



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 9A (Proper 12)

July 26, 2026

[RCL]: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; **Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

Prayer |

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Context |

Matthew 13 contains a series of eight striking parables, three of which are entirely unique to Matthew's Gospel. These parables form a central piece of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God in Matthew. The English word parable comes from the Greek *parabole*, which literally means "to cast alongside," "to compare," or "to place beside." In other words, a parable is designed to "cast" a deeper spiritual reality alongside an accessible everyday image. Through analogies and stories incorporating elements of agricultural life, household activities, and trade, Jesus offers touchstones for his listeners to grapple with complex ideas.

Matthew's emphasis on the parables of Jesus builds on the foundations of the Old Testament tradition. Parables were a well-documented and established form of teaching amongst the Jewish people. For instance, Psalm 78:2 declares, "I will open my mouth in a parable; I will declare the mysteries of ancient times," a verse Matthew employs as a means of connecting these parables with an older tradition (13:35). In some instances, Jesus begins a parable simply by launching into a narrative. Yet, in the case of today's pericope, all of the parables begin with the comparative statement, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Each parable illustrates another unique aspect of the kingdom of God and how we ought to respond to it. The final parable shifts this pattern by beginning instead with the comparison, "Every scribe who has been

trained for the kingdom of heaven is like...” This change in emphasis brings the focus directly to those being called to take part in the work of the kingdom.

The phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs 32 times throughout Matthew’s gospel, yet is entirely absent from Mark, Luke, or John. One possible explanation for this is that Matthew’s largely Jewish audience would have been more comfortable with the phrase “kingdom of heaven”—as opposed to “kingdom of God,” which breaches the reverential practice in Judaism of only naming God indirectly. In this case, it’s acceptable to view the terms “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” as largely interchangeably in the truths to which they point.

Theological Reflection |

As Jesus builds a foundation for understanding the kingdom of heaven through this series of parables, he begins with a series of strikingly small objects. A mustard seed, a bit of yeast, a hidden treasure in a field, and a single pearl all exist at a much smaller scale than is commonly associated with an eternal and universal kingdom. Yet, in each case, the parables invite the listener to look beyond the objects themselves, toward the fruits they bear when they realize their full potential.

When properly fertilized and tended, the smallest seed not only grows into a shrub and then a tree, but it becomes a place of hospitality and homemaking for the many birds who build their nests on its branches. Similarly, the yeast remains a small and unappetizing substance on its own. Yet, when the woman takes the time to carefully mix the yeast with the correct ratio of flour, it leavens the dough and becomes a means of feeding an entire community. If left unattended and undiscovered, the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value would only decay. Yet, once uncovered and properly gleaned, the treasure and the pearl transform the lives of those who possess them.

In each of these cases, we see how God works through an individual or a community of individuals to cultivate the potential growth and transformation contained within seemingly small and everyday objects. Through this transformation, God’s kingdom is advanced.

Yet, it is not until the end of the text that the scale of the analogies expands even further. Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a net that catches “fish of every kind.” This new imagery shifts the focus away from local and intimate images towards a much broader universal perspective. As the “bad” fish are separated and cast away, the parable explores the nature of God’s justice and divine judgment.

The rapid succession of these parables reminds the listener that no single metaphor can fully explain the mystery of God’s kingdom. Every image captures an aspect of the truth, yet none contains its fullness. Together, these complementary—and sometimes seemingly contradiction-filled—images weave a tapestry pointing towards the depth and scope of God’s eternal reign. A common thread runs consistently through

all the parables: showing that God does not define or limit creation merely by its present condition or appearance. Just as a mustard seed and a tiny pearl alike can become catalysts for extraordinary expressions of God's creativity and vitality, so too can a net full of fish contain both the abundance of God's providence and welcome, as well as the truth of God's judgment.

Finally, Jesus directs his attention to those who are being "trained for the kingdom of heaven," by comparing them to the leaders of a household who bring out treasures both old and new. Those who participate in the unveiling and ushering in of the kingdom of God are called to steward the ancient wisdom handed down through Scripture and through generations of faithful believers. At the same time, they must remain open to the ways in which Christ continues to speak, reveal, and illuminate new aspects of God's kingdom in our rapidly changing world. Faithful followers of Christ are called to share in remembering that which has come before while also viewing the potential in our midst, discovering the new ways that God is still at work.

Discussion Questions |

- Which of the parables in the text speaks most to you? What aspect of God's kingdom does that parable illustrate for you?
- Do any of these parables leave you uneasy or confused? How might God be speaking to you through this confusion?
- What forms do parables take in our cultural context today? How do you see imagery and analogy being used to illustrate truths that ordinary language cannot capture?

Faith in practice |

This week, using the structural format found in Matthew 13 ("the kingdom of God is like..."), craft your own parable. This parable can be informed your own experience of God, but it should draw on present day everyday language. Utilize images and concepts that are relevant to you and your daily context. Get creative! You might encourage another person in your life to do the same exercise this week, so that you can share with one another.

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