

God Works with Our Story

July 26, 2020

Matthew 13: 31-33 and 44-52

³¹ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." ³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."...

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

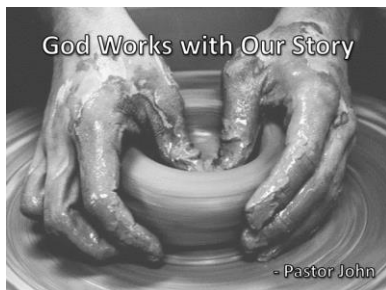
⁵¹ "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Romans 8: 26-39

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what the mind of the Spirit is because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.



Today we turn to how God works with our story to help us grow closer and deeper in our faith. In Matthew 13 we find four comparisons that Jesus uses to illustrate the value of faith – a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, and a pearl of great worth. This connects into our

passage from Romans 8. Paul helps us to understand that value – for people of faith we know that God is for us and that the Spirit intervenes on our behalf. One we have entered a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, Paul reminds us that nothing will ever be able to separate us from God's love. In this week's movie – "Toy Story" – we find two unlikely friends, Woody and Buzz Lightyear, who come to understand just how much they really need each other. As the movie develops, both toys grow personally, and they each discover a deeper meaning and purpose in life. They find it when they look outside of themselves. This too is our story and the story of how God works in us. As we begin, let us pray...

Turning to Matthew 13, we begin with two examples that parallel our faith. Both the mustard seed and the yeast start as something small. A mustard seed is tiny, and yeast appears as but a few small grains. Both have what appear to be insignificant beginnings. This parallels the relationship between Woody and Buzz in "Toy Story". There is not much there at first. They are what I would call acquaintances. In the opening teachings on the mustard seed and yeast, when they are allowed to do their thing, the mustard seed becomes a large plant and the yeast will spread throughout the dough, causing the dough to rise, to appear to have life within. Although small and seemingly unimportant at first, there is a glorious outcome when the mustard seed and yeast complete their work.

In “Toy Story” the relationship between Woody and Buzz evolves. At first, they coexist with a tension ever below the surface. Over time, though, the tension rises to the surface, much like the seedling poking out of the ground or the dough slowly rising to fill the bowl or pan. In this way the yeast and the mustard seed are like the all-pervasive influence of faith in our lives. When we allow faith and the Holy Spirit to work within us, God can and will do pretty amazing things.

This is what we sang about in our opening song, “Build Your Kingdom Here”. As we sang about the power of God’s kingdom, we sang these words: *“No force of hell can stop your beauty changing hearts. You made us for much more than this, awake the kingdom seed in us. Fill us with the love and strength of Christ”*. The mustard seed grows into a huge



plant, the yeast spreads throughout the whole dough. Our faith can be like the kingdom seed awakened in us, filling us with Christ’s love and strength and power. When allowed to grow and mature, faith will make all the difference in our lives. In the movie, it was the fully mature relationship between Woody and Buzz that enabled them to triumph over their separation from Andy, their time with Sid, and the distance created by the moving truck. The value they found in each other led both Woody and Buzz to give all for their common cause of being reunited with Andy and their fellow toys.

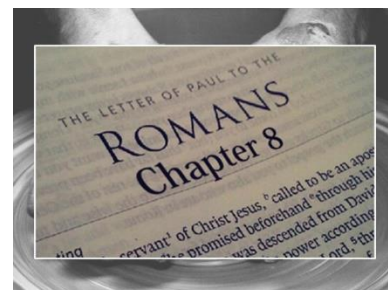


As we continue on in Matthew 13, the giving of one’s all is precisely what Jesus is speaking about. One man discovers a treasure hidden in field. A merchant finds a

pearl of great value. Both do whatever it takes to acquire that item. They sell everything they have to acquire the treasure or the pearl. I believe there is a hidden warning here as well. This attraction to the things of this world, to the lure of wealth or power or respect can be trap or a snare for us. If it were just about the actual value of the treasure or the pearl, then we would be like Woody in the movie. You might recall how Woody's jealousy of Buzz's popularity led him to ultimately push Buzz out the window using the remote-control car. Our pursuit of the things of this world can lead us to poor decisions as well. But in Jesus' teaching today, the treasure and the pearl represent our faith.

Like the treasure for the man and like the pearl for the merchant, there is nothing of greater value in our lives than our faith and our relationship with God. Jesus is telling us that we should be willing to give up or forfeit everything else in our lives to hold onto our faith. For Woody and Buzz, being reunited with Andy was this thing of great worth. It was Woody's speech to Buzz that led him to realize that being a part of Andy's life was what really mattered. It did not matter that Buzz was not the real Buzz Lightyear – that he was “just a toy” as Woody said over and over. What mattered was that his purpose was to bring joy and fun and adventure and creativity to Andy's life. Buzz came to understand that as the “why” to his existence. It was his purpose and it gave him meaning. Turning to verses 47 through 52 in Matthew 13, we come to the “why” – why is our faith the most important thing we have in our lives? It is a familiar theme these last few weeks. It was the conclusion of the parable of the weeds just last Sunday. Jesus again reminds us all that those without faith will be thrown into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Faith is not just an

end of life concern, though. We do not have faith simply to get into heaven. Yes, that is the hope at the end of this life, but faith also has a great value in our day to day living. That is what Paul speaks about in Romans 8. This morning we will be looking at verses 26 through 39. Let us turn to that passage in our Bibles.



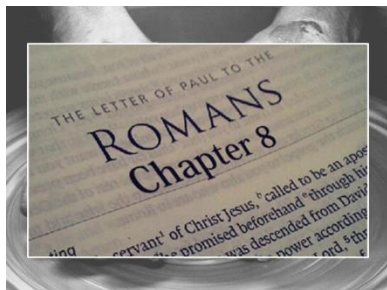
Paul begins in verse 26 with the value of the Spirit in the life of a believer. In this verse he writes, *"And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness"*. For Paul, this is part of the solution to the inner battle that he has been writing about in chapter 8 and that we have been working through these last few weeks. Over the course of Romans 8 Paul has established that we are weak and that we need the Spirit's help in the battle against evil. Paul goes on to explain that the Spirit intercedes for us – it prays for us in our weakness. These are not just random prayers. They have purpose. In verse 27 Paul tells us that the Spirit *"intercedes for the saints according to the will of God"*. The Holy Spirit prays for us even when we do not know that we need prayed for. The Spirit knows the will of God for us and for our lives. We were created to live as children of God so that is what the Spirit prays for. When we are living in that alignment with God, seeking to do God's will, then God and the Spirit work together in all things for our good.

Now, that does not mean we will not have hardship. That does not mean we will not suffer. That does not mean that we will not endure things that we do not like. That does not mean we will not have to deal with people we do not like. That is one of the key struggles for Woody and Buzz in "Toy Story", right? They cannot see past themselves. When we are in that place – being self-centered

and self-absorbed – we have trouble seeing anything but our desires and what we think we want or need. When we are there, we are loving self and we are not loving God. From that place, it is hard for God to work with our story. When Paul writes, *"all things work together for good for those who love God"*, what Paul is telling us is that for those who love God and who trust in God's will, that all things will work for our good. That hardship, that time of suffering, that walk through the valley – in those times God will ultimately work things for our good. In the midst of the time of testing, sometimes it is hard to see what good can come out of it. But almost always, in time, we can see how God worked "good" out of a bad situation or experience. This is what happens towards the end of the movie.



Two self-absorbed toys find themselves in a bad place – all because of their own selfish attitudes and desires. Because they are all about themselves still, they almost work against each other as they try to get back to Andy. In the midst of the valley, when Buzz was at his lowest, the background song plays, *"the dream that ended too soon"*. Buzz is content to exist in Sid's room, to meet some unfortunate end. But Woody intervenes, telling Buzz that this is not the end of his story. Woody's hope and enthusiasm re-energizes Buzz and they become a team. Working together with Sid's toys, they escape and find a good ending to their story. Teamwork, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and love work together for the good as Buzz and Woody are reunited with Andy's other toys. From there on in the life of the toys, it looks like a storybook ending.



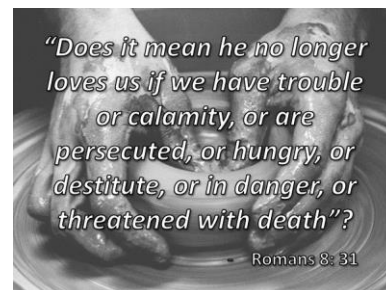
Paul speaks of a similar storybook ending – and life getting there too. Following Paul’s train of thought in verses 29 and 30, we see that the good that God has planned is really all about each of us becoming more and more like his son Jesus. Before we were born, God

chose us to become like his son. As our journey of faith leads us on a path to becoming more like Jesus, we are ever drawn deeper into our relationship with God. To continue the process, at times we need to be made new again, so that we are in right standing with God. Being in right standing with God is what will allow us to share in his glory. There is a progression to our journey of faith, to our becoming more and more Christlike. It is like that mustard seed or yeast that Jesus was talking about in Matthew 13. Faith begins to work in our lives and soon it grows or spreads to affect every area of our lives – heart, soul, mind, and strength – as we mature in our faith.

If you have your Bible here with you today, please turn with me to verse 31. This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. Here we read these words: *"If God is for us, who is against us?"* Nothing worth mentioning. This is what we sang about in the song, "Our God". We sang out our faith, declaring, *"And if our God is for us, then who could ever stop us? And if our God is with us, then what can stand against?"* If God is on our side, and we are on God’s side, then there is really no stopping us. It would be like putting yeast in the dough and then telling it to stop working. And to illustrate the depth of God’s love, Paul goes on to remind us, *"He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"*

God did not spare his one and only son for us, but willingly gave him as the sacrifice for us all. That is deep love. It is a love so deep that no one or nothing can ever condemn us. Because of God's covenant love for us, we know that nothing will ever be able to separate us from God's love. In verse 31, Paul asks a hypothetical question. Here he asks, *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"* Paul is acknowledging what we all know. Life isn't always easy.

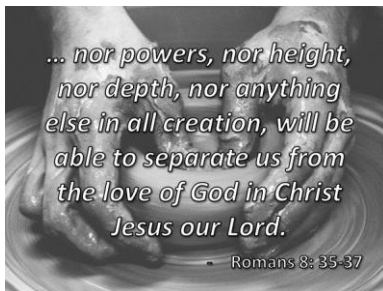
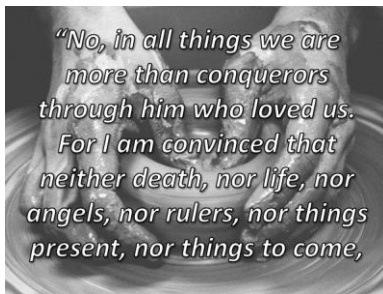
In one of the study Bibles that I read, the question posed in verse 31 is phrased this way: *"Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble of calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?"* Yes, we will have hardships and trials. As I talked about last week, sometimes the struggle comes from within. The struggle or suffering is because of a choice we made, because of a sin we indulged in. There are consequences, a price to pay at times. In "Toy Story" this would be Woody's anger leading him to push Buzz out the window with the car.



But in this case, Woody damaged his relationship with his friends. That separation was Woody's consequence. And even though we feel separated from God because of our sins, it does not mean that God has left us or has given up on us. We are the ones that turn our backs,

that turn away, that create the separation. The separation is never on God's part. Even when we are sinning, the Spirit is at work – praying for us, reminding us of God's will and plan for us, drawing us back, working out our God story.

In that sense, here is where the value or worth of our faith is found. Through it all, God still loves us. This is why it is like that treasure in the field or that pearl of great worth. In and through the working out of our faith, we can overcome anything with the potential to separate us from God. With faith, we can be conquerors, overcomes, victors. I love the closing verses from Romans 8 that speak of the strength and enduring quality of God's love for us. Please join me as I read verses 35 through 37. The words will be on the screens.



"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

There it is, my friends. Nothing can separate us from God's love that we find in Jesus Christ. Nothing. N-O-T-H-I-N-G. It is that strong. That's like the mic drop, isn't it? Boom, show over, case closed. Not death or life, not angels or demons, not the past, the present, or the future, not any power – nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God. As God works in each of us this week in the continuations of each of our God stories, let us live a confident faith, trusting that nothing can or will ever be able to separate us from God's love. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.