

What Is the Kingdom of God Like?

Matthew 13:31-35, 44-46

This afternoon we will look at a series of parables, shorter parables, all with a common theme. The kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God? Where is the kingdom of God? Is it here already? Or is it still yet to come?

What will the kingdom of God look like on earth? How will be made visible on earth? How successful will the kingdom of God be on earth? That last question is probably the key question for today. How successful will it be? How widespread will its influence become? Or, the same question from a slightly differing perspective, is the kingdom something that awaits a future age, the kingdom age as distinct from the church age?

Now, I'll answer all of those questions this afternoon from these parables with a realization of our own cultural context. Most of us are rather limited in our awareness of the kingdom, because we limit the scope of our analysis to our own experiences. Our own lifetime. Our own social and cultural context, and in that context, for most of us, we would come away concluding that the kingdom of God is, at best, an isolated and dwindling influence upon the world in which we live.

I could give you statistics, though I really don't like making points with statistics. I could also use anecdotes, from my own experiences as well as from some of the the common experiences we share. I could identify the decline of the influence of the Christian church in our own country, the decline in the practice of godliness and law-keeping. I could talk about the decline of sexual morality, the breakdown of marriage and the family, or more widely observed social/political issues such as abortion and homosexual marriage. We could observe the

increase of violence, especially in our schools; the prevalence of the teaching of evolution and social Darwinism, or even socialism itself. We can look at the rise of religious based, Islamic terrorism, or the prevalence of cults and false religions gaining acceptance and status within the norm. Indeed, the only religion seemingly looked down upon in our current political and educational systems is historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity.

Name the data point in almost any cultural or moral issue over the last 50 years in this country, and you would probably conclude that the kingdom of God is waning. Or observe in the news countries where Christianity is actually outlawed, where Christians are persecuted, even unto death. Eritrea. China. Syria. Pakistan. North Korea. So many others. Your conclusion might well be that the Christian faith is in decline, that the faith and practice of true Christianity is on the decline, and that we as a nation are rapidly approaching what might already be an accurate description of Europe, post-Christian. Many would say very clearly that we now live in a post-Christian age.

That is the context in which many people evaluate the presence and the prosperity of the kingdom of God. And that is the wrong context, that is the wrong perspective, that is the wrong starting point for the discussion and the wrong foundation upon which to evaluate the work of God in the kingdom of God, today.

The correct starting point and the proper foundation for that discussion is, simply put, the Word of God. So let's look at the subject of the kingdom of God, even with that question is use as my sermon title, and lets see what God says about the kingdom. It is, after all, his kingdom. And the perspective we ought to have is the perspective which God has. So, what is the kingdom of God like? That question is answered by a series of four images.

I. IMAGES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

What is the kingdom of God like? It is like,

A. A mustard seed.

v.31-32

Actually, just a grain of mustard seed. It is the smallest of the seeds in the garden. That's the starting point. Smallness. Even insignificance. Apparent unimportance. A tiny, little seed. And the point that Jesus makes is that that tiny, little seed grows into great and large plant, a tree as we read in verse 31.

There is an obvious contrast, one that forces us to look beyond what we can see with our own eyes and what we might experience with our own lives. So you can't define your expectations about the kingdom of God by you yourself might observe. You might observe only a small seed, a mustard seed. You might observe something so seemingly insignificant as to be statistically irrelevant. You might observe only the seed, and assume that that is all that there is, all that there ever will be.

You might think the church of our day is on the decline, that the influence of the church is all but over, that the kingdom is actually shrinking rather than spreading. You might view the progress of the kingdom in this age from the very narrow and limited perspective of declines you have seen in your own lifetime. And you would be wrong!

That's not the image that Jesus gives his disciples. Jesus' image of the kingdom is the contrast between that smallest of seeds to the giant size of a tree, one "larger than all the garden plants." Surely the disciples would have grasped the first part of that contrast, for they were small and insignificant themselves. There was nothing in them, nothing in them that would provide

any expectation of a movement that would change the world. Nothing in them that had any power at all. They were the smallest of the seeds, but Jesus would make his kingdom to be a great tree.

The Apostle Paul would later learn that same message, as he wrote to the Christians in Corinth,

1 Cor. 1:26 "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Paul made his own application clear, writing then,

1 Cor. 2:1 "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

That's important, because we can often think that the success of the kingdom depends upon us. Upon our wisdom, our ability, our strategy, our vision, our strength, or our money! Often when we think about the growth of the kingdom today, we think about the movers and shakers of our age. We think about the type-A

personalities, we think about their goals, their vision, their drive and their purpose. And that's how the kingdom will grow!

But Paul says this, "I was with you in weakness, in fear in and much trembling." And Paul told the church of his day,

1 Cor. 1:27. "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are."

That's the image of the kingdom which Jesus is teaching his disciples. The kingdom doesn't begin with anything that we can identify as great or important, it begins with a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds.

But, by contrast, it becomes a tree, a great tree. Notice from verse 32 the description of that tree, "the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." Those words didn't originate with Jesus, and from their Old Testament reference it is easy to see what he means. They come from Ezekiel 17. The prophet is giving a revelation from God about the restoration of the nation of Israel, the nation of God's people.

Ezek. 17:22 "Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar and set it out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on a high and prominent mountain. 23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it."

God will plant Israel as a tree, and the birds will nest in it. Every kind of bird. In other words, every nation of the world. If you remember, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had a similar dream about his great kingdom of Babylon, only his dream ended badly. The tree was cut down. And in Daniel 4, we read about Daniel's interpretation of that dream, that the great Babylonian empire would be cut down. Nebuchadnezzar would lose his kingdom. And Daniel records what seem to be words of genuine faith and repentance. Nebuchadnezzar seems to understand,

Dan. 4:34 "At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth."

And so the kingdom of God will spread throughout every nation. All the nations of the world will find rest and peace in the kingdom of Jesus, no matter what you might see today in the world today with your own eyes.

Mat. 24:14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Therefore, our great commission as a church,

Mat. 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

That's not an empty promise, for according to Jesus' own word, all the nations of the world will join that kingdom. All the birds air will make nests in its branches. That's the extent of the kingdom growth that will take place in this age, by the work of the church. And the church is represented by the smallest of small seeds.

That's not a perspective that was new in the New Testament, but one that has clearly always been presented to God's people. For example,

Ps. 72:8 "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, And His enemies will lick the dust. 10 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles Will bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba Will offer gifts. 11 Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; All nations shall serve Him."

That's what the kingdom of God is like! That's how extensive the growth of the kingdom of God will be. Then a second image of the kingdom, this time one emphasizing the intensive growth of that kingdom. The image is,

B. Leaven.

Yeast.

Jesus tells a short, simple story. One that was easy to understand, and easy to comprehend.

v.33

In other words, just a little tiny bit of yeast is needed to make bread. A little, tiny bit of yeast leavens a whole loaf, here identified as "three measures of flour." In simple terms, there is a small quantity of yeast, and a large quantity of flour. One commentator suggests perhaps as much as 50 pounds of flour is

being used, obviously enough for a very large crowd. Only that small portion of leaven was needed.

Now, interestingly, this pervasive effect of leaven is more often used in Scripture as something harmful, something evil or bad. For example,

Mat. 16:11 "How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12 Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Or, in the context of church discipline,

1 Cor. 5:4 "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

But here in the parable, leaven is good. Its influence is good. It possesses a power that appears hidden to us. And it permeates the whole batch. It was hidden and invisible, yet its effect was seen in the obvious increase of bread. That's how the kingdom of God will grow in this age, by the internal power of God at work among his people, as leaven is at work in a batch of bread dough.

And so the kingdom won't grow as the direct consequence of cleverly devised strategies and vision statements. It won't grow

by the exercise of social justice, seeking to make right all the perceived social wrongs and inequities of our day. No, the kingdom will grow when God's people become salt and light, when they become leaven. The kingdom will grow when God's people live in the world like yeast lives in a batch of flour.

The kingdom that Jesus says is "within you" will grow from within, perhaps at times unseen, but its effects never unnoticed. So let me encourage you not to withdraw from the world, nor to think your own wisdom and power will change the world. Rather, let your light shine, let the influence of your life and faith start in your own ordinary experiences of life. That's why holiness is so important, because if you conform yourself to the pattern of the world, you cease to have any ability to be leaven. If you conform to the worldliness of others around you, if you love the world and love the things of the world, you will cease to have ability to influence the world as yeast influences a batch of bread.

If the world doesn't recognize anything different in you, if the world doesn't recognize any difference in our church, then there is no leavening. But to the contrary, let this parable be of great encouragement. It doesn't take great power. It doesn't take advanced wisdom or intelligence. It doesn't take a grand vision or an entrepreneurial strategy. The kingdom of God grows when the people of God leaven the world with a pervasive influence so well illustrated by yeast.

The third image of the kingdom,

C. Hidden treasure.

Here somewhat a shift, from an emphasis upon the spread of the kingdom to its value.

v.44

You see the honesty of that man. You see the excitement. The joy. The anticipation of riches and wealth. But also the commitment. He knows he will be rich, but he has to sell all that he has first. "He sells all that he has and buys that field."

So it cost everything, but he gains greater riches than he had to begin with. If only the people of the world in which we live would understand that about the gospel. Too often, the church of our day lies to unbelievers in our evangelism. We tell them they don't have to give up the world. We tell them there is no cost, only a benefit. No cost, only reward. So many people, seeking the reward, never give up their own lives in the pursuit of God. They never die to themselves, but preserve their own identity and autonomy, and try to add God to their lives something as the icing on the cake. To use a common idiom, you can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't have it both ways.

Mat. 10:38 "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

To put that very positively, however, to emphasize the end result, here is life! Here is the meaning of life, the fullness of life. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

It is a hidden treasure. And if you are to obtain that treasure, if you are to purchase it, it will cost you everything. But again, the main point here, it's worth it! "Losing your life" in that context is great joy. Selling all that you have is great joy! Because the reward is a great treasure that you know will be yours!

Please don't lose that perspective when God, in his providence, might seem to demand something in your life that you seem unwilling to give up. Please don't lose that perspective when you realize the sacrifices necessary to be a disciple of

Jesus Christ. The life that Jesus offers is a hidden treasure, worth far more than anything of this world that you might lose.

Similarly, the fourth short parable for this morning,

D. A pearl of great price.

v.45-46

Indeed, it is the chance of a lifetime. But it will cost your whole life. Pearls were a status symbol for wealthy people in Jesus' day, not unlike ours, and this parable is of a man who goes out in search of pearls and finds one of greater worth than he has ever seen. But he doesn't have the money to buy it. It is a now or never proposition: sell everything and buy!

And so with this perspective on the kingdom of God, as I preach the gospel, I offer to you that pearl of great price. I offer to you life. Everlasting life. Eternal life. I offer to you abundant life, meaningful life. I offer to you the joy of life. And the peace which this world cannot offer you. But you must sell everything!

Mat. 16:24 "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

So sell everything you have! Whatever attraction this world might have, give it up. And get what is best. Gain what is of greatest value. The hidden treasure. The pearl of great price.

Let me end with verses 34 and 35, with a brief repetition of what I emphasized before we began these parables, namely the use of parables to make known the revelation of God. Jesus

uses these parables for the very specific purpose of,

II. REVEALING THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Remember that he also hides this revelation from those who will remain in their unbelief.

v.14-15

But he also uses the parables to reveal. Jesus quotes,

Ps. 78:1 "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! 2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, 3 things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done."

So these things may have been hidden, these things about the kingdom of God. But they are hidden no longer. The kingdom of God is not a mystery that remains hidden, but rather a mystery that is now revealed. It is a kingdom that is within you, it is already here. And though it begins as the smallest of seeds in the garden, it is a kingdom that God's people from all the nations of the world will enter.

It is a kingdom that offers the greatest possible prize and reward, but costs you the whole of your life. So take up your cross. Lose your life. And gain the prize of eternal life. Let me end with Paul's own words of himself, words I urge you to make your own.

Phil. 3:7 "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having

my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”