

THINGS TOO WONDERFUL—WEEK 2

HEAVENLY ATTITUDES



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Things Too Wonderful, Week 2 — Heavenly Attitudes

The kingdom of heaven has a different way of looking at things. Through His actions and His parables, Jesus teaches this heavenly perspective. From a secular point of view, it all seems nuts.

But it isn't.

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1 Luke 15:8–10 (NKJV)

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Imagine this happening in your neighborhood. Would you go to her celebration? Her overreaction to finding a misplaced coin is just plain strange.

Some of the most important passages in Scripture are the most puzzling ones. We’re puzzled by them because we don’t think the way Jesus thinks. We need to see His point and adjust our attitude.

Last week, we saw the kingdom of heaven mostly in terms of its growth. This week, we want to see it in terms of style. The kingdom of heaven has the mindset of heaven, which is rather heavenly.

At first glance, this looks like “any excuse for a party.” Heaven is a joyful place, so maybe they just celebrate every chance they get—sort of like they do at The Magic Kingdom in Disney World.

But that’s not it, and Jesus makes this clear. *“I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

The one coin represents a single sinner who repents. This teaches an important and profound point—a single sinner who repents is significant in the kingdom of heaven.

Despite the grand scope of His creation, God cares about us individually. Even though we’re comparatively microscopic, each one of us is important.

The LORD’s attention to detail is almost incomprehensibly wonderful. He even listens to our prayers.

I’ve never been able to get used to that.

The kingdom of heaven has a different attitude. It sees everything from a different perspective, through a different lens.

Our job as Christians is to try to learn to see things from that perspective. That’s not easy. We were born with worldly eyes.

That’s why so much of Jesus’s teaching was through parables. He’s stretching our imagination.

As we walk through some examples of heavenly thinking, try to see yourself in these situations.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. — John 15:7 (NIV)

Growth in Christ means conforming our will to His.

2 Luke 15:1–7 (NKJV)

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

This is nuts. Every shepherding textbook teaches that when one sheep wanders off you don’t do something crazy like leave the rest of the sheep unguarded while you chase down the errant one. A sheep that tends to wander off needs to be forgotten or, if you have the manpower to retrieve it, turned into tomorrow’s dinner. The safety of the entire flock comes first.

That’s the point. Shepherding textbooks aren’t written by angels. The kingdom of heaven has a different perspective. Jesus portrays this in a way designed to shock his listeners. He even uses a negative interrogative to pin them down by saying, *“What man of you, ... does not leave the ninety-nine.”*

Everyone should be thinking, “What? I wouldn’t.”

So, this argument isn’t going to convince the Pharisees and scribes who complained. Jesus isn’t trying to convince them.

He’s teaching an advanced lesson to us.

The advanced lesson is that the one has priority over the ninety-nine. How can that possibly make sense?

First of all, the priority is momentary, just as it would be with a shepherd. He’s not leaving the ninety-nine forever, just long enough to fetch the errant one.

Secondly, the ninety-nine will be just fine. They are not unwatched while the lost sheep is found. God is in control over all creation.

Still, the bottom line is thrilling. A single lost soul gets the undivided attention of the almighty author of space, time, matter, and energy.

And that lost soul is a perfect pain in the neck who does not deserve to be gone after.

3 Luke 17:11–19 (NKJV)

Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

Imagine that you’re one of ten people in intensive care with COVID-19. A doctor tries a new medicine on you and all ten of you are suddenly cured. The hospital needs the ICU beds, so they ask you to check out immediately. You’re more than happy to do that, and everyone is headed for the parking lot.

And then it hits you. Your being saved means everyone can be saved. You run back inside, breaking every social distancing rule in the book.

And hug the doctor.

That’s what this parable is all about. The kingdom of heaven has an emotional, out-of-control exuberance about it. Heavenly priorities (like people’s eternal destiny) are big priorities. They lead to big joy.

What’s important to the Samaritan leper isn’t that he’s cured; it’s that the cure has arrived. He sees beyond his own selfish needs to the big picture. But the secret sauce isn’t the egalitarianism; it’s the unbridled happy-go-lucky attitude. From an earthly perspective, it’s doing crazy things.

It’s nuts to throw a party every time you find something you misplaced. It’s nuts to leave ninety-nine sheep alone and at risk to go after one that has wandered off. It’s at least disobedient for the healed leper to come back to Jesus after He explicitly gave the instruction, “Go show yourselves to the priests.”

But from a heavenly perspective these things are not nuts, not disobedient, and not impractical. God is in control and you can do what you’re called to do without worrying about worldly priorities, probabilities, and rules.

When Patrick decided to return to Ireland, to the people who enslaved him, his family went all out trying to stop him. His plan was nuts.

Except that it wasn’t.

4 Luke 10:38–42 (NKJV)

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

At first glance Martha seems right. But notice Luke's interesting choice of words.

But Martha was distracted with much serving.

Distracted? From what? She was concentrating on the task she and Mary were responsible for. Isn't Mary the one who's distracted? And what *one thing is needed* anyway?

Note that this is all happening just after Jesus had fed five thousand in Luke 9. Martha worrying about serving food is almost insulting.

Meanwhile, Mary *sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word*. Jesus was teaching. That's why He's there. That's why He's anywhere. That's what *one thing is needed*. That's what Martha was distracted from.

Martha needs to stop being *worried and troubled about many things*. Mary will help her if needed and in due time, but right now she's attending to the Lord. Dinner can wait a few minutes for Jesus to finish His lesson. He, not Martha, is in control. Mary has the kingdom perspective. Martha needs to learn it.

So do we.

But this sounds like a call to irresponsibility. When is it OK to ignore a responsibility?

Never. Distracted is the word. We live in a world of spam. It's designed to make us *worried and troubled about many things*. We're not called to ignore things; we're called to not be distracted by them.

Mary wasn't ignoring the household tasks; she had made the choice to put them off. Meanwhile, she wasn't playing solitaire; she was listening to Jesus teach. She had made a perfectly reasonable choice.

The difference between Mary's kingdom perspective and Martha's worldly one was that Mary didn't lose sight of what's important. Martha let worldly tasks distract her, and Jesus called her out on it.

The kingdom doesn't call us to be irresponsible. Even deadlines are born of choices we made. You can set yourself up for distraction by accepting a responsibility you aren't ready for—even a job in the church.

Kingdom thinking is thinking ahead. Don't over-commit.

5 Matthew 13:3–8, 18–23 (ESV)

And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” ...

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

The rocky ground and the thorns are distractions! Tribulation or persecution are on one end of the distraction spectrum, cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches on the other. They pretty much cover the whole range.

And you can be just as distracted by riches as by trials. That’s why Jesus said so many things about the difficulties with saving the rich (e.g., Matthew 19:23–24, Luke 6:24, Luke 18:18–25).

But why is Jesus teaching this? What are we supposed to learn? How can this help us be better disciples?

Is this a guide to help us understand what happens to others? Or to understand what’s happening to us?

I think it’s about us. I know I’ve been different soils at different times. That’s important.

This parable prepares us by teaching how different distractions are dangerous in different ways.

Tribulation and persecution are frontal assaults on faith. Without deep roots, we get distracted, panic, and fail. That’s why Jesus warned us over and over to prepare for persecution. Be ready to stand your ground.

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” — Matthew 5:11 (ESV)

The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches are different. They “choke” the word, leading to a lack of fruitfulness. Those types of distraction will suck the oxygen out of your faith and your ministry.

Distraction isn’t a single enemy; it’s a class of enemies.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why does God care about our prayers?
2. Apply this to when you were a lost sheep.
3. Have you ever exploded in joy?
4. What distracts you?
5. When were you rocky soil or with thorns?

Items for prayer: