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## ON BEING THE RESISTANCE Matthew 13

### INTRODUCTION

“I didn’t see that coming.” We hear that every now and then. I say that a lot as a result of living with Laurie. Life is never boring with her because she is so full of life and spontaneity. A couple of days ago we were using some wipes we had bought to clean the inside of our car. Laurie at one point said, “Oh, oh, oh no.” I asked what happened. She said, “The steering column ate the wipe.” I was at a bit of a loss to understand how that was possible and I expressed this to her. She said she was cleaning the column and there was a hole in it, and the wipe went down the hole. She said, “Do you think that’s going to be a problem?” I said, “Well, I don’t suppose it will destroy the steering. On the other hand, I doubt Nissan intended the steering column to be a trash receptacle.” I definitely did not see that coming. Yesterday at one point I came downstairs and found Laurie with a big smile on her face. She said, “Look what I have.” She was holding a pair of small tongs, and in them was that wipe. She had managed to fish it out of the steering column. I didn’t see that coming either.

The “I didn’t see that coming” thing is big in movies. It is a fundamental plot element in many movies. One of the classics of all time came in The Empire Strikes Back when Darth Vader said to Luke Skywalker, “Luke, I am your Father.” Didn’t see that coming. Jesus’ life was a long series of “Didn’t see that coming moments. Didn’t see the birth of Messiah in a stable coming. And the climax of his life, his death and resurrection, were both “didn’t see that coming” moments. Today we are going to look at Matthew 13 where Jesus tells a series of parables about the coming kingdom of heaven. This is a major “didn’t see that coming” moment. What Jesus does in this chapter is a total shock.

In Matthew 12 Jesus had some encounters with the religious leaders of his people that culminated in their complete rejection of him. They began trying to figure out a way to terminate him with extreme prejudice. Jesus had been attacking the ideas of the religious establishment pretty much from the outset as we saw in the Sermon on the Mount. But now there is an open break between Jesus on one hand and the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the Law of Moses on the other. Increasingly Jesus is forcing the people of Israel to make a choice. This put people in a difficult position. Today the Pharisees mostly have a bad reputation. To be a Pharisee is to be rigid, judgmental, legalistic and hypocritical. But that’s not the way it was in first century Judea. The Pharisees were the most respected people in that society.

They were genuinely serious about the faith that all Jews claimed, and practiced it to a degree that was well beyond the reach of most people. They were learned, sincere and dedicated. Many were drawn to Jesus. But wasn't there some way to accept him and the Pharisees too? Jesus told them there wasn't, and so they had some tough choices to make. They knew that to break with the Pharisees would lead to some painful social consequences.

Jesus knew that the one thing that might entice people to follow him was the idea that he was the Messiah who had come to finally usher in the long awaited Kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven. A choice between the status quo with the Pharisees on the one hand or the power and glory of the kingdom of heaven with Jesus Messiah on the other was an easy one to make. The kingdom trumped everything. However, it was the kingdom that people were misperceiving.

Jesus' contemporaries heard the messages of the ancient Jewish prophets like Isaiah and longed for their fulfillment. Isaiah said of Messiah in Isaiah 9:7, "Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. For he will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever." In verse 3 he says of him, "You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy." In verse 4 he said, "You have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."

These prophecies say this coming King, the Messiah, will defeat those who oppress Israel, clearly Rome qualified, and usher in an age when Israel would be the preeminent power. Other prophecies show the whole world coming to pay homage in Jerusalem, because Messiah will rule over all. It will be a time of peace, power and glory for the nation of Israel. The Jewish rabbi Maimonides wrote, "there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful and all delicacies as available as dust." It will be a time of peace, everlasting joy and abundance. The peace will be so great the wolf will lie down with the lamb.

This was the kingdom of heaven everyone wanted. Jesus' disciples expected that kind of kingdom from Messiah. In Acts 1:6 after Jesus had died and then come back to life, after they finally got the picture of who he really is, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Are you finally going to unleash that divine power of yours and clean house? We are ready for that kingdom to come, Lord, so bring it on.

In Matthew 13 Jesus tells a series of parables that explain some hidden truth about the Kingdom of Heaven. What he says could not have been more shocking. The truths he reveals were so radical that many couldn't even understand what he was saying. There are Jewish people today who have a concept of the Kingdom of Heaven not much different than that of Jesus' contemporaries. They claim that Jesus could not have been the Messiah because he did not bring about the peace, the abundance, the power and glory of the kingdom Isaiah and the others described. All of this has some considerable relevance for us because we share some similar desires to those first century Jewish people. We want a lot of the same things from Messiah that they did. So we need to listen to understand the truth about his Kingdom. Let's look at Matthew 13.

## EXPOSITION

### THE KINGDOM WON'T BE UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED

The first 9 verses of the chapter relate the familiar parable of the soils. A farmer sows his seed. Some falls on rocky soil, some on spots where the soil was very shallow, some among thorns, and some on good soil. This is another example of Jesus' sense of humor. This was not one of his knee slapping jokes, but a story that would elicit some smiles and a few chuckles. When a farmer plants seed he plows the ground in rows that are as straight and as evenly spaced as he can make them. Then he goes and plants the seeds in the furrows, in the places he has prepared for his crops to grow.

But this nut job farmer just throws his seed all over the place. He doesn't take care to plant in the prepared soil. He's just flinging seeds all over creation, so some of the seed lands on rocks, among the weeds, in terrible soil. It never has a chance to take root and grow there, but he doesn't seem to care. Jesus' listeners were thinking that this guy is either a comically inept farmer or he is just clueless, so dense light bends around him. Actually this "farmer" is full of grace and kindness. Verse 19 says the seed is the message of the kingdom of heaven. He spreads the seed far and wide, so that all get to hear it.

The typical approach to this story is to consider what each of the soils mean and how that could be us. Surely we don't want to be that rock hard soil that a seed can't even penetrate, nor do we want to have the seed take root but be so stressed by the stuff of this world that it chokes the seed out completely. We are then challenged to be the good soil that gladly receives the message about the kingdom and produces abundant crops, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times greater than what was sown. The challenge then is to think about what kind of soil we are and to become that good soil that produces a bumper crop.

Much of my life that's how I saw this parable. But if that's correct Jesus' disciples must have been pretty slow on the uptake. The meaning of the parable is obvious, so how come they had to ask Jesus to explain it to them? The fact that it was not obvious to them should clue us in to the fact that maybe we're missing something. It is easy for us to view this little story through the lens of a fully revealed gospel. We have a thoroughly different frame of reference today from that of Jesus' contemporaries, and this causes us to miss the real point Jesus was making.

Think about the prevailing view of the coming Kingdom of God. It was powerful, conquering. Was it going to depend on people being good soil that would accept it? No way. It was going to rumble over every kind of soil, and all of it would become subject to it, whether it wanted to or not, because kingdoms are about military force and about power in this world.

This kingdom that Jesus depicted was another animal altogether. People could be rocky soil that would not receive the message of the kingdom at all. They could be soil that was thin, that would at first buy into it, but immediately go away. Some would accept the message of the kingdom, but that initial acceptance would be choked out by the stress of life. Wait, if it's a kingdom of riches, peace and power, who is going to have their heart hardened to that? How is stress going to choke out a message of riches and power?

This story would have been completely bewildering to people in Jesus' day. They had no paradigm for understanding a messianic kingdom like this. Kingdoms are about power, ruling, force. They are about military conquest and powerful rulers taking over. But Jesus claimed his kingdom was something that would be offered to people, and they could choose to reject it. In fact, the story suggests most will do so and only a minority will receive the news of the kingdom.

This story was stunning. It said the kingdom is totally different than they envisioned. It is something that can be rejected. That being the case it obviously could look nothing like the awesome earthly kingdom that everyone wanted. This isn't about what kind of soil we are at all. It is about what kind of kingdom Jesus brings. It is a kingdom utterly at odds with human expectation. Jesus' disciples had trouble understanding the meaning of the story because they could not imagine the kingdom of heaven being resisted and rejected, so this made no sense to them. Jesus was going to do something utterly different than they expected.

## THE KINGDOM WILL EXIST IN A WORLD OF WEEDS

In the next story a farmer sows his seed in his field, but while he is sleeping some fiendish enemy comes and sows weeds in the field. I think that same guy has been at work in the front and back yards at my house. We once put nice grass sod in

there, but now there is as much weed as there is grass. We didn't do that. How did those weeds get there? That weed fiend did it!

Early on the farmer has no clue. There are just seeds planted out there in the field. He doesn't know that now lots of those seeds are for plants he wants no part of. But when the crops start growing he gets bad news. There's as much weed out there as barley. At that point Jesus' listeners were cackling. Man, Jesus' farmer is terrible. He doesn't know how to plant, and now he's ticked somebody off so much that just toilet papering his house won't do. He's got an enemy who seriously wants to do him harm. The farmer's field hands ask if he wants them to try to pull the weeds out of the field. He tells them to just leave the weeds until harvest time. If they try to pull them out they're likely to ruin the whole crop.

Um, okay, what's all that about? Once again this depicts a kingdom that is completely unexpected. What are they expecting? A powerful kingdom that will rule over everyone and will bring peace to all. Jesus is saying that's not how it's going to go. There are going to be weeds in the world and the Kingdom will co-exist with them. It will not eradicate them the way they envisioned it happening.

The bad news is that we can be in this kingdom and still be surrounded by weeds. There will be weedy people. The problem with weedy people is they cause problems for other people. If there is only one weedy person in the world, there will be trouble, because weedy people cause trouble. William Willimon, Duke University chaplain, said this parable speaks to the issue of the mess of this world. "If this is God's world, then one should expect God to have done a better job of making it seem more like God's world. Here we have war, injustice, pain, suffering, sickness." It is a weedy world indeed.

The point here is that the kingdom of heaven is not going to be the bed of roses that everyone in Jesus' day thought it was going to be. Yes, there's will be roses in the bed, but they will be surrounded by weeds. With those weeds come some difficulties, disappointments, conflicts and frustrations. That was an aspect of the kingdom of heaven that no one saw coming.

#### THE KINGDOM WILL START SMALL BUT SPREAD

Next Jesus said his mysterious kingdom is going to be like a mustard seed. I know approximately zero about mustard seeds from personal experience. I've never actually planted one. I found out that the mustard seed really is small, only 1 or 2 millimeters in diameter. But it is not the smallest seed in the world. There are orchid seeds so small they cannot be seen by the naked eye. Oh, so Jesus was mistaken? No, he was not intending to make a technical botanical statement. The

mustard seed was the smallest known to Palestinian farmers, the smallest seed they would plant in a garden or field.

This tiny seed produces a plant that would be large in one's garden. It is a tree that can grow as high as 25 feet, which would be enormous compared to tomato plants, carrots, broccoli and any other garden plants. Jesus point is that is how it is going to go with his kingdom. It is going to start small, so small as to be negligible. Yet it is going to grow dramatically. He then adds a second picture. It will be like yeast that works through the whole loaf of dough. In other words, the kingdom will expand until it is found throughout the entire world. Jesus is prophesying the future of the church, that would start as a negligible, tiny movement, but today be a world wide presence.

Once again this is a surprising picture. What kind of kingdom did everyone back then think the Messiah would institute? I have 3 words for you. Shock and awe. In 1996 Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade presented a report to the National Defense University in which they proposed a military doctrine called Rapid Dominance. They defined it as attempting "to affect the will, perception and understanding of an adversary to fight...through imposing a regime of shock and awe." That doctrine was specifically applied in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to remarkable effect. That is precisely what people expected the Messiah's kingdom would be like. It would be big, powerful irresistible, awesome and noisy.

Jesus completely baffled people with this one. How could God's kingdom start out like a tiny seed? They liked the idea that it would grow to fill the earth, but this start small thing was mystifying indeed. This kingdom is going to disappoint many people. So Jesus had to tell us some good news.

### THE KINGDOM IS MOST PRECIOUS

Next Jesus pictures a man going on a walk through a field. This guy apparently was not a farmer and this field isn't a farm, just a field. However, as he is strolling through the field to his great surprise he stumbles across a treasure trove that is hidden away. This story raises all sorts of questions for me. Where did this treasure come from? Was this buried pirate treasure? Was this some drug dealer's stash of cash, in which case messing with it was a really bad idea. And how did this random stroller "just happen" to stumble upon the treasure. You have to figure whoever it belonged to would have hidden it very well, so how did this guy know where it is?

Unfortunately Jesus doesn't answer any of those questions for us. All he tells us is that he hid the treasure again, went out and sold everything he had to raise enough money to buy the field. The man found something that had much greater value than all of his possessions put together, so he hocked them all in order to buy the field and take ownership of this most valuable treasure.

Jesus followed that up with a story about a guy finding a pearl so valuable he did the same thing. Sold all he had to buy the pearl. The fact that Jesus essentially told the same story twice tells you this was especially important. This strange kingdom Jesus brings is very different than the kingdom you think you want. But it is infinitely more valuable.

We have a neighbor who owns the mineral rights to some land out in the desert. The land would seem to be of no worth. It is desolate and far from population centers. It is not arable and you can't build anything there because no one wants to go there. So why did he spend good money to obtain those rights? He bought them because there are rare earth minerals there. Rare earth minerals aren't actually all that rare, but currently the main sources of them are in China. They are important for application in many high tech products like satellites, smart phones, hybrid and electric car batteries and so on.

Suppose one day I see a sign up in his front yard informing all that his house is for sale. I would ask him, "Why are you selling your house? I thought you really like the neighborhood." Then suppose he glances around, then quietly says, "Rick, I'm going to let you in on a secret, but you need to keep it quiet. Don't tell anyone." "Okay." Then he says, "I've gotten a thorough geological analysis of my land up in the desert. The geologists say there is a minimum of 20 tons of lanthanum up there. I'm selling the house to raise money to begin the process of mining it." Lanthanum is used in those hybrid car batteries. It sells currently at \$64 per gram. That works out to \$29,000 a pound. If you do the math you'll see that a ton of it is worth \$58 million. My friend's 20 tons is worth \$1.1 billion. Would you think he's foolish to sell his house? I wouldn't. He's going to make over a billion dollars! With that he could buy our entire neighborhood and have well more than \$900 million left over.

He is doing the reasonable thing, for what he is going to get with the money he receives from selling his house is going to turn into a fortune worth many, many times the value of his house. This is the crucial point of this chapter. This kingdom is not at all what you expected, but it is far more valuable than the kingdom you think you want. Give up that one for this brave new kingdom. Jesus says this strange kingdom that he is talking about might be a big disappointment to people

who were expecting that awesome, powerful, physical kingdom. But in fact it is the great treasure. It is the pearl beyond price. It is worth infinitely more than that physical kingdom would have been worth. It is so valuable one would be wise to give up everything else just to have it, including one's dreams of power, glory, status, and abundance here in this present world.

### THE KINGDOM WILL EVENTUALLY BRING JUSTICE

The last parable speaks of how judgment will come at the end of the age. A net is let down from a boat and scoops up lots of fish of all kinds. Some are worth keeping, others are not. The bad are tossed away and the good are kept. Jesus said that is like what will happen at the end of this age when final judgment comes.

This is like what Jesus described in the story of the wheat and the weeds, but the emphasis is a bit different. In that one the emphasis was on the fact that there would continue to be weeds in the world even after the kingdom came. In this parable the message was that the kingdom would bring justice, but not immediately. It would happen, but only at the end of this age. This was not what the people of that day expected. They thought the king would use his power and make all evil people, especially enemies and oppressors of Israel pay, and he would do it quickly.

I caught the end of the action movie *London Has Fallen* on TV recently. Not a great movie, but in the end the really bad guy is defeated and killed and the good guys survive. It was a satisfying ending. There are a lot of people in the movie industry who prefer movies with what they typically call more nuanced endings. In those good doesn't win out. Maybe nobody wins, or it is unclear if good even exists. That's actually a position that derives from world views where there is no truth, there is no good or evil, or that believes in life good doesn't win. Mostly justice doesn't happen in the world.

The problem with that is that human nature wants there to be justice. We can't help it. We want wrong to be righted. We want things to be set right. We want evil to be punished and good rewarded. We want the happy ending. What is the usual parental response to the child's common complaint, "that's not fair"? It's "life isn't fair." But that bothers us. We want life to be fair. Theologian N. T. Wright says, "We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse for a moment a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently." He says our longing for justice "comes with the kit of being human."



What Jesus said is that the kingdom of God will finally bring justice. But it won't be right away. He was not going to serve the evil Romans a heaping plate of "now you get yours." Yes, God will some day bring the justice all long for, but it is at the end of the age, and that time did not come in Jesus' day. We still wait for it today.

With these stories Jesus was giving people a first glimpse at the reality that was to come, one that was not what they were looking for. It was a kingdom that most would reject, that would exist in a world full of weeds, that early on would not be big, powerful, splashy and obvious, but would be so small as to be unnoticed, that would be precious beyond calculation, but would not immediately bring the justice and power that so many were hoping for and anticipating.

The people thought the kingdom of heaven would be about finally having power, being on top and winning in this world. It is about having power and winning, but in ways totally different than we typically expect and think we want.

#### APPLICATION

You've probably seen a scene in one that goes something like this. The good guys are surrounded, facing impossible odds. They are desperately calling for assistance or all is lost. Headquarters tell them there is not much they can do because they have limited resources and not enough to overcome the forces threatening the small group of good guys, but they promise to send what help they can. Finally the help is able to sneak through enemy forces and reach them. One man shows up. The beleaguered good guys ask, "where's the rest of your team?" He says, "I'm it." "There's no one else?" "No, just me." Hearts sink, for they now know that all is lost. One man isn't going to make any difference at all. To call what they feel disappointment is a gross understatement. They are in despair, for now it is undeniable that there is no hope.

Matthew 13 reminds me of that kind of scene. God's people are beleaguered, desperate, hoping for and calling for help from heaven. Literally heaven is their only hope. Heaven answers and sends the hoped for assistance. Matthew 13 is that scene when the desperate people begin to realize that the answer is not at all what they thought they needed. In fact, it is a total disappointment. This is it? This is no help at all. In the movie, of course, the people don't realize that one man is a cross between Jason Bourne, Triple X, Ethan Hunt of the Mission Impossible movies and Rambo. He is a one man army that will shock the enemy and destroy them all. Jesus wasn't a one man army that would destroy the hated Romans, but he would defeat all of our worst enemies and bring life to God's beleaguered people.

## REALIZE THE KINGDOM IS PRICELESS

Our problem is we are like the people of Israel. We think what we want is the same kind of stuff they wanted. It is power in this world, it is glory, it is wealth, it is security, it is status. We think if we had those we would have all that we want and life would be good. The ancient Jews believed that. If they could knock Rome off, become the world superpower, experience miraculous wealth, have peace and safety, then all would be great.

But Jesus brought a kingdom that is different. It is not of this world. Let me repeat that. It is not of this world. It is not about us being rich, safe, healthy, famous, powerful. It is the kingdom of heaven. It is about having our hearts and souls healed and made whole. It is about finally being free of guilt. We know we don't measure up to what we ought to be and certainly not to what God requires us to be, and that leaves us with guilt. But in the kingdom of heaven we are forgiven. We are loved, accepted, valued, even celebrated like the prodigal son returning home, despite that gap. That is a huge relief. The kingdom is about living in God's presence safe, secure and loved. It is about having his life coursing through us, filling us with his love, his fullness, his joy, his peace and his grace. It is about living for what God values and what he commands. what heaven values. It is a place where God rules. What he says goes. It is a beautiful kingdom that leads to a beautiful existence.

Recently we were co-signing papers with Toby and Anna so they could buy their new home up in Orange County. It was an hour long session of signing an endless stack of tedious but arcane documents whose significance is a total mystery to me. We made it as fun as we could. Near the end of the time the escrow officer said, "Your family get-togethers must be a real riot." We assured her they are.

On Easter Sunday we had everyone in our family at our house for dinner. We had a wonderful meal. But more than that we had a time when we experienced so much joy and love. There was abundant laughter. It was so good just to be together and enjoy each other, to laugh at the antics of the kids. It was so fun Ella didn't want it to end. Her Mom and Dad began saying it was time to go because it was nearing bed time. They said, "We need to put your shoes on." She said, "No shoe on." Then she looked at her parents and said, "Bye, bye, Dadden," (her word for Daddy), "Bye, bye, Mama." In other words, "I'm good with you leaving but I'm staying." It hit me that in those few hours we experienced a little taste of the Kingdom of Heaven. There was love, joy, laughter, togetherness. Like Ella, I didn't want it to end. That was just a brief, imperfect taste of the kingdom. The more we live in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Christ, the more of that

we will experience. To experience it in its fullness is more wonderful than anything I can imagine and it is certainly beyond my ability to express.

We keep thinking that things which are the most valuable are possessions, position, status, power, success, acclaim, security. Those are not the great treasure. You could have all of those and if you lacked the kingdom of heaven, you would find it to be frustratingly incomplete and empty. We must start with the understanding that the kingdom that Jesus was offering, the one he instituted in his work in this world, that totally unexpected kingdom, is far and away more valuable than anything else we could have know or experience.

### VALUE THE KINGDOM

The late Dallas Willard talked about how he grew up in a rural area that in his early years did not have electricity. He remembered when electric service first came to his area. What a blessing it brought. Lights at night, electric appliances, so many good things. But he remembers there were people who didn't trust it. Some were even afraid of electricity. So they continued to live in the dark, refusing what electricity could bring to them. They didn't experience its blessings. Likewise, the Kingdom of Heaven has come, bringing with it incredible blessing. But we can choose to reject it and forego its blessing. To live in the kingdom of Christ is to let him be our king, to let him rule. In so doing we experience the blessing of that kingdom, which nothing else can give us.

But what will that mean in this world? We'd like it to mean what the ancient Jews wanted it to mean. Jesus rules and we rule with him. We have the power and the glory that those ancient Jews longed for. But that's not what it means. During World War 2 the Nazis overran Europe. For years they dominated and oppressed, and wreaked incredible evil everywhere. There were underground groups that fought back. They were called the Resistance. They faced an enormously superior enemy. They could not go to war with them and defeat them. They could harass them, disrupt them, help Allied airmen who were shot down and the few Allied prisoners of war that escaped. What they could not do was defeat the Nazis on their own. Nevertheless, they kept fighting. What kept them fighting was the hope that the Allies were going to invade Europe. They were coming some time in the future with all their might, and if they did then the Nazis could be defeated.

That is like us. That is how the kingdom works in the world right now. We are the Resistance. We are a minority in the world. We face overwhelming odds. We cannot defeat the enemy on our own power. But the Lord is someday going to

invade, and when he does he will win. This is where our hope is. Knowing that he is coming we can keep on fighting.

So let's remember this kingdom is the treasure of greatest worth. Let's sell all we have for it. That doesn't literally mean let's get rid of all our possessions, but it does mean let's treasure this kingdom above all else. What if you are betrayed and stabbed in the back by a friend? What if you are cheated and lose money? What if the career you hoped for is a total failure? These are hard, sad things. But you have the kingdom of heaven, and that is more precious than the best of circumstances. It is having the kingdom of heaven that gives us the ability to live through the losses, hurts and disappointments of this world and still have peace, confidence, joy, hope and strength. It is cause for great joy. Let's make living as subjects of King Jesus to be what matters to us more than anything else, and let us never compromise this Kingdom for some bauble of this world.