

There is a movie producer named Zora Bikangaga . What a name! It has an exotic feel. His appearance is similarly striking. Zora is 6’7” and has dark black skin. With the information you have, where would you guess Zora is from? Zora was born and raised in a small, northern California town whose residents are almost entirely white. Everything about the way he talks and acts is like a white American male.

His normal American life didn’t stop him from getting special attention when he enrolled in a small Christian college. When his roommate saw the name Zora Bikangaga listed as his roommate, he emailed Zora to learn where his name comes from. He told him that it was Ugandan. Zora’s friends thought it would be fun to see how long Zora could convince his roommate that he was from Uganda. So, when the roommate called, Zora answered the phone with a fake accent. The roommate was clearly excited to be roommates with someone interesting.

Zora decided to see if he could fool him in person. He wore a shirt that he got while visiting Africa and put on some sandals. He planned to give it a few hours and then reveal his true identity. But when he showed up to meet his roommate, he met his whole family. They were even more excited to meet Zora. The roommate’s sister was full of questions about Uganda. They went out of their way to offer him American hospitality. He just couldn’t tell them the truth. He couldn’t keep the prank private. It was the first day of the college semester and everyone wanted to meet the 6’7” African student named Zora Bikangaga.

Zora got a lot of attention with the new identity that he stumbled into. And he liked it. When he was introduced to some real African students, from Kenya, he felt a genuine sense of loss in the anticipation of his prank being exposed. But when he managed to fool even them, he was convinced that he could pull this off for a long time. So, he continued speaking in an accent and dressing in his best African style.

Many of Zora’s daily conversations were about what life is like in Uganda. Here was an American, who had never lived in Uganda, making up stories for other Americans about life in Uganda. And they loved it. He was disappointed by the general ignorance that made it so easy to fool people. People seemed to believe anything he would say so he pushed the limits. When they asked if people owned dogs in Uganda, he told them stories of his childhood pet lion.

After a semester, Zora revealed his true identity in the school newspaper.ⁱ

“What is it like?” That is the question that curious minds ask about anything different and exciting. Are you a curious person? Do you enjoy getting a glimpse of what something is like? Knowing what something is like can be so satisfying that even ridiculous answers from unreliable sources can get us all excited.

This is a study of six parables that begin with the words “The kingdom of heaven is like...”ⁱⁱ If there can be excitement simply from reading a name like Zora Bikangaga as a roommate, there can certainly be excitement when we hear these words. If we can get excited to learn what Asia is like from Lonely Planet or what Europe is like from Rick Steves, then we should have more excitement to learn from the king of heaven what the kingdom of heaven is like. Think about what is available to us in the parables of Matthew 13. We get to learn about what a different culture is like. It is more exciting than Uganda. It is the kingdom of heaven. And the person telling us what is it like has credible answers. We get to hear from the king about what the kingdom is like. Do you want to know what the kingdom of heaven is like?

Matthew 13 starts with a parable we are not going to cover in this study, the parable of the sower, or the soils (13:1-23). But I want you to notice two elements of this parable. Jesus calls the teachings of these parables “secrets of the kingdom” (v.11). He also explains why he teaches in parables. It is partly to reveal and partly to conceal (vv.10-17). In the next six parables he reveals some of these secrets of the kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... Weeds & Wheat (24-30; 36-43)

The parable of the weeds and wheat reveals that the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of *great patience*.

Matthew 13:24-26 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.”

This scenario was not hard to imagine in first century Palestine. A common way that people would hurt an enemy was to sow Bearded Darnel seeds in a wheat field. Darnel is a “mimic weed” that looks just like wheat until harvest when its heads turn black. This was an especially harmful act against the farmers because harvest is the busiest time of year. But the crop infested with Darnel had to be painstakingly separated.

It was important to get Darnel out of the harvest because it is poisonous to humans. In small doses it is an intoxicating hallucinogenic. In ancient Greece it was known as the “plant of frenzy”. Its scientific name includes the Latin word for “drunk”. If Darnel made it into the harvest, it would produce bread with some strong side effects and likely make it into the seed for the next year’s crop.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is entirely understandable that workers would want to pull it out when they found it.

Matthew 13:27-30 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

Christ’s enemy spares no attack.

“By bringing into the church those who bear Christ's name while they deny His character, the wicked one causes that God shall be dishonored, the work of salvation misrepresented, and souls imperiled.” COL 71.1

This is a patient master. Those weeds could spread if they were not uprooted. And what is the reason for such patience? *The master is willing to deal with weeds because he is not willing to lose any wheat.* King Jesus is patient with messed up people who hang around his kingdom because he doesn’t want to risk turning away anyone who might eventually choose the kingdom. This king wants his kingdom as big as it possibly can be within the righteous requirements he has established. Nobody will find themselves on the outside of the kingdom because of the careless judgment of the king.

Notice two important truths of the kingdom in these words from verse 30, “at harvest time I will tell the reapers”. Now is not the time for pulling weeds. And we are not the ones to pull the weeds.

The weeds will be dealt with at harvest time, at the end of the age. Now is not pulling time but growing time. The master refuses to be distracted from the mission at hand, growing wheat. The second coming marks a change of season in the kingdom of heaven. Praise God there will be a harvest and praise God that now is the season for growing. We don’t need to give our energy into weeding out the kingdom. Instead, focus your efforts on growing and helping others to grow. That is the season we are in.

And when it comes time for the harvest, we are not the ones who are tasked with pulling out the weeds. God has reapers that he will tell to deal with that.

“Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging character and motive. He knows our nature too well to entrust this work to us. Should we try to uproot from the church those whom we suppose to be spurious Christians, we should be sure to make mistakes. Often we regard as hopeless subjects the very ones whom Christ is drawing to Himself.” COL 71.3

We may feel that God’s patience is wearing thin with us. We may be struggling to have patience with some others that we think are weeds in the church. We might be tempted to pull some weeds. Now is not the time and we are not the ones to do it. The kingdom of heaven is marked by great patience.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... Mustard Seed & Leaven (31-33)

The parables of the mustard seed and leaven reveal that the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of **great potential**.

Matthew 13:31-32 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

It takes roughly 750 Black Mustard seeds to measure one gram. The kingdom is a place where small things have the potential to grow large.

The kingdom itself started small and has grown large. It is that stone that grows into a mountain in Daniel 2. There was only a small group of people who were faithful to Jesus at the time of his death. Now there are residents of the kingdom all over this planet.

There is also great potential in the individuals who live in the kingdom. The seeds sown in us may be small, but they are cultivated by the Holy Spirit. There is no limit to what God can do in you. Your potential is not determined by what you have to offer but by how much you receive of what the Spirit offers you. It is not the size that matters but the spirit that matters. Is your seed of patience small? Is your seed of discernment small? Don’t worry about the size of the seed. Ask yourself only if it is God who has planted and is growing the seed. God is unstoppable.

There was a group of Jews who returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They made some progress under the leadership of Ezra and Zerubbabel. But they had adversaries and they received a letter from King Artaxerxes. And we read in Ezra 4:24 that the work came to a standstill. God’s people

weren't looking very big or strong. So, God raised up Haggai and Zechariah as prophets to speak to the people. Listen to the word of the Lord to the prophet Zechariah.

Zechariah 4:8-10 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. Do not despise the day of small beginnings."

Are you starting small? Don't despise the day of small beginnings. In the kingdom of heaven, small things have potential to grow very large. God is doing a work in you. Don't be discouraged, as small as it may seem to you.

Matthew 13:33

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

The mustard seeds represent the growth potential in the kingdom. The leaven represents the influence potential in the kingdom. The little bit of leaven works through the whole batch and has an influence that shapes the entire loaf of bread. Your kingdom influence may seem small but it is like leaven. Its influence might shape the culture of the office you work in. It may change the conversation topics of your friend group. It may raise the level of spirituality in your church. It may transform the relationship in your classroom.

Kingdom influence is potent stuff. There is great potential in the kingdom.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... Treasure & Pearls (44-46)

The parables of the treasure and the pearl reveal that the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of **great value**.

Matthew 13:44-46 The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Notice two common elements in these two parables. 1-Something valuable is found. 2- Everything else is sold to gain the treasure. Similarly, there are two main ways in which we fail to experience the value of the kingdom of heaven. 1- We haven't found the treasure. 2- We haven't sold everything to gain the treasure.

If you haven't found Jesus to be a treasure, keep digging. The emotions that you might experience in finding buried treasure or a long sought after pearl are the kind of emotions we will have when we see Jesus as he is. How much do you value peace? How much do you value purpose? Emotional stability? Healthy relationships? Hope? Eternal life? Joy? Connection with Christ? The kingdom is a treasure.

The great motive for pursuing God is not because it is right to do so but because he is worthy. He is a precious, desirable, satisfying, attractive, glorious treasure.

Do you want to find the treasure and sell all for it? Do you want to love the Lord your God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength?

In the kingdom Jesus is not only our Lord, he is our treasure.

Tradition will not drive you to give it all, treasure will.

Commandments won't keep you in faith, treasure will.

Threats, fear, and punishments won't give passion for God, treasure will.

Religious guilt won't inspire life change, treasure will.

Knowing that you ought to do something won't produce joy. Making Christ your treasure will. Whether it is found by surprise in a field, or it is the object of a long search like the merchant and the pearl, don't stop until it is found. If Jesus is not your treasure, if he is not precious and delightful and thrilling, then I suggest you haven't seen him as he is. The more urgent task in front of you is to go on a spiritual treasure hunt until Christ is your treasure.

There is an additional barrier that keeps us from experiencing the value of the kingdom. Not only must we find the treasure, but we must sell everything else. Some have tasted the value of living in the kingdom but they don't continue to enjoy it because they are still holding on to other things of value. The kingdom is an all or nothing proposition. We must surrender all other treasures to have this one. The wisdom in this case tells us to not diversify our assets but to put all our eggs in this one basket.

Finding but not selling is the condition of those who have felt desire but have not decided. There is interest in God and the kingdom but there has not been a definite choice made. Wanting is not the same as choosing. Feeling is not the same as deciding. Maybe you have caught glimpses of the treasure and you have enjoyed it and you think that because you felt it you have it. But have you decided to sell all?

I went to Faith Camp at the Wasilla SDA Church and heard a testimony that beautifully illustrates these parables of the value of the kingdom. I encourage you to watch the presentations at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ST59t6yamiE>. It is the story of two wealthy people who didn't find the treasure of the kingdom until they gave up everything else.

"In the parable the pearl is not represented as a gift. The merchantman bought it at the price of all that he had. Many question the meaning of this, since Christ is represented in the Scriptures as a gift. He is a gift, but only to those who give themselves, soul, body, and spirit, to Him without reserve. We are to give ourselves to Christ, to live a life of willing obedience to all His requirements. All that we are, all the talents and capabilities we possess, are the Lord's, to be consecrated to His service. When we thus give ourselves wholly to Him, Christ, with all the treasures of heaven, gives Himself to us. We obtain the pearl of great price." COL 117

The Kingdom of Heaven is like... Nets & Fish (47-50)

The parable of the net reveals that the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of **great judgment**.

Every kingdom has requirements for how to become a resident. What does it take to get into the kingdom of heaven? Is it easy or hard? What is the immigration process like?

Consider some statistics on how hard it can be to become a citizen in some countries. I got these statistics from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hardest-countries-to-immigrate-to>

In China, it is possible for a foreign-born person to become a citizen but exceptionally rare. China has over a billion citizens. According to China's 2020 census only 941 of those citizens were foreign born.

Vatican City only 450 citizens. If you want to become one of them, you have 4 options. 1. Become a Catholic Cardinal residing in Vatican City, 2. become a diplomat of the Pope, 3. Have a profession that requires you to live in Vatican City, 4. Apply directly to the church administration.

In Japan, like many countries, to become a citizen you must renounce citizenship of any other country. But Japan is so serious about protecting their borders that they will “actually pay unemployed Latin American immigrants to return to their home country”.

In Qatar there is a long list of requirements for citizenship but none of those will get you citizenship unless your father is a citizen of Qatar.

In both Leichtenstien and the United Arab Emirates, foreign-born people must live in the country for 30 years before they will be considered for citizenship.

In Kuwait, not only is fluency in Arabic required for citizenship, but the applicant must be Muslim by birth or conversion. If by conversion it must have happened a minimum of 5 years before applying for citizenship.

There is only one possibility for citizenship in Saudi Arabia. You must marry a Saudi citizen by birth.

Bhutan's borders were completely closed until 1974. If you make it through their strict immigration process and are caught speaking against the king or country, your citizenship can be taken away.

If you are a male age 18-35 and you want to become South Korean, after learning to speak, read and write, you must serve in the military for 18 months.

In Austria you might get in if you have in-demand work but only 11 occupations are considered “in-demand”.

Other countries are far more easy to gain citizenship^v. In many countries the quickest way to become a citizen is to give money through their citizenship investment programs. You can have a passport from Grenada in as little as 2 months with an economic investment of at least \$150,000. In Antigua, if you make a \$100,000 investment you only have to be in the country for 5 days over the span of 5 years.

Other countries make citizenship relatively frictionless if you can prove a connection to the country by descent. You can get citizenship in Italy if you can document a relative who was an Italian citizen and was born after March 17, 1861.

What about the kingdom of heaven. Is it easy or hard to join? Are the borders open and inclusive or are they narrow and exclusive? They are both. The parable of the net is about entrance into the kingdom and in it we see that God is a great judge over this.

Good judgment doesn't exclude prematurely or include indiscriminately. Listen, in the parable of the net, for both the broadness of the invitation of the kingdom and the narrowness of acceptance into the kingdom. Listen for both the extreme inclusivity and the strict exclusivity.

Matthew 13:47-50 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

These extremes of judgment are a big point in the teaching of Jesus in Matthew. There are 10 total parables in the book of Matthew that begin with the words "the kingdom of heaven is like". Six of those, including all of them that are found outside of Matthew 13, also teach of the mixture of good and bad in the kingdom and the broadness and narrowness of judgment. They are represented in the chart below.

	Broad & Inclusive Invitation	Narrow & Exclusive Admittance
Weeds (13:24-30)	"Let both grow together" (30)	"Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." (30) "throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (42)
Net (13:47-50)	"gathered fish of every kind" (47) "When it was full" (48)	"sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad" (48) "The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous" (49) "and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (50)
Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35)	"And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt" (27)	"And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt" (34) "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."(35)
Wedding Feast (22:1-14)	Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. (9-10)	"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." (11-14)
Ten Virgins (25:1-13)	"Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." (2)	And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to

		us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' (10-12)
Talents (25:14-30)	"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property." (15)	"You wicked and slothful servant! (26) "And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (30)

What are we to make of these two realities? The kingdom is both. There is no kingdom more broad in its invitation and no kingdom more narrow in its admittance.

Those who don't accept the invitation are not accepted into the kingdom.

Unconditional love requires conditional judgment. Unconditional judgment is not love. There are things that love cannot accept. The absence of conditions is found in the love of God toward us but not of our acceptance to heaven. This unacceptance is not a failure of unconditional love. God unconditionally loves all those that he will eventually not accept into the kingdom. He unconditionally loves them even as fire falls from heaven and consumes them.

Love never fails. Firm boundaries are not a failure of love but an essential characteristic of it. The love of the savior is unconditional. The salvation he offers is conditional.

For more relation study look back to the study in this series called Divided by the Kingdom.

Unconditional judgment is not evidence that God is a picky jerk but that this is a real rescue. Imagine a person hanging from a cliff. The rescue worker throws down a rope and descends saying, "I can help you but you have to take my hand." The person protests, "Can't you just get me out of here and skip all the formal rescue stuff. I don't want to take your hand. Just save me." The rescue worker is not being rude to insist on the condition that he takes his hand.

The rescue depends on cooperation on this point. It is not stubborn insistence but a necessary condition. God's only option in saving us is the grace of offering Christ's righteousness in our place. We must take Jesus' hand. He says, "I am the way., no one comes to the Father but through me." There is one way into the kingdom. Sin is not an object lesson or a discipline tool of heaven. It is death. It is separation. The righteousness of Christ is the only life we have.

Being here (at church) is no guarantee of getting there. Here is what we should feel, not anxiety about our salvation in Christ, but an awareness that nothing else will do. If we are presuming to slip into the kingdom because we are closely associated with the church but not given to Christ we need to feel the weight of conviction. The nets bring in fish of every kind, but then they are sorted. Alaskans know that not every fish is good to eat or legal to catch. The Rock Fish will get thrown back, but that doesn't keep them from biting the hook.

"Almost Christians, yet not fully Christians, they seem near the kingdom of heaven, but they cannot enter there. Almost but not wholly saved, means to be not almost but wholly lost." COL 118.1

What is the kingdom of heaven like. It is a kingdom of great patience, great potential, great value, and great judgment.

ⁱ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/598/my-undesirable-talent/act-two-11>

ⁱⁱ Matthew 13 includes 7 parables. Technically it is the last five that end with those exact words. The second parable begins with a slightly different phrase that can be translated “the kingdom of heaven is comparable to”.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wheats-evil-twin-has-been-intoxicating-humans-for-centuries>

^{iv} The following statistics come from <https://www.globalcitizensolutions.com/easiest-countries-to-get-citizenship/>