

Signs of Understanding the Kingdom (13:51-58)

Good to see everybody this morning. If you have a bible, go with me in them to **Matthew 13**. Today we're going to wrap up this installment of our study through the book of Matthew, but **before we get there**, I wanted to take just a bit of our time to talk through the latest COVID-19 developments. As most of you probably heard, **this Tuesday, the CDC** updated some of their guidance and recommendations for COVID-19. Most significantly, they are **now recommending that even vaccinated people wear masks in public, indoor settings**. From what I've read, this guidance is to "maximize protection" against the new Delta variant strain of COVID, and to guard against possibly transmitting it to others. The CDC is doing their best to respond to data that is developing and changing in real-time, and offer guidance based on that.

So here's what we know so far. At this point, there is **overwhelming evidence that being vaccinated** protects you really well against being infected. While there have been cases of fully vaccinated people getting sick, those cases have been overwhelmingly mild, and hardly ever lead to hospitalization or to death. That could always change, of course, but as of now, that's what the data shows. **Which means, essentially, mask-wearing protects vaccinated people against mild, cold-like symptoms, and protects mainly unvaccinated people from severe illness and hospitalization.**

That said, there is a **much more effective option** out there for unvaccinated people if they want protection against being infected: and that's *getting vaccinated*. There are of course some people who *can't* be vaccinated (mainly children), but for anyone and everyone else, if you want to get vaccinated, you can literally set up an appointment today and get it done.

One thing that has been **very encouraging to me** personally is that **from what I know, a majority of people in our church have been vaccinated already**. **That isn't the case in our area as a whole, and for whatever reason, tends not to be the case for Christians and evangelicals as a whole, but it does seem to be the case with our church**. In fact, in general, you all have been a great model throughout the past sixteen months of being incredibly agreeable, and very sacrificial in how you responded to all of this. **Whereas many in our country have turned this whole thing into a political showdown**, you all have mostly just quietly served and loved your neighbor by wearing masks, or getting vaccinated, or whatever you've been asked to do.

And in part because of that posture in you, here's where we're at in regards to this new CDC guidance. ~~(We had planned...)~~ **We as a church are going to echo the CDC in recommending that you wear a mask, vaccinated or not, but we aren't going to**

make it mandatory. We won't stand at the door and insist that you wear a mask in order to attend. Our pastors and staff will wear them except for when they're on stage. Our City Kids volunteers will continue wearing them, because the kids they're serving *can't* get vaccinated. If you're *not* vaccinated, you should *already* be wearing a mask when you attend. But we're not going to mandate that everyone wear them. We'll leave that up to you. Now that said, if the data changes significantly, or if we have an instance of community spread happen at our Gatherings, we very well may have to reconsider that policy. But for now, that's where we'll leave it. Make sense?

So I'll just end here: if you *haven't* yet been vaccinated, I would just ask you to please consider being vaccinated. Most people would love nothing more than to put this whole ordeal behind us, and so far, all the data points to vaccination and herd immunity as the best way to make that happen. So that's my ask. If you choose not to, that's your choice, but I would ask you to consider it. *Maybe you think I'm just saying that because Bill Gates told me to and he's trying to take over the world. And he did offer me \$100 billion dollars yesterday but I don't think it's related.*

So if you have questions on how or why we made that decision, feel free to reach out to us, but that's the plan for now. Sound good? Okay. *All of that* said, I would love to not talk about COVID anymore and instead talk about Matthew. So let's get to the teaching. If you're new around here, we have been studying through **the book of Matthew** for the past several months straight, and for the past year on and off. And in *this* chapter of Matthew, chapter 13, Jesus has spent almost all of his time telling **parables** about the kingdom: these short stories that were meant to illustrate aspects of what life with God is like.

But these **parables also served to separate** those who understood and lived into that kind of life, from those who *didn't*. And today, as we bring chapter 13 to a close, things are going to continue in that vein. **We're going to get a parable from Jesus that explains what it looks like when a person understands what the kingdom is all about, and then a story from Matthew about what it looks like when people don't.**

So let's **dive in** and see what we can learn. Starting in v. 51:

[51] "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked (speaking at this point to just his disciples. "Yes," they replied.

So remember: throughout chapter 13, **Jesus has told quite a few parables.** And at least the *bulk* of them were **told to the crowd** as a *whole*. Now *you and I, the readers*, are fortunate in that Matthew, has *woven in* for us *explanations* that Jesus gave the disciples

after the fact. We essentially get the *cheat sheet* for understanding these parables. But you have to remember that **the overwhelming majority of the people who heard Jesus teach in parables didn't get those explanations at all**. For most people, they just showed up, Jesus got up there, told a seemingly random story about seeds or soil or bread or fish...and then walked off ("thank you for coming to my TED Talk"). And those people were left going "ummmm....okay? What was *that* all about?" The parables had a tendency to be incredibly confusing to most people.

And **because that was the tendency**, Jesus at this point wants to make sure that **at least his disciples do understand what he was saying**. So he turns and asks them "have you understood these things?" To which their answer is: "Yes, we understand...mostly because you explained it all to us in detail, but yes—we understand." So then Jesus does what we probably should've all seen coming: he **tells one more parable**. This one is a parable *about* the disciples' ability to understand parables. So it's a very *meta* parable. So let's read it:

[52] He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Okay. So before we attempt to unpack what this parable means, I need to give **a disclaimer**. In studying up on this passage the past several weeks, I consulted a total of eight commentaries on Matthew and on the parables of Jesus. And that's not a brag about how smart I am—it's a statement about precisely how *confused* I was by this parable. And in the *eight* that I looked at, there was basically **zero consensus** on what exactly Jesus meant by this parable. Some of them state *confidently one* thing that it means, and then one or two others would say that that meaning was ridiculous and wrong. And then others would just state three to five possible explanations and then say "we're pretty sure Jesus meant one of these five things. Good luck to you."

So all that to say, I'm **not gonna stand up here today** and pretend to be able to do something that at least eight people with more bible degrees than me *couldn't* do. Sorry if you expected someone smarter and more confident. But here's what I *am* going to do: I'm going to give you what I think is the *best* explanation of this parable that I read. And even if this *isn't* what Jesus meant by *this* parable, it is nonetheless a true idea taught elsewhere in the Scriptures. So worst case scenario, you walk out of here having learned and remembered a true thing from the bible—just not a true thing from this particular passage. I figure if I'm gonna *miss*, that's the right direction to miss *in*. Fair?

Okay. So Jesus' parable here is about a "teacher of the law" who becomes "a disciple of the kingdom." Now, we've encountered people called teachers of the law already in Matthew. Generally, they are found alongside the Pharisees, and were this group of well-educated experts in the Old Testament law. Studying the law was their *profession*. But because Jesus tells this parable to his *disciples*, and there don't seem to be any teachers of the law nearby, we think *here*, he could be using the term "teachers of the law" more *generically*. He could be simply referring to men and women who were very familiar with the Old Testament law *in general*. Which, because all of his immediate disciples were Jewish, would likely refer to *all* of them. They had all grown up being taught the Old Testament, and teaching it to others. So in a more informal sense, they were all "teachers of the law, who had *become* disciples in the kingdom." Make sense so far?

And then Jesus says that *every person like that* is "like the owner of a house, who brings out of his storeroom *new* treasures, as well as *old*." So what does he mean by *that*? Well from the way Jesus tells this parable, it would appear that the "old" treasures are the things that a *teacher of the law* is familiar with. The things detailed in what you and I call "the Old Testament"—the first five books of the bible, the Prophets, and the wisdom books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Those could be considered "old treasures."

The "new treasures" could refer to the things that a *disciple in the kingdom* would be familiar with. The things detailed and expounded on in what you and I call the New Testament. Jesus says when you're a teacher of the law-turned-disciple of the kingdom, you're familiar with *both old, and new*. You're like the owner of a house who brings out "new treasures as well as old." Does that all make sense? So in summary, we might put it like this: *understanding the kingdom looks like...*

Learning from All of the Scriptures

~~It looks like knowing and learning from all of the Scriptures: New Testament and Old.~~ Sometimes, *people tend to think* the Old Testament and the New Testament are kind of different *worlds*. That you have the Old Testament, which is kind of about rules and regulations and where God is super angry and quick-tempered, and then you have Jesus and the New Testament, where things get a little more chill and God's image gets a little makeover of sorts. Some people think that the Old and New Testament are two very different worlds. Or *worse*, that now that we have the New Testament, we don't really *need* the Old anymore. That it's the outdated version that doesn't have much relevance to us. To the point that you can literally buy bibles that are New Testament only. As if the Old Testament isn't even necessary to *have*.

But I want you to **contrast that with** places like **Matthew 5**, where Jesus says this:

*“Do not think that I have come to **abolish** the Law or the Prophets (or what you and I refer to as the “Old Testament”); I have **not come to abolish them but to fulfill** them. For truly I tell you, until **heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished** (that’s about as strongly as you could put that). **Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands** (anyone who ignores them or overlooks them or pretends they aren’t important) **and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**”*

So suffice it to say, **Jesus does not feel as if** the “old” things in the bible are irrelevant. Quite the contrary, in fact. He says that those things actually point to and lead us to the “new” things. *He* actually thinks the old and new work in *tandem* with one another. **The things in the New Testament help us understand what the Old Testament was pointing towards, and the things in the Old Testament help us understand the things that the New Testament fulfills. There’s a symbiotic relationship there.** It’s not that one *nullifies* the other; they shed *light* on and *inform* each other.

~~Practically speaking, **this is why we want to learn** from both the Old Testament *and* the new here at City Church. The first book of the *bible* we ever studied through on Sunday together as a church was the book of *Jonah* in the Old Testament. One of the first teaching series we did was on Old Testament narratives and how they point to the realities of who Jesus is. The plan leading up to Christmas this year is to spend some time in the Old Testament prophet *Isaiah* and glean from *it*. It is massively important to us that we not only spend our time exploring “new treasures,” but also “old.” It’s important to us to learn and read from *all* of the Scriptures.~~

Now, that said, I know that a lot of the bible—especially the Old Testament—**can be difficult** to understand at times. So if you need some help getting started, let me give you **a very tangible next step** to take. Out in the lobby, there are Bible Reading Plan booklets we had printed for a series a couple years ago. We still have lots of them left over. They technically run January–December, but you are more than welcome to cross those months out at the top and make them start on August 1 or 2 or whatever.

In them, you’ll find a reading from the Old Testament and the New Testament each day, and each time you start a new book of the bible, there is a **short, 7ish minute animated video** from the Bible Project that gives you some really helpful background on what

you're about to read. I fully believe that if you do that for a year (or however long it takes), you will come out the other side being incredibly well-versed in both the Old and New Testaments. You'll be like "the owner of a house, who brings out of his house old treasures and new." Make sense? **When we truly understand the kingdom** of Jesus, we grasp the importance of learning from and knowing *all* of the Scriptures. **That's one sign** that a person has *understood* the kingdom.

The second one is *also* in that parable, but you might have *missed* it as we went by. Notice that Jesus didn't just say a person like that *has* new and old treasures—he said they what? "**Bring them out of their storeroom.**" The assumption there is that they're bringing them out for *others* to see and experience and enjoy. So **the second sign of understanding the kingdom** is...

Teaching Others What You've Been Taught

Throughout his life and ministry, **Jesus wasn't just teaching his disciples** things so that they could grow smarter and wiser and more mature—he was teaching them things for them to teach others. So they could bring their treasures *out of the storeroom*. **This is so difficult for us** to remember, especially in a knowledge-based culture like ours, but is so very important: **as a follower of Jesus, the point is never to just know things for the sake of knowing them.** (I'll say that again). **The point is always to put into practice what we know, and quite often, the point is to teach what we know to others.** We actually **just saw that in our Matthew 5** passage too: Jesus said the person who is "greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the person who **"practices and teaches"** what they've learned from the Scriptures.

So when you sit down with the Scriptures in the morning, or afternoon—or whenever you happen to do that—the temptation is to read it *only* for *you*: "God, what do you have in these pages for *me*? What do you want *me* to learn? What do you want *me* to grow in? What do you want to *teach me, tell me*?" And hear me, that's *vital*ly important—we absolutely can't bypass that.

But I want to **suggest that you also accompany that** question with "God, what do you have in here for *others*? What do you have in here that would be helpful to someone in our church, in my family, in my LifeGroup? To someone at my workplace or someone I'm friends with? What do you have in these pages that you might want to tell them or speak to them, and how might you want to use *me* to do it?" **All of us have likely had the experience** where we read something in the bible and go "yeah I don't really feel like that applies to me right now. That's a cool thing, a true thing, a helpful thing...but it just doesn't seem like that's what *I needed* in this moment." And that *might* be true—it might

be that what we read wasn't *for us*...it was for somebody else. And God wants to use us to deliver it.

I think it's **also** so important that we do this **when it comes to hearing teaching** from the bible, in settings like this one. The temptation for us often when we hear teaching from the bible is to receive it through the lens of whether or not it was relevant to us (the individual). "That teaching really helped *me*," "really convicted *me*," "was really relevant to *me*." Or inversely, "yeah, that teaching didn't really apply to *me*." "That sermon *didn't* really seem all that relevant to where *I'm* at." But that's not the only way to evaluate teaching from the bible.

For instance, a friend of mine got to travel to **Kenya for a mission trip** one time. And while he was there, he got to sit in on a number of different church services. In one of them, they were teaching through the book of 1 Corinthians, and the sermon specifically that day was on the section of 1 Corinthians where it is talking almost entirely about *singleness*. The *interesting* thing was that he knew that in that particular church, literally everyone who was old enough to be married, *was* married. But as the pastor was preaching on singleness, he looked around and saw people furiously scribbling notes and letting out "amens"—everyone was *incredibly engaged* during the sermon. After the service, he went and asked his host family why that was. He said "I don't mean to sound ignorant, but why was everyone in the room so interested in this sermon on *singleness*, even though they're all married?" His host said back to him, "oh in Kenya, we don't just listen for *ourselves*—we listen for *others* too." Their belief was that the Scriptures aren't just taught for their individual benefit, but so that they could benefit *others* with what they learned.

So **what if God has us listening to teachings** sometimes, not just for *our* benefit, but for *others*? What if God has you hearing a teaching about *suffering*, not because *you* are currently suffering and need it, but because a *friend* or a *family member* is? What if God has you hearing a teaching on *decision-making*, not because *you* currently need it, but because someone *else* does? What if God has you hearing a teaching on how to read the bible, not because *you* need help doing it, but because you need additional tools to teach *someone else* how to do it? It's so easy for us to forget that aspect of teaching, but it's vitally important to what it means to follow Jesus.

Participation in the kingdom of God is just as much about what we *impart* to others as it is about what is imparted *to us*. So **who are you imparting things to?** When you read the Scriptures, or hear *teaching from* the Scriptures, what might it look like to *add* things—new and old—to your "storeroom," so that you can seize opportunities

to take that treasure out, and *share* it with others? That's what I think Jesus is getting at here. Make sense?

Okay. So we just got **two signs of understanding** the kingdom. Now chapter 13 is going to **wrap up with a story** about some people who *don't* understand.. Pick it up with me in v. 53:

*[53] When Jesus had **finished** these parables, he **moved on** from there. [54] Coming to his **hometown** (a town called Nazareth), he began **teaching** the people in their synagogue (what a great place to teach if you want more “teachers of the law” to become “disciples in the kingdom,” right?), and they were amazed. “Where did this **man** get this **wisdom** and these **miraculous powers**?” they asked. [55] “Isn't this the **carpenter's son**? Isn't his **mother's** name Mary, and aren't his **brothers** James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? [56] Aren't all his **sisters with us**? Where then did this **man** get all these things?” [57] And they **took offense at him**. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without **honor** except in his own **town** and in his own **home**.” [58] And he did not do many miracles there because of their **lack of faith**.*

So Jesus **returns to Nazareth, where he grew up**, and is teaching and preaching in the synagogues there. But as he does, he starts to encounter an interesting reception. People start asking questions like “isn't this Mary's son?” “Didn't he grow up here?” “Don't we know his brothers and his sisters?” “Where did he get all of this wisdom and these miraculous powers?”

And if you think about it, this response from the people of Nazareth actually **makes a lot of sense**. Have any of you had somebody you grew up with all of a sudden become a very big deal? So let's say there was a kid in your hometown named **Timmy**. You grew up with Timmy, you know Timmy. And one day you see on Facebook, or you hear from your mom or dad, that Timmy is now a Hollywood producer. Or Timmy just got drafted by a pro-level baseball team. Or Timmy started a company and is now a millionaire. And you're like “wow—Timmy? Really? *That* Timmy? Awkward, never talked to anybody, *Timmy?*” Doesn't it usually seem like the most *random* people? I think that's at least a *version* of the experience the people of Nazareth are having here in the passage. “Jesus? Really? Jesus that grew up *here*? Mary's son? James' *brother*? Weird. Okay, I guess.”

But in Jesus' case, the passage says, that experience actually leads to some **opposition**. It says in v. 57 that *because* of all of that familiarity with Jesus, they “took offense” at him. We've talked about that phrase “took offense” before. It's a phrase that literally means to

“stumble” or “trip” on something. **The people of Nazareth are so incredulous at this idea that Jesus, from their hometown, does miracles and displays such wisdom, that it actually causes them to *stumble*.** It causes them to disbelieve in the reality of who Jesus is. **In other words, the people of Nazareth had just enough familiarity with Jesus to prevent them from seeing who he really was.**

And I've got to think that in that way, **some of us** might have something in common with the people of Nazareth. After all, we're in **Knoxville, Tennessee**. Where there is almost *literally* a church on every corner—there's *two* churches on some corners. And furthermore, a lot of us grew up *in* and *around* church. If you're like *me*, your parents had you in church every time the doors were open. If you asked a lot of us about Jesus, we could tell you all the stories. We could tell you about how he was born in a manger and how he's the son of God and how he taught people to love one another. We could tell you that he went to the cross to “die for our sin” and to forgive us, and that if you accept that, you get to live forever with him. **Many people in our area, and likely many of us sitting in this room, have a high degree of familiarity with Jesus.**

But here's the thing: **familiarity with Jesus isn't what saves you.** The *Pharisees* were as *familiar* as a person could be with the God of the bible, but were often as *far* as they could be from the *heart* of God. The people of *Nazareth* were *familiar* with Jesus, and at the same time had *no idea* who he was. Jesus even says at one point that one day, people will say to him, “didn't we cast out demons in your name, didn't we do mighty works in your name—Jesus, didn't we *identify ourselves with you* in everything we did?” And Jesus says he'll say to them, “sure—but I never *knew you*.” **Familiarity isn't what saves you.** Familiarity with God doesn't always indicate a relationship *with* God. **And sometimes, familiarity can also be a very dangerous thing.** It can convince us we don't need to know any more, study any further, wrestle any harder with the things of God. And it can convince us that we know who Jesus is—when in reality, we haven't even scratched the surface.

So **how do we avoid that experience?** How do we *keep* familiarity from being a hindrance to truly knowing and loving Jesus for who he is? How do we avoid the mistake Nazareth made in how they understood Jesus? The *answer* we get to that question in the Scriptures is very simple. We actually mentioned it in our first teaching in Matthew 13. We said then that **this word “understand” in the gospels doesn't just mean to *intellectually comprehend a concept*. It means to hear something, agree with it, and then *put it together with action*.** To use Jesus' language from Matthew 5, it's to put *it into practice*. The answer is that we *hear*, and then we *respond* to what we've heard.

James 1 puts it this way:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James says that **when all we do is hear** the teachings of the Scriptures, we actually run the risk of “*deceiving ourselves.*” There’s something about hearing without doing that actually makes us believe things about ourselves that aren’t true. We start to believe that we’re good with Jesus simply because we *know* things *about* him. We start to think we are faithfully following him just because we can regurgitate true statements about him. James says “whatever you do, don’t fall into that trap.” Don’t deceive yourself into thinking that *hearing* things from the bible is the same as *doing* what the bible says. Instead, “*do what it says.*” The way to ensure that you’re not just *familiar* with Jesus, but that you actually *know* him...is to listen and then do what he says. To hear, and to practice.

When you feel the Spirit pressing on you that **the way you save and spend** your money isn’t consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures: you don’t just continue offering empty platitudes like “‘generosity is very important to me’ and ‘it’s all God’s anyway’.” You respond by confessing that your life isn’t consistent with the Scriptures, and then you *actually allow Jesus to change* how you spend and save your money.

When you feel the Spirit pressing on you that **the relationship with your boyfriend or girlfriend** isn’t healthy or maybe doesn’t reflect what the Scriptures teach us about sex: you don’t just say “yeah, I know it’s wrong, but we really love each other—I’m sure Jesus forgives us” and continue about your way. You go “Jesus is king—which means if he says this is wrong, *it’s wrong.*” So I’m gonna confess that, I’m gonna break off the relationship, be done with it, and I’m gonna do things that way.

When you feel the Spirit impressing upon you that your **relationship with alcohol** isn’t *healthy*—that more often than not, you’re drinking more than you need to, you’re getting carried away...you don’t just say “oh, it was just an accident,” or “it’s not a big deal.” You say “I belong to Jesus’ kingdom, and so I’m going to repent of this, and trust in him.”

Does that make sense? **This is what it means** and this is what it looks like to follow Jesus. The Scriptures are too helpful to just be familiar with. *Jesus* is too good to just be *familiar* with—he’s worth knowing and following with everything in us. He’s worth giving our time and our money and our efforts and our hearts to. He’s worth *hearing and responding* to. And **when you respond to Jesus, what you encounter is the grace and mercy of God. You encounter the Jesus who poured out his life and gave up his breath to rescue and call people into his kingdom. You encounter the one who**

wants to make you more and more into his image, and into who you were made to be. And let me tell you: there's no better way to live.

So **here's where we'll land:** if there's something this morning that you know you need to respond to Jesus on: an area of your life that isn't yet right, a part of your heart that isn't yet his—can I just encourage you to do something about that? Can I encourage you to not allow *familiarity* with Jesus to get in the way of *intimacy* with Jesus? Can I encourage you to know him—not just with your mind or your intellect—but with your heart and your spirit? To *understand*: which means to hear, and *respond*.

I **don't know what exactly it is** this morning, but I would bet there's at least one thing for a *lot* of us. One thing that we could press in on, respond to Jesus in—and allow his grace and his light and his truth to do something in us, beginning today. So I'm just gonna ask the band to play quietly for a bit and give some space for us to ask God what that is? What area of our lives do we need to hear God on?

We've been **in this series about responses** *to the kingdom*, but I don't want to end it without giving us one more chance to ask “what do we need to respond to the kingdom on?” Just ask God if you want: *what is it?* What is it that I need to listen and respond *to*? What is it that I need to do work on? Where is it that I need to let your grace and your truth break in?

Give people space to do this and feel it out...