

The Kingdom of Heaven

by the Rev. Nathan Gladish

Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables... (Matthew 13:1-3).

These words introduce a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven. In one sense the whole of the Old and New Testaments is a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven. Every story can be connected to that kingdom and our potential for entering and living there. This is especially evident in the New Testament, though, because it is stated plainly and repeatedly that the Lord's purpose is to help us understand the kingdom of heaven. For example, in Luke we read that "He said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent'" (Luke 4:43). In another place we're told, "He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1). And then, "He sent [the twelve disciples] to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick" (Luke 9:2).

So, throughout the Word we can find an emphasis on the importance, the vitality, and the hope for experiencing the kingdom of heaven. In particular, in this 13th chapter of Matthew, the Lord tells seven parables directly on this subject. He says the kingdom of heaven is like these activities:

1. a man sowing good seed in his field, and his enemies sowing tares there at night
2. a man who sowed the smallest seed of all, the mustard seed, and how it grows into a tree that the birds can settle on
3. a woman making leavened bread, putting yeast into three measures of meal, kneading it and letting it rise until the bread is ready to cook
4. a man finding and buying a field with treasure in it
5. a pearl merchant buying a pearl of great price
6. a group of people fishing and gathering a large catch of fish, both great and small
7. a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old

Through these symbolic word pictures, the Lord gives us a glimpse of His heavenly kingdom. His kingdom is not some airy, imaginary state of being, filled with winged cherubs that just sit around and look pretty. It's also not something inaccessible or removed from life. Heaven often consists of ordinary people doing ordinary things and then experiencing extraordinary blessings. And the New Testament parables of such people give us the opportunity to explore this kingdom a bit, walk around in their shoes, and get a feeling for what it's like.

Today, instead of looking in-depth at any one of these parables, let's look at them as a set of stories that, taken together, help us understand three significant dimensions of the kingdom of heaven.

The first dimension has to do with what we tend to think of as the other world—the afterlife or eternal life, the place or state each person goes after death. One of the main points of what the

Lord reveals in the Bible is to introduce the idea of a kingdom of people beyond this world, a kingdom that is not bound by time and space, a kingdom with all sorts of opportunities available to us. In the Old and New Testaments, the Lord provided foundational, general teachings about this spiritual world, but He also said “I still have many things to say to you” (John 16:12).

Fortunately for us, the Lord has revealed a lot more about this other world. Through the extensive theological works of the New Church, we now have a huge knowledge base of information to help us rationally understand and explain what is only touched on in the Bible. The Lord has made this information available so we can have a better idea of what is in store for us and prepare for it.

So in a general way the kingdom of heaven in these parables refers to the whole spiritual world, with its various realms: the heavens, the hells, and the intermediate world of spirits where people gather while discovering their ruling loves. And each of the parables adds to a more complete picture of what the other life will be like.

For example, in the parables about the growth of seeds and plants, the church’s teachings show that the kingdom of heaven is a place where good spirits and angels are growing in love and wisdom, even though that growth sometimes comes with struggle. In the parables of finding treasures, the teachings show that the kingdom of the heavens is a place where good spirits and angels discover and take great delight in the spiritual treasures the Lord provides.

The parable of the woman making leavened bread shows that the kingdom of heaven is a place where people are rising together above temptation. Good spirits and even angels are never perfect. They take with them from earth all the things that are of their own selfish personality. From time to time they experience what could be referred to as states of fermentation, like the process initiated by the yeast in the making of bread. While they are in these states, the angels and good spirits doubt their own spiritual integrity. Yet, the Lord teaches that “those who suffer themselves to be renewed by hope remain steadfast in what is affirmative” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2338). Spiritually, these angels rise above the insinuations of the hells and the fermentation process passes, as leavening is stopped by the baking of the bread.

The parable of fishing teaches that the spiritual world is a gathering place of people who love the Lord, people from all walks of life with various approaches and customs in their celebrations of the Lord in their lives. We used to have an advertisement that said “The Lord lets more people into heaven than you or I would.” It was reflective of a teaching of the New Church that the Lord allows people to come into heaven if they lead a life according to their understanding of the commandments. When they arrive in the kingdom of heaven, these good people can become more and more versed in the truth of the Lord’s Word.

All these parables give us a picture of a dimension of life we can look forward to after death. They teach of the reality of our lives to come. As we read in the work, *Divine Providence*, “The inmost design of the Divine providence is that a person may be in this or that place in heaven” (67).

Let's move on to a second way of applying this set of parables to our lives. This time we'll consider an orientation that is more present than future. Through these parables the kingdom of heaven is said to be immanent. To be immanent is to be in the present, in the now. The kingdom of heaven is not just something of the future. It is a present reality. The Lord says that the kingdom of heaven can be within us right now. Consider this teaching from *Divine Providence*:

Every person by creation is a heaven in the least form, and consequently an image of the Lord. Since heaven consists of as many affections as there are angels, and each affection in its form is a person, it follows that it is the continual design of the Divine Providence that everyone may become a heaven in form and consequently an image of the Lord (67).

The way to build the kingdom of heaven within your mind and heart is to do the activities that are represented in these parables on a day-by-day basis. Let's think about the application of this principle to individual spiritual growth.

The sowing and growing of seeds corresponds to learning truths of the Word in our own individual ways. Some seeds of truth are very small in our lives, like the mustard seed, but with the Lord's blessing they can become large and useful when we nurture them and find inspiration from them. In other cases, such as those pictured in the parable of the wheat and tares, we can get mixed up because of the commingling of seeds of truth with seeds of falsity, and we have to struggle to tell the difference.

The parable of the woman making bread is a kind of chemistry lesson in personal transformation. Addressing some of our personal foibles can raise mental and emotional disturbances that elevate our awareness of the need for a change. Significant and lasting change comes by submitting ourselves to the gentle but persistent heat of the Lord's wise love.

The parables of finding treasures and doing everything possible to buy them are spiritually about our individual efforts to accept and embrace the treasures that the Lord wants us to have in our individual hearts and minds. Similarly the fishing parable is about gathering knowledge of all kinds to feed our spirits. These examples give a general idea of how to apply the parables to our individual spiritual growth.

Now let's look at a third and final dimension of life. The kingdom of heaven as described in these parables is to be renewed and strengthened by the *people* of the Lord's church in heaven and on earth. And by the church here, I mean a community of people looking to the Lord and being helpful to each other and to those beyond the community in His name. Specifically, I want to call attention to all of us and how we interact with each other. Let's look again at this same series of seven parables as they teach us how the Lord brings people along in order to establish the kingdom of heaven among them.

The parables of sowing and growing seeds are about scattering seeds of truths among us and experiencing spiritual growth together. The parable of the woman making leavened bread shows that in groups and congregations there will be challenges brought on by false reasoning, ill will, confusion, etc., but that by keeping our eyes on the end in view and being warmed by the Lord's

love, we can rise above petty issues for the sake of higher uses. In the parables of finding treasures and doing everything possible to buy them, think of the passage from the Old Testament where the Lord says to the Israelites, “You are a special treasure to me” (Exodus 19:5). In the Lord’s sight, each person is a special treasure. The Lord wants us each to treat each other as if we have just found a most wonderful human resource, a blessing from the Lord. What a gift each person in the church is! The fishing parable is about reaching out through the networks of people with whom we are involved and gathering each other into the thought, the love and the work of the Lord and His kingdom on earth.

So there you have it—a way of applying these parables to three dimensions of human life—in the other world, in our own individual hearts and minds, and in the interaction of ordinary people doing ordinary things. By understanding more deeply what is symbolized by the activities pictured in these seven parables, you can live more and more in the kingdom of heaven. As we do this, we can experience the presence of the Lord immanently—more and more immediately—and we will be preparing ourselves for our future in the life to come. Let the words of the prayer ring true in our lives, “as in heaven, so upon the earth.”

Amen.

Lessons: *Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 13:1-3, 24-52; Arcana Caelestia 29, 4637, 10717*

SPIRITUAL “TASK” FOR THE WEEK:

The kingdom of heaven parables—symbolic word pictures—are tools to help us relate heavenly experiences with ordinary activities. Each of the activities depicts spiritual growth and discovery. This week, pay attention for little reminders of one or more of these parables: growing plants, making bread, finding treasures, sorting things, buying and selling. Use your earthly experiences to help you understand the Lord’s kingdom.