

Hidden treasure

There are two ways in which people can govern themselves. One is by an individual—a king or dictator. The other is by the rule of law. In a monarchy or dictatorship, the ruler's word *is* the law. Under the rule of law—all the citizens of a country are subject to its laws, including the ruler. No one is above the law. In the course of history, most western nations have gravitated toward the rule of law. You may not know this, but the rule of law has its origins in the Bible. It appears in the *Book of Deuteronomy*, where God instructs the Israelites that when they choose a ruler, he must be from among their brothers and he must obey God's law. ***Deuteronomy 17:*** “when he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or the left.” (*deut. 17:18-20*) So all the kings of Israel were subject to the Mosaic Law. A thousand years later, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote: “it is more proper that law should govern than any one of the citizens.” The Roman statesman Cicero said it this way: “we are all servants of the law in order to be free.” In 9th-century England, the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred The Great incorporated the rule of law into what was called the “*doomsday book*” and three centuries later the rule of law was formally adopted by King John of England in the *Magna Carta*.

In America, the rule of law is foundational to our republic: the legislative branch passes laws, the judicial branch interprets laws and the executive branch enforces the laws. Or at least that's how it's supposed to work.

So the fact is that we all live under the rule of law.

First of all, we are born with God's law written on our hearts: we call this our conscience. We grow up under the legal codes of cities and counties and states and the federal government and we are taught to obey them or suffer the consequences.

Our problem is that we are all sinful and chafe under the authority of the law. So we are divided against ourselves: according to our consciences we want to do right but according to our sinful natures, we want to do wrong. And a house divided against itself cannot stand. God bailed us out of this quagmire by sending His Son to usher in a new kingdom which he called the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom of heaven the rule of law is replaced by the rule of the Gospel—the good news that all our transgressions of the law have been forgiven. Therefore, we are not under law, but under grace. But we also have to live in the kingdom of this world. We walk in God's kingdom and are filled with His Spirit and rejoice in His love, but we also live in the kingdom of this world where we see with worldly eyes and think with worldly brains and speak with worldly lips. So we live in two different kingdoms at the same time and are still divided against ourselves, as Paul wrote: "...in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body...making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members." A Christian's life is a tussle: sin versus obedience; law versus gospel; the kingdom of this world versus the kingdom of heaven.

Understanding this is key to understanding Jesus' parables about the kingdom of Heaven because they can be understood in two ways: a "law" way and a "gospel" way. The "law" way is usually the more obvious way, but there is always a Gospel message there as well. The parables in today's Gospel lesson are good examples.

The first parable is an account of a man who finds a hidden treasure.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” Now the treasure in this parable would seem to represent the kingdom of heaven and the one who found it, someone who longs for it so much that he sells everything he has in order to acquire it. According to that interpretation, the kingdom of heaven is the most important and the most precious thing we can have in our lives, and we ought to give up everything else we have in order to possess it. The second parable follows the same pattern. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” Once again, the pearl seems to represent the kingdom of heaven and the merchant, a man who gives up everything he has in the world in order to enter it. Sounds good at first, but isn’t there a problem with these interpretations? In the first place, is the kingdom of heaven for sale? Can a person acquire it through his own efforts? The answer, of course, is no. You can’t acquire the kingdom of Heaven by doing anything: you can only receive it as a free gift. “The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ.” In the second place, people don’t naturally seek God or his kingdom. Like Adam and Eve, they prefer to hide from God rather than seek him. I can’t think of a person in the bible who found God by seeking him—it’s God who does the seeking and the finding. God sought and found Abraham, God sought and found Moses, God sought and found David and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Peter and Andrew and James and John and Paul—none of them were seeking Jesus. The first four were seeking fish and the fifth one was seeking Jesus’ disciples in order to put them out of business. On the night before he was betrayed, Jesus told his twelve disciples: “you did not choose me, I chose you.” So these interpretations won’t fly—at least not at face value. But if that’s the case, then how are we to understand them?

Or to put the question another way: where is the Gospel in these parables? If the man in the parables doesn't represent someone who gives up everything he has to purchase the kingdom of heaven, then who does he represent? Well, who gave up everything he had to purchase the kingdom of Heaven for mankind? Isn't it Jesus--who gave up his life to bring the kingdom of Heaven to earth? And if Jesus is the man in the parables, who gave up everything in order to usher in the kingdom of Heaven, what do the treasure and the pearl represent? Isn't it you and I? And doesn't that mean that you and I are a treasure in God's eyes? "God so loved the world that he gave up his only begotten Son so that all who believed in Him should not perish but have eternal life." See the difference? The first way of understanding the parables is the law way: they teach us what we can and should do to enter the kingdom of Heaven. The second way of understanding them is the Gospel way: God sent his Son to purchase it for us ***because we are a priceless treasure in His eyes!*** Which way sounds more like God to you?

But Jesus now adds a third parable which takes us a step further and adds a new dimension to our understanding. "...the kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." How are we to understand this parable? Well, first of all, by comparing the kingdom of Heaven to a fisherman's net, Jesus is saying that God wants to draw all people into his kingdom. Like the sower who sowed his seed everywhere—including several places where it has no chance of growing—God gathers all humanity into his net. He calls everyone in the world to believe the Gospel and be saved.

But many who are called are “bad fish”: they reject God’s seeking love and are cast away forever. God has given them the right of refusal and they choose to exercise it. Then Jesus adds a very interesting note. He said to them, “therefore every teacher of the law who has become one of Jesus’ disciples is like the owner of a house *who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.*” To those who have entered the kingdom of Heaven, God adds another gift: since the law no longer has a hold on them, they can view it as a resource rather than a slave master. That is why the Hebrew word for law—“*Torah*”—can have two different meanings. It can mean “a command” as in the sentence, “You must obey the law.” But it can also mean “instruction”, as in the sentence, “You will be blessed by receiving the Lord’s instruction.”

Take the fourth commandment for example: “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it Holy.” Understood in a “law way” it means, “You must do nothing but worship God on the Sabbath.” But understood in a Gospel way, it means, “come and find rest in the Lord and let him bless you through your worship.” See the difference? To one who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven—in other words, to a believer—the law becomes a blessing rather than a curse. You will **want** to be with God--not only on the Sabbath but every day of the week. You will **want** to be a blessing to your neighbor rather than cheat him or harm him or deceive him. You will **want** to keep your marriage pure and undefiled. You will **want** to keep God’s name Holy and precious on your lips. You will fail to do all these things perfectly of course because you will still have a sin nature and at times you will yield to it. But deep down in your heart, you will **want** to follow the instruction of the Lord. And in God’s eyes, in the wanting is the doing.

Apart from the Gospel, the law is a death sentence. Seen through the eyes of the Gospel, it is a blessing. Amen.