

The Center of the Gospel

PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

MATTHEW 13:1-9

Sunday, January 18, 2026

“The Center of the Gospel” | Matthew 13:1-9 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Can you guess what “IT” is?

- It is very important to do it in a healthy marriage
- It is something parents and teachers expect their children and students to do
- It is something we do every day, for better or for worse
- It has six letters
- It was a focus of yesterday’s devotional on Matthew 17

And it is something Jesus encourages at the beginning and at the conclusion of the gospel reading for today, from Matthew 13, in the center of Matthew’s gospel.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow.⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up.⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ If you have ears, hear!”

The IT in question is LISTEN

As we know, listening is vital for relationships, for teachers, and for families. And every day we are surrounded by lots of noise and distraction, so we end up listening to some good things and some not so good things. The gospel reading begins and ends with Jesus giving the invitation to listen to his followers.

Listening is pretty important when we’re talking about Jesus our teacher.

This month we’re focusing on the gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus’ role of teachers is highlighted. There are five distinct teaching sections in the gospel, which are the focus of the five sermons in this series.

Today, we're looking at Matthew 13 which has seven parables about the Kingdom of God, and Jesus urges his followers to listen.

If you've been reading Matthew this month, a chapter a day, you would have read Matthew 13 a few days ago. And perhaps you have noticed the Kingdom throughout the gospel, right from the beginning.



- In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” --Mt 3:2
- From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” --Mt 4:17
- Jesus said to the twelve, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’” --Mt 10:7

The kingdom is good news.

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for the Kingdom in Matthew 6:9-10

Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy.
May your kingdom come. May your will be done

Jesus teaches his followers to seek first the Kingdom, to prioritize it, in Matthew 6:33

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.

Chapter 13, with seven parables about the Kingdom, is at the center of Matthew, seemingly suggesting that the Kingdom of God is at the center of our faith.

What is this kingdom, this reign, this realm?

First a word about the word.... In Matthew Jesus often says Kingdom of heaven, instead of Kingdom of God, which we see elsewhere in the new testament. Jesus was writing from a primarily Jewish audience who avoided the word “God.”

The word Kingdom is archaic, and there are many other options: reign, rule, commonwealth, kingdom. All of these are becoming more commonly used.

Our parable for today is one of seven in Matthew 13, and this particular parable, like all parables, eludes precise understanding. It invites us to think, to ponder.

Some call it the parable of the sower, and think of Jesus tossing seeds of wisdom around, with the hope that people would listen and that the seeds would bear good fruit.

- Perhaps there is an invitation to be more intentional about listening to Jesus, along with other good teachings and lessons.

Some call it the parable of the abundant harvest, noting that a harvest of 30, 60, or 100 fold is beyond any reasonable expectation.

- So perhaps this parable is encouraging us to be hopeful, that somehow, someway, God is going to work a miracle and the kingdom will grow, the good things will bloom and blossom in our lives and in our world.

Some call it the parable of four soils and recognize the reality that even the best teachings in the world may not take root, because the soil is not good.

- Perhaps there is an invitation to ponder what kind of soil we have, or how receptive we are to letting God's word and God's love take root in us.

By reading Matthew this month, by gathering for worship on a very chilly day, by striving to be a community of God's people, trying to learn and live God's love, we're doing our best to be good soil for God's word and for the Kingdom of God.

But as the parable reminds us, with the thorns, the rocky ground, and the dry pathway, the seeds don't always take root. So we persist in encouraging and supporting each other in listening and growing.

While there is no precise scientific definition of the Kingdom in the words of Jesus, there are plenty of examples, along with evocative parables of chapter 13.

The kingdom seems to be a place or a reality of good news for people who don't get much good news anywhere else.

Jesus offered blessings to all sorts of people:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Jesus taught his followers to love, saying that love is the most important commandment: Love God, love neighbor, and even love enemy.

Jesus repeatedly called his followers to be compassionate and generous, particularly with people who are struggling.

This kingdom, this idea that is at the center of our common faith is about love, and it's about compassion and kindness especially for those who are the lost, the least, and the last.

I think we're figuring that out here at Covenant. I think we're learning that, and starting to live that.

- Jesus says I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. Our little food pantries, indoor and outdoor, are VERY well used, and we're wrestling with bigger issues of food insecurity.
- Jesus says I was a stranger and you welcomed me. We have many people learning about and engaging with the complicated but vital issues around immigration. We provide space downstairs for Open Doors for Refugees.
- Jesus says I was sick and you took care of me. The people of Covenant are kind and caring with people who are sick or mourning or lonely or struggling. We pray, we share food, we call, we write, we visit. Our church provides space for many 12 step support groups.

This week, at some point, I can almost guarantee that you're going to get the opportunity to be kind and compassionate, to advance God's kingdom. You're going to come across someone who is lonely or struggling or hurting.

As important as caring for the lost, the least, and last is, we need to remember that this Kingdom isn't just individuals and individual actions.

From the time of Jesus onward, the kingdom stands opposed to the kingdoms of this world. Back then it was the Roman Empire, more specifically King Herod.

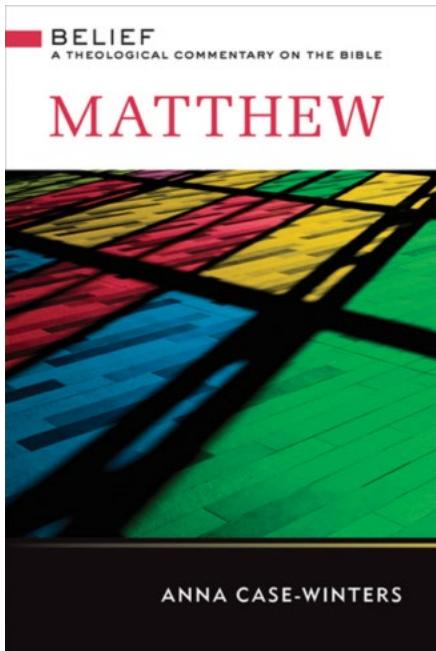
That opposition is most clearly seen in the fact that John the Baptist and Jesus himself were assassinated by that empire. Most empires of this world want total control, and sometimes that is a challenge for those who claim to be in part of God's kingdom.

And we see growing opposition to Jesus, just before and just after these teachings on the Kingdom in Matthew 13

”But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.” (Mt 12:14)

”Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? And they took offense at him. (Mt. 13:54-57)

The Kingdom of God can be a threat to the kingdoms of this world.



As Rev. Anna Case-Winters writes in her commentary on Matthew:

The reign of God contrasts with and contradicts imperial reign. Those living under God's reign form an alternative community that is inclusive and egalitarian and both theologically and socially resistant to empire. The theological challenge is in the conviction that the world belongs to God—not to Rome; and God's saving purposes and blessings are to be found in ... in Jesus—not Rome. (Matthew: BELIEF: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, p. 18)

As Christians, our primary allegiance is not to Covenant Presbyterian Church, or the Presbyterian Church USA. Or the Republican Party, or the Democratic Party, or any politician. Or any preacher or teacher.

The Kingdom of God, the realm of God, the reign of God, the Kin-dom of God is meant to be our primary allegiance, the most important thing.

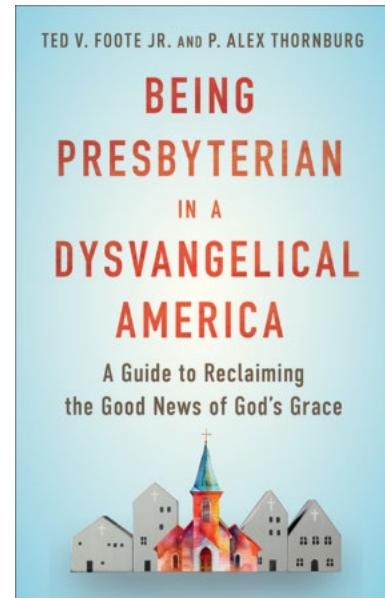
After the 11:00 service today, we're having a one-hour discussion on Christian Nationalism and the book *Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical America: A Guide to Reclaiming the Good News of God's Grace*.

I think the book helps us keep focus on God's kingdom rather than human kingdoms.

In a chapter called "The Future is Hopeful, Not Something to Fear" the authors focus on the kingdom of God, noting how Jesus' vision of the Kingdom challenged traditional expectations:

He preached forgiveness, not revenge and love of enemies, not hatred. He preached peace rather than violence. He spoke of inclusion of those previously excluded. He embodied grace toward all people, both the occupied and the occupier. His dream was not simply of a reestablished nation but a restored humanity. (pp. 70-71)

So, my encouragement for you this week, or the seed I'm humbly and hopefully tossing out today is to listen for and look for signs of the Kingdom, and ways that you can be part of that Kingdom, with both acts of compassion and with clarity about our ultimate allegiance.



A good way to begin is with prayer. We can do a breath prayer with part of the Lord's Prayer. You can pray this at the breakfast table, at a red light, in the middle of a tense situation, when you're reading the news, or lying in bed at night.

Inhale: "Thy Kingdom come"

Exhale: "Thy will be done"

Amen.