

Scribes Trained for the Kingdom
Matthew 13:44-53

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And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." Mt. 13:52

My sermons in August are all linked to the question, "What do we have to be – as individual Christians and as a church – in order to be spiritually healthy both now and when we can re-enter the church's full schedule of in-person worship, Christian education, fellowship, and mission?"

Last week I gave the answer that we need to be people unashamed of the gospel. I called us to be unashamed of the gospel's claims, commands, and consolations, which is to say its doctrines, ethics, and ministries of comfort.

Today I add to that and offer up the answer that in order to be spiritually healthy as individuals and as a congregation now and after the pandemic breaks we need to be scribes trained for the kingdom.

That phrase – "scribes trained for the kingdom" – comes from near the end of Matthew 13, a chapter that is, for the most part, a collection of Jesus' parables. I count seven parables in all in Matthew 13: the Parable of the Sower, which is quite long, the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, which is not quite as long, and five shorter parables, some no longer than a single sentence. All seven of these parables are about the kingdom of God or, as Matthew prefers to call it, the kingdom of heaven.

Before I get into the specific text for today I want to pause to say a bit about the kingdom of God. There was some misunderstanding about it in the adult class a couple of weeks ago, and I want to take a moment to address what the kingdom is.

The kingdom of God is not the kin(g)dom of God. It is vogue in some circles to put parenthesis around the *g* in the word kingdom and pronounce it "kin-dom." The reasons for this have to do with being gender-inclusive and non-hierarchical, and I get the importance of both those desires. Still, if we write the King out of the kingdom, if we remove Sovereign from the realm, we are left simply with ourselves, and we aren't much. Human fellowship and effort are nice, but neither are the kingdom of God; there is no sovereignty in us.

The kingdom of God also is not – and this gets to the misunderstanding in the Sunday School class – something in the ideal future, in the sweet by and by, when God finally puts all things in order. There is a future element to the kingdom, but the kingdom is already a present

reality here and now.¹ The kingdom is in the future; we pray, “Thy kingdom come” as though it is not here. And yet the kingdom is a present reality; we pray, “Thine is the kingdom” and these parables begin “The kingdom of heaven is like” The kingdom is a present reality that will have a future completion.

One of my professors defined the kingdom in this way; he said, “The kingdom is the creative and redeeming force of God’s Word and Spirit giving birth to a new humanity.”² More simply, the kingdom is the influence of God in the world today. It is largely hidden, but we can see outcroppings of it. It is now and it shall be more fully realized.

Returning now to our text, Jesus, after teaching the disciples these seven parables of the kingdom to show what the influence of God is like, says the conscientious disciple is a scribe trained for the kingdom.

A scribe at that time was someone who could read, write, think, and teach. A scribe was one who “preserved in written form the oral law and faithfully handed down the Hebrew Scriptures.”³

Jesus now says that the disciple, in relation to the kingdom of God, is one who receives the truth of God, preserves the heart of the gospel, and passes it along so others can live in faithfulness to the kingdom of God. The disciple is a scribe trained for the kingdom of God, and this scribe takes from the treasure what is new and what is old.

A scribe trained for the kingdom is one who draws upon the best of the new.

There is a cry that goes up today. It says, “Give us what is old!” Those who make this cry lament the disappearance of the old practices, methods, and customs. If only we could get back to the way things were, they say, everything would be better. When we did things the old way, they opine, there was stability, success, and strength. The old is better than the new. Give us the old. This cry may be especially loud now during the COVID crisis as people long with deep longing for the way things were. Give us what is old.

The scribe trained for the kingdom, Jesus teaches, does not accept wholesale this philosophy that the old is necessarily better. Not every old idea or former practice carries the mark of excellence. Age is no guarantee of usefulness.

Take the example of the King James Version of the Bible. When King James of Scotland became King James I of England in 1604 there was some wrangling between the Puritans and the people of the Church of England over which was the proper version of scripture to employ. James wanted to put an end to that and summoned 47 scholars who worked in 6 committees to bring forth a new translation of the Bible. The new version – the King James Version – came out

¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), p. 78.

² Bloesch, p. 76.

³ C. L. Feinberg, “Scribes,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. by J. D. Douglas, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 1151.

in 1611.⁴ The King James Version is highly honored as a classic in English literature and has an unmistakable beauty many love. And yet, can it really be that the best way to reach people today is to rely upon language that is 500 years old? Can language from the 17th century reach people of the 21st?

We may have profound reverence for the methods and tools of the past, but they may have lost their power to connect effectively with people today. Beloved they may be, they are best left behind.

The scribe trained for the kingdom selects the best of the new. Nothing in the way of any idea, method, or technology is rejected simply because it is new or accepted because it is old.

New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth

sings the hymn.⁵ And Jesus himself says that new wine is to be put into new wineskins (Mt. 9:17 and par.). So to be true to this gospel word and fit for our new day as well as our present day, we need to be prepared to select from the new and not automatically stick with the old.

A scribe trained for the kingdom retains the best of old.

There is another cry that goes up today. It says, “Give us what is new!” If the preferential desire for the old is the arrogance of antiquity, the preferential plea for the new is the elitism of contemporaneity. It is the tyranny of the trendy. Those who hold this point of view insist that today is not yesterday. They adamantly maintain that what worked in a previous generation is incapable of being effective in the present generation. The old ways of being the church, they say, are insufficient. We need to think outside the box. This cry may be especially loud now during the COVID crisis as people see a new normal on the horizon and are sure we will have to equip ourselves with new ideas, methods, and technologies.

The scribe trained for the kingdom, Jesus teaches, does not accept wholesale this philosophy that the new is necessarily better. Not every new idea carries the marks of excellence and faithfulness. The new can be a trend without a trace of truth behind it to substantiate it. We may have the ability to do something, but having the capability to do it is not the same as having the authority to do it. Just because something can be done does not mean it is noble enough to be done. Some ideas, bright and shiny with newness, need to be left alone just as some old ideas need to be left behind.

The scribe trained for the kingdom retains the best of the old. Nothing in the way of any idea, method, or technology is rejected simply because it is old or accepted because it is new. A theological professor was once asked to recommend a good biography of Jesus – the questioner wanted the latest; the professor shot back, “Well, have you tried the one Luke wrote?” (James Denney) In other words, by all means, give the old a chance! Instead of being enamored with thinking outside the box we should think inside the box, too, because the one who knows how to

⁴ On the history of the King James Version of the Bible, see Adam Nicholson, *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

⁵ James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” *The Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), #441.

think inside the box discovers timeless truths, long-forgotten perhaps, which are fit for today because they have ready insight and real help.

What do we need to be in order to be spiritually healthy now and when we can return to our in-person schedule? We need to be scribes trained for the kingdom. We need to be able to resist the bandwagon of the latest trend and the treadmill of the monotonous same. We need to resist rejecting the new because it has never been done that way before and rejecting the old because it's the way it's always been done. We cannot play favorites with the new and shiny or with the old and comfortable. We need to be ready to receive the best of the new while we retain the best of the old. We need to change with the times without being changed by the times. We have to think, to imagine, to experiment, to let go, and to hold fast. All the while, God's word should be our rule, God's Spirit should be our teacher, and God's glory should be our purpose.⁶ In that way we shall serve the kingdom of God which is God's way of having influence in the world today.

⁶ This sentence is based on the pulpit prayer regularly used by John R. W. Stott before preaching. See John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 340.