread making - remember, Jesus’ point may not be the obvious one!

Please keep in mind the following point: it may be true, but is that what Jesus means here? This is important to bear in mind. You know how easy it is to get distracted or go down the wrong road in your discussion. The heart of the question is: what does Jesus want us to know about His rule and reign from this passage?

REMEMBER: parables are riddles. They are meant to give us an impression of the Kingdom. They are a snapshot, a cameo, one aspect of what the Kingdom of God is like.

If those who heard the parable understood that yeast was a negative thing, associated with sin and sinners, and this is in Jesus’ mind, how does that impact our understanding of the parable?

Yeast / Leaven in the ancient Mediterranean world
It was the archetype of uncleanness and corruption. In this parable Jesus addresses the popular idea that the kingdom of God is holy, good and triumphant. The kingdom turns out to be active in the marginalized and the poor, both of whom were regarded in Jesus’ day as objects of God’s abandonment. Jesus teaches that everyday life is the place of the sacred... he invites us on the basis of our pre-packaged beliefs, what is good and what is evil. Thomas Keating.
So the key thought is this: yeast is understood as having a negative influence—it corrupts, puffs up and spoils. Religiously speaking, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law (the so-called Holy ones) were ‘pure’ and the ‘sinners’ and ‘tax collectors’ were unclean and outside of God’s blessing. However, Jesus declares that He has come for the sick rather than the (spiritually) healthy, and that, in fact, those who recognise their need of Him (as opposed to those who are too puffed up to acknowledge their need) will receive entrance into the Kingdom. It is a story with a sting in its tale; those who should have understood the Kingdom, don’t (because of their pride and arrogance), and those who are humble and repentant bring about God’s purposes on earth. And the sting? The yeast (which everyone thought was bad) is that which, it turns out, works its good through the whole dough.

With what kind of yeast-type people does Jesus spend his time?

What light does Mark 2.17 throw on this parable?
See too John 3 and 4 – who is the gospel for? Who accepts it and who rejects it?

Jesus seems to be telling us that we should expect to see grace in the most unlikely of people and places. Where do you see grace in the world today? Is there anywhere when you see God’s grace working in a place which surprises you?

TRY THIS! Spend the next two weeks considering your day before the Lord. It might be having your diary open helps, or running through your plans in your mind:
- Where do I expect to see God work?
- Where am I sure that I will not see His grace at work?
- Am I ready for grace to surprise me?

Be ready to share your experiences with the group next time you meet.

SCATTERING

Call: Lord, teach us how to fear and follow you and in doing so be wise.

Response: Show us how to make every day count, living every moment in your presence.

Call: Give us your peace and satisfy us with your goodness.

The peace of the Lord be yours this night (day)

One by one say: The peace of the Lord be mine this night

Call: The Peace of the Lord be ours, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Amen
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