



# THE KINGDOM

## KINGDOM ACCOUNTABILITY

**Sunday 20 June 2021**

*EXTENDED SERMON TRANSCRIPT*

We are coming to the last few scenes of the Kingdom Gospel – and, to this point, the story has been past and present tense; but now we shift our perspective to be present-future oriented. Where is history going? How will the story end? When Marvel Studios was wrapping up its Avengers Infinity Wars series, there was so much speculation and anticipation about how it would all end. Fans would scan the story so far to find any clues and build wild theories and pronounce their prophecies and revelations. The same would have been true for the Lord of the Rings trilogy if we hadn't already had the book for 60-years and we knew how it would end. Well, we have had *this* book (the Bible) for quite a bit longer and we know basically how it ends but there is still speculation on the details...

So, today, let's talk about the 'light' topic of the return of King Jesus and a final judgement. We are not going to all agree on some of the details. You may be extremely convinced about how you see it all ending. I have to say I never have been. Ask me in another decade because maybe I'll think differently – or not. As author Shane Claybourne says, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that scare me, it's the parts I do!" I agree. I'm not so concerned with cracking some revelation code or predicting when Jesus will return to judge us – I'm concerned with *do I live like He is returning to judge us at all?* I'm not so concerned if my understanding of judgement, heaven or hell is watertight – I am concerned that I live like there is a judgement, there is a heaven and there is a hell.

- Do we live like Jesus is returning?
- Do we live like hell is a very real reality that people we love may face?
- Do we live like we don't need to build heaven in our own lives because we are inheriting a kingdom that outclasses anything we can construct?

What concerns me out about the Bible is not what I don't understand but what I do understand in all those red-letter verses: that Jesus calls me to take up a cross and follow, to die to myself, to be a living sacrifice, to be thankful in all circumstances, to do justice and love mercy...

*(But we all do have biases and so if you are wondering who my influences are, it will be writers like CS Lewis in *The Great Divorce* and *Screwtape Letters*, Tim Keller in *The Reason for God* (specifically chapter 6), and NT Wright in *Surprised by Hope* (which will be available as a free PDF in our Discipleship Resources Hub soon).)*

Now the problem with a topic like this is what NOT to talk about when there is such a volume of references to judgement - and the number one culprit is Jesus. Don't you find it strange that one of Jesus' favourite subjects is judgement, and the real possibility of hell - and yet we rarely talk about it? Perhaps that is an overreaction to a gospel that focused on fear. Perhaps it's simply because we don't realise that even judgement is still good news.

So, to narrow this down, I'm going to focus on one parable sitting in the middle of a full complement of parables about the kingdom in Matthew chapter 13. This chapter begins with the more famous parable of 'the sower' in which Jesus describes how different people receive the message of the kingdom, like a sower throwing out good seed. Sometimes the message hits good soil of a heart and really grows, but very often it doesn't because human hearts are hard, distracted and deceived. Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom is reaching out to all kinds of hearts, but only some kinds of hearts receive it - and that we should expect this because there is much that gets in the way. I always find comfort in that parable - *it helps me navigate my feelings as a person who goes out of their way to seed hearts with the good news.*

But he follows that up with another 'wheat' parable that seems to say that even when there is what looks like healthy wheat (people of the kingdom) that is growing, all may not be as it seems:

*Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)*

*Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear." (Matthew 13: 36-43)*

Ok. So this parable is a real-life illustration that his audience would have totally understood - located across the growing cycle of wheat: planting, growing and harvesting. As the wheat grows, the servants find out there is another plant growing because, while the servants were asleep, an enemy has walked through the field and sowed a poisonous weed - probably called 'darnel'. The thing about this weed is that it looks exactly like wheat until the heads form. This weed gets a fair bit of press in ancient literature. It was considered an act of economic sabotage under Roman law and carried severe punishment if a person was found out to have contaminated someone's wheat crop.

From verse 36, Jesus explains that he is the Sower - the good farmer - and he sows good seed in his field, which is the world across time. The wheat are people whose lives are of the kingdom; the weeds are people whose lives reject the kingdom. The farmer only sows good seed, but the servants ask, "where did all these weeds come from?" And this question works on several levels: the world, our church, our lives are a mixed field - some of it looks nothing like the kingdom, some of it looks like the kingdom because it is, some of it looks like the kingdom but it's just a good fake.

"Where did all these weeds come from? How did this happen?" Jesus says an enemy - Satan - has done this. This is critical in the plotline of the Bible. Rewind to the first verse of the Bible - "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." God did not make evil or hell. This is a critical detail for people who have this image in their heads that God constructed hell because He is 'enthusiastic' about people going there to be eternally tortured (we are far too influenced by Hollywood and medieval art). But rather, since Genesis 3, Jesus is saying there is something else growing that is really a poisonous counterfeit - the work of the enemy planting poisonous seeds - to sabotage the work of God. There is a kind of corrupting impulse so powerful that sways our heart from God. This links to the last parable of 'the four soils/hearts':

- some hearts are hard just like a concrete footpath;
- some hearts are overcome by self-preservation amid troubles and persecution;
- some hearts ruled by self-absorption for of cares of the world, temptations of wealth.

So, as a result: we run the show ourselves, we define good and evil ourselves, and we build a counterfeit kingdom that looks like God's kingdom but doesn't bear fruit like God's kingdom. Jesus says an enemy did this! As CS Lewis put it, "something has been going in all of us from the beginning that, if not nipped in the bud, will be like hell for us if we let it" - and perhaps hell is our freely chosen course of self-absorption, a self-preservation, a hardness of heart extending on forever.

That's hell.

And we don't need to wait because, inside God's good creation now, we already witness a kind of hell on earth in addictions, injustice and exploitation, prison cells and court rooms and warzones, neighbourhoods and broken homes... This is all the weeds of a counterfeit crop that God doesn't make, and God wants to remove.

The servants ask, "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" "No," he answers, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them."

The servants (who represent us) are saying, "let us handle this. Can we start the judgment?" and the master says, "wait, be patient, it's not the right time."

Why? He says, "because you will end up doing more damage than good." The servants can't judge what is wheat and what is weed yet. We think we know who is what, who is in and out, who is righteous and who is not, who is a good Christian and who is a sinner - and Jesus is saying, "I don't trust you to judge if someone is yet to be a wheat or a weed; and I don't want you to treat wheat like it it's a weed, or treat weed like it's a wheat. Only time will tell. And if you engage in the task of being judge you not only will do unnecessary damage to people but you will do what you are not qualified to do, which is be the judge!"

Now, this does not mean we cannot challenge or critique what we see around us, especially by people who claim to be religious. Jesus is constantly speaking out about attitudes and actions by religious people that are corruptions of God's will and way. Paul does this in the church all the time. But it does give us all pause to realise that we should be really, really hesitant to judge a person's final status in the kingdom. Ok, maybe you can't see the wheat at the moment, but be careful what you declare over someone. Did the thief on the cross look like a weed or wheat a few hours before his death?

So, Jesus says, "Let both grow together until the harvest." There is a time coming when what's of the kingdom will be revealed - it's at the harvest. So, at the harvest, who is the judge? Not us but King Jesus. As the Nicene Creed states, "Jesus will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead." In John 5:22 Jesus said, "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son". It is abundantly clear from Jesus and his apostles that King Jesus will return to judge all people. And we note in this parable

that Jesus has angelic servants that will be implementing that judgement at the end.

*(In recent years some popular Christian authors and speakers have lumped the doctrine of judgement and hell into the basket of metaphor only - meaning it is pointing to something not in fact real in any ontological sense, I suspect, to make the doctrine more accessible to a world that cannot accept what the Bible says on this subject. I think this is a grave mistake. Our passage today is parable and metaphor, but it is nonetheless describing something tangibly real that is happening and will happen in the arc of eternity.)*

**When is that harvest?** I don't know! Read Matthew chapter 24 for yourself. Jesus says there will be lots of signs... But no one knows the day or the hour. So because my time is limited, all I'll say is: I have no idea if it's in my lifetime or in a thousand years' time - but we are supposed to live like it could be any day. Do we?

**Who is going to be judged?** ALL of us at the harvest: the wheat AND the weeds. We will all stand before the Judge one day. Do you think about that much? One day you will be accountable for your life - yes, even those who prayed a prayer and went to church. Strangely, somewhere in my own Christian formation, I grew up thinking there was an express queue - like you find at theme parks - for 'special' people to skip the real queue; that, as a Christian, I has a secret passcode or 'access all areas' pass that enabled me to avoid judgement... But that is simply untrue.

To the religious people in Matthew chapter 12, Jesus says, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken" ... I could be there a while!

And if you turn to Matthew chapter 25 you will find a series of parables that, as Tim Keller writes, are 'smelling salts for the soul' - they wake us up to the reality of judgement. Here you find

- the parable of the ten young maidens (virgins), which is a parable about being ready for the return of Christ
- the parable of the talents, which is about knowing the heart of God such that you live stewarding whatever resources God has given you now
- the parable of the sheep and the goats, which reminds us that many people who think they are sheep (wheat) - who think they are good with God - may get a nasty shock when Jesus reveals how their religious activities didn't count for anything because it never translated into the most basic expressions of love for others in need. This is intense!

And to top it off, I'm reminded that as a leader, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15, "*their work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed*

*with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames."*

So, our lives and our work will be shown for what it is. It will all be tested – and for some leaders, all we will have at the end of that is the mercy of God, but there will be little to show for the life we were given to use for His glory...

**Now I know judgement sounds heavy but if you think about it, you actually want this.**

**Why?** Because a world without a God who judges it is a world without ultimate justice: where nothing really matters in the end, and everything goes unaccounted for – the good and the evil. And that not only means that the way you live your life doesn't ultimately matter, but when someone else does a grave injustice against you, well, ultimately that doesn't matter either. Do you want that world where right and wrong is only a matter of each individual's opinion and no one is finally going to be held accountable? Some will respond, "well, God is a God of love, and He would not send people to hell!" Yes, He is the God of love, but that means He is equally committed to justice as an expression of that love. If God were not angry at injustice, if God were not concerned with holding people to account for their sin and corruption, He would not be truly loving nor worthy of our worship.

Also, you want a God who judges because without it our world is thrown deeper into an endless cycle of retaliation, revenge and ever-increasing violence (e.g. Israeli, Palestine, Rwanda, Myanmar, Ireland, Syria). If there is no final justice, you have to always take your pain into your own hands; and, this seems paradoxical but, God's judgement is perhaps the only way people can break free of the cycle of violence and revenge, and truly find peace because the answer to "shall we deal with the weeds? Shall I take vengeance?" is NO. In the end, God will. And with that burden of getting back or getting even lifted off our shoulders, God's justice unlocks us from the prison of our resentment and bitterness and enables us to walk free into grace, into forgiveness, and into a new life.

You see, judgment is actually good news.

I know that's not what you thought. Judgement has been used to scare the hell out of a lot of people and scare Jesus into them. But the problem with fear is that it never transforms the heart. It just makes us comply and usually for the same self-preserving, self-seeking reasons as before – you are still thinking, "what's in it for me!" You could say fear just fertilises the weeds that the enemy planted! And I think the enemy is quite happy with that. Jesus even says that that Pharisees make converts who are twice as much sons of hell as they are! (Matthew 23:15)

What truly changes the heart is not fear of judgement, but a love so costly that it melts your hard heart, drowns the fear, and makes you want to run toward loves' source – no

matter the cost. Like in the very next two parables of Matthew chapter 13 – a treasure in that field you discover that makes you sell everything to buy the whole field; or the finest pearl you must have such that you sell everything to have it – where do we find this kind of love? A treasure that is worth everything? In the Judge, himself.

You see, from God's perspective, what is the treasure in the field or the fine pearl worth selling everything for – it's YOU! And that is what God did in Jesus, the Judge. Loving you cost more than you can imagine. We will all be in the courtroom dock on that day, the judgement is handed down and the verdict should be guilty – no matter how good you think you are. But then the Judge comes down and says, "hey I know you son, daughter," and pays your fine – you're acquitted free! How? Because Jesus lived the life you could not live and died the death you should have died on the cross – the judgement came down on Him. The Judge sacrificing Himself for our guilt and shame; loving you, completely.

You are the treasure worth selling everything to have. So may you discover Him to be your treasure today: put your trust in Jesus. And if you will, then live tomorrow like everything matters. Partner with God in doing His will and way for the blessing of all creation.

How is the soil of your heart today? In Matthew 12:32 (and Mark 3:28) Jesus says to religious, moral people that there is only one thing that God won't forgive now or in the age to come: grieving or blaspheming the Holy Spirit. But what is that? A key role of the Spirit is to convict us of our need for forgiveness, to lead us to repentance. And so, the one thing God can't forgive is the person who refuses to have ears to hear, who refuses to be led by the Spirit toward repentance and healing. He can forgive anything, but He can't forgive someone who doesn't want forgiveness. And so I say to you today, Christian or not: Whoever has ears, let them hear. Do not resist that whisper in your soul right now. Stop. Return. Let His love melt your heart again in this time, and do not resist.

### **Reflect this fortnight on Matthew 13:24–30 and Matthew 13:36–43:**

Reflecting on this parable, what was your overall reaction to:

- The reality that God allows wheat and weed to grow together till the end?
- The command to not assume the role of judging people's status in the kingdom?
- The truth that Jesus is going to judge EVERY aspect of our lives one day?

*"Jesus will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead."* (Nicean Creed)

- To what extent do you think Jesus returning to judge the world should influence the life of a disciple?
- Do you think we live like it's true?
- How might accountability and the return of Christ as Judge positively shape our discipleship?

## **Some great quotes about hell to ponder and discuss with others:**

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

- C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened."

- C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Hell is our freely chosen course of self-absorptions a self-preservation a hardness of heart extending on its current trajectory forever - that's hell.

- Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

## **Further reading this fortnight:**

- Re-read Matthew chapters 13, 24, and 25
- <https://timothykeller.com/blog/2008/8/1/the-importance-of-hell>