

March 7, 2010
Matthew 13:11-17 / Luke 13:18-21
Jesus' New Perspective on the Kingdom — It Grows!

There is probably no other biblical topic that is harder to explain than Jesus view of the Kingdom of God! And I say that from 23 years of both the personal and pastoral experience of spending significant time in three churches trying to do so!

Yet there's a good reason for that, since Jesus Himself tells us (in Matthew 13:10-17) that understanding it involves understanding "secrets" or "mysteries." "Secrets" are things that are "hidden," and "mysteries" being "something incomprehensible to the unaided human intellect" or "not evident to most."

And not only that, Jesus also tells us these "secrets" of the kingdom are PURPOSELY hidden from some. The answer Jesus gives when his disciples ask Him, "*Why do you speak in parables?*" is "*So that seeing they may NOT see, and hearing they may NOT understand.*" (v. 13b)

Thus (according to Jesus) the reason He spoke in parables was NOT simply to use stories or the narrative form of preaching (because people like it better and can relate to it better, as is most often suggested today), but also (by His very own testimony) so that the secrets or mysteries of the kingdom would remain secret and mysterious! That is, to all but those whom God sovereignly chose to bless with the knowledge of such mysteries!

Strange as that may sound to our ears, His speaking in parables was NOT to help EVERYONE understand, but to actually keep SOME from understanding.

In fact, Jesus tells us in John 3:1-8, the one thing that has to take place before anyone can even begin to comprehend the mysteries of the Kingdom of God — they must be born again!

God must do a work of grace in their hearts. "*No one can SEE the kingdom of God,*" says Jesus, (that is, no one can grasp or understand or comprehend it) unless or until he is born again."

One must first receive the Holy Spirit by the grace of God in regeneration or the new birth, or they will never be able to see or comprehend the secrets or mysteries of the kingdom.

The Apostle Paul would later say the same exact thing in I Corinthians 2:12, where he writes:
“No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. And we (that is we who have been born again or born of the Spirit) have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” – one of those things being the kingdom of God and our entrance into it (Luke 22:29).

Yet despite the many difficulties that are clearly involved in trying to help people understand “the nature of the kingdom of God,” we must continue to do it and do it however long it takes! Because as I pointed out last week, the Kingdom of God was **THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF EVERYTHING JESUS DID AND TAUGHT!**

That’s why He tells us: *“Seek **FIRST** the Kingdom of God!”* Why? Because seeking it is essential to everything that’s truly Christian! In fact, it’s not secondary to the greatest commands to, *“Love the Lord your God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength”* and *“your neighbor as yourself,”* it’s actually part of fulfilling it!

You can’t love God and your neighbor, unless you’ve set your heart to seeking **FIRST** (above and beyond all else) the kingdom of God. And LISTEN: It’s not just a suggestion! It’s a command! It’s in the imperative tense! *“Seek **FIRST** the kingdom of God.”*

And we’re to do it precisely because that’s what Jesus did! Not only was the kingdom of God His favorite topic (and thus the thing closest to His heart), but as I pointed out last week, proclaiming the good news about it was (according to His very own testimony) the reason He was sent to earth! (Lk 4:43)

Yet I can’t even stop there, because merely proclaiming it was NOT His ultimate purpose either! His ultimate purpose was to help His disciples understand what it was like (as much as they could) (Mt. 13:16-17) / display it’s power and presence through His ministry of healing and forgiving sins and casting out of demons (Luke 11:14-22) / and then inaugurate, usher it in or establish it over the whole earth (Luke 13:18-21 /22:29).

In fact, according to the Apostle Paul that precisely what Jesus has been doing since He ascended into heaven! *“Christ must reign,”* says Paul in I Cor. 15:24-28 (and he means in the ongoing present just as He has since His ascension) *“until He has put all His enemies under His feet.”* He must rule or reign (according to Paul) until He has destroyed or defeated all dominion and authority and power that opposes the saving purposes of God!

So let me say this before I go any further: Since the kingdom of God was the thing closest to Jesus heart / and He told us it should be the PRIMARY thing we seek (above and beyond all other things) / it only stands to reason that we should do whatever it takes / however long it takes / and however many times it takes / to understand the nature of the kingdom, so that we can know exactly what it is we're supposed to be "seeking" FIRST and FOREMOST, both in our lives, in the church, and in the world! How anyone could possibly disagree is beyond me!

Yet sadly enough, even in the church, we do just the opposite. We invest so much of our time and energy and focus on accumulating things or having a good self-esteem or keeping fit and trim or trying to feel good about ourselves or trying to prosper financially that we forget both the command and the accompanying promise of Jesus, when He tells us: ***"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE ADDED UNTO YOU."***

Yet what we tend to do? Focus primarily on all those other things, when Jesus tells us to focus primarily on the Kingdom of God, and He'll bless us with all those other things as the by-product of seeking FIRST the Kingdom of God!

Why do so many people wrestle with a low self-esteem? Well at least in part it's because many have no over-arching, heart-consuming, life-invigorating purpose worthy of pouring all their soul and their energies into!

They have no grand vision or transcendent purpose or eternal perspective that's bigger than them and thus infuses them with a sense of energy and significance, because it sweeps them into a cause that's worth living and even dying for!

The same can be said for many instances of depression. And I know that depression can be grief induced or caused by numerous different factors — even biological ones. No well-informed person would deny that. / But I also know that some depression is the result of our culture being so darn narcissistic and self-focused.

In fact, the more self-focused or self-centered our society becomes, the more widespread depression will become, because God never intended that we be so self-focused! He made us to be Kingdom Focused! We were created, called, and are now commanded to SEEK FIRST the things of His KINGDOM!

Which means one of the worst things we can do is make US the focus of everything we THINK ABOUT, TALK ABOUT and DO! It's just NOT the way God intended things to be!

God made us to be workers and laborers who joyfully engage in a cause far more grand than anything we could ever have imagined!

And because He's made and called and converted and commissioned and commanded us to SEEK and FOCUS PRIMARILY on the KINGDOM OF GOD / when other things become our PRIMARY focus and pursuit, and we don't whole-heartedly engage ourselves in that work, it only stands to reason that we'll feel lost and disoriented and become depressed. Because we were created and redeemed to live for and do grander things!

One of the fruits of my conversion (back in my 20's) was that the depression I'd been under for two years, lifted! Why? Not just because I was forgiven, but because I now had some-thing to live for that was so much bigger and grander and more wonderful than simply being concerned about ME!

Part of our conversion is being liberated from the kingdom of self and transferred into *"the kingdom of the Son that He loves"* (as Paul puts it in Col. 1:13) — where everything is focused on HIM and not US!

We sing the song, *"It's all about You, Jesus... It's not about me, as if I should do things my way..."* Which is true! But we don't tend to live that way when it comes right down to it.

So, with all that behind us, let's consider what Jesus tells us today in relation to *"What the kingdom of God is like."*

If you mistakenly closed your Bibles, open them once again to our text for today, where the **FIRST** thing Jesus does, after the healing the woman bended double (like the hunch-back of Notre Dame for 18 years) is use the miracle He's just done as a springboard for helping them have a better understanding of what the Kingdom of God is, or is like.

So, after pausing to heal the lady in verses 12-16, He asks all who just saw this miracle: *"What is the kingdom of God like? To what shall I compare it?"* (And He means, in light of the miracle you've just seen!)

Yet He doesn't really want their answers! This isn't a give and take discussion where everyone gets to share their opinion! It's to inform or correct any wrong ideas people may have regarding the nature of the kingdom. So He answers His own questions and gives them two illustrations. The first is of a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds known to people he was speaking to.

And using that tiny little seed as an example, He says, *“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden, and it grew until it became a tree which was large enough for the birds of the air to perch on its branches.”* (Actually they are considered to be bushes and grow anywhere from 12 to 15 feet tall.)

And if there is one thing we can learn from both our passages this morning, it is that Jesus view of the nature of the Kingdom was entirely different from the view held by any of His contemporaries, which fell into one of two general categories.

There were some who believed the kingdom would be purely political (as in King David’s day). It would be established through military victory (aided by the miraculous intervention of God like some victories in the OT where God drowned the armies of Egypt or sent an angel to smite the armies of Babylon). / It would be an earthly kingdom ruled by a Messianic Jewish King, and if it did “grow” it would only be in the sense that any earthly Kingdom or Empire grew — by military conquest of additional territories.

Yet others believed in a more apocalyptic view of the kingdom. They believed it would burst on the scene like something out of the recent movie, 2012 — blood and fire and smoke and desolation! Earthquakes and meteors and gargantuan tidal waves and volcanic upheaval as God defeated all His enemies! To them the kingdom would come crashing in Hollywood style — people trembling and aghast at the raw display of divine wrath and power! Absent one moment, there in all its glory the next!

But **LISTEN**: ***NO ONE PRIOR TO JESUS ever expected it to come in the way Jesus describes it here!*** Breaking in upon the scene like a small, almost unnoticeable seed planted invisibly under the soil, and then slowly (ever so slowly) growing, until a little shoot breaks the topsoil, gradually growing into a stalk, and then sending out shoots, which became branches, which produced buds and leaves until over time (a long time) it was 12-15 feet tall!

In fact, Jesus point is that the coming of the kingdom would barely be noticeable to most, and it would grow so slowly, that even if you stood there watching, you couldn’t see it growing, at least not apart from the use of time-lapse photography, or remembering how small it was when it began as compared to now (like this batch of dough I had Bud mix up for us this morning!)

Which is the other illustration Jesus gives us in regard to *“What the Kingdom can be compared to.”* An illustration every man and woman and child in Jesus day would have been totally familiar with, since most everyone in that day made their own bread.

THAT, says Jesus, is what the kingdom of God is like! THOSE are the types of things that you can “compare it to!” Things that start out so small, and grow so slowly, that you can barely notice its growing!

So I ask you: Is that what you believed about the kingdom of God? That it would break in upon this world like a whisper, and grow so slowly few could even notice it growing (one soul at a time!). Growing so slowly that only way to tell it was growing was to look back and remember what it was like at the beginning!

Think of it: Beginning with only 12 disciples, and growing to only 120 after three years, the sprout “popped through the soil” on the Day of Pentecost with 3000 added to their number, and then shortly thereafter, another 2000 more!

It went from a small sect essentially limited to the City of Jerusalem, and spread into Samaria, and then the entire eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean, and over the next 30 years to Turkey, Asia Minor, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece and Italy — until its ranks were sprinkled throughout the entire Roman Empire!

It spread all over Northern Africa, and Europe, and the British Isles and Scandinavia and east into Russia.

By the 1600's, it had come to the eastern seaboard of the United States, and spread to Canada and then the Caribbean and Mexico and Central and South America! It spread west to California and on to the Pacific Islands, Australia, India, Burma, Indonesia and New Zealand! And in more recent years to South Korea and China, which now boasts a Christian population estimated to be 100 million people strong!

In fact, one church in China was growing so fast that (as you may have seen in the news in December) the Chinese Government ransacked the church and arrested the pastors —the 50,000 member church of Linfen, in China's coal district.

Yet that's small in comparison to the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, which now has an estimated 800,000 members in one church, and dwarfs anything in the United States! (Brazil has one church with 250,000 members!)

Think of it, my friends! The 12 disciples started out with NOTHING but he clothes on their backs and today there are churches and colleges and seminaries and clinics and hospitals and schools and orphanages on every continent!

Adoption agencies and homes for unwed mothers and counseling centers and soup kitchens and food banks and drug and alcohol rehab centers and relief organizations and mission agencies and camps and retreat centers all over the globe!

Did it happen all at once? Did it come crashing in Hollywood style?! **NO!** In fact, at certain times it grew so slowly that an entire century went by before people could look back notice in hind sight that it had indeed grown.

Which brings me to the **LAST** thing I need to point out from this text and our text from Matthew. That the life and power which fuels the growth or spread of the kingdom is inherent in the seed or the yeast. The seed has life in itself. Yeast has life in itself. Jesus chose to illustrate the kingdom of God with two things that have life in themselves!

And what is the seed or the yeast? Jesus tells us when He explains the parable of the seeds. The seed, He says, is "the message about the kingdom." It's the Gospel! Which assures us beyond any shadow of a doubt that the growth of the kingdom is inextricably connected to the activity we call evangelism or sharing the Gospel message with others!

Isaiah, speaking of the Gospel of God's free grace and forgiveness in chapter 55, says: ***"Just as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which I have sent it."***

And Paul says essentially the same thing in Romans 1:16, where he writes: ***"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for the Gospel IS the power of God for the salvation of all who believe!"*** The Gospel message doesn't just HAVE power, Paul says it IS the power of God! It's the power that brought us and all others who have entered the kingdom of God, to enter it! And in that sense, caused it to grow!

Deeds of love and mercy do display the presence of the Kingdom! / Healings and miracles and answered prayers do display the presence of the kingdom! / People repenting and being converted and growing in their faith do display the presence of the kingdom!

Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit do display the presence of the kingdom! Living a godly life and sacrificing for the poor and caring for the orphan and widow in their distress and standing up for what is good and fair and just all evidence of the presence of the kingdom!

But in the end, my friends, the growth and expansion of the kingdom, is dependent primarily upon you and me and all true Christ followers, sharing of the Gospel of His grace, and telling people *“the message”* or *“the good news of the Kingdom”!*

My question to you is, “Will you commit to do it?” Remembering the whole time, that it takes much time for the seeds you plant to grow — so don’t get discouraged!

Persevere (like those first Presbyterian missionaries to Korea who waited 19 years before they saw their first convert – almost two decades just to get ONE!) Imagine if they had become discouraged and left Korea after 5 years or 10 years, because they didn’t see any immediate results or rapid growth.

They’ve long since passed away. But they’d be pleased to know that their perseverance was not in vain! For in addition to the other church I mentioned, Korea now boasts the largest Presbyterian church in the world, with 80,000+ members in one church, and over 2.5 million Presbyterians in the country!

LISTEN: If we do it to get results, or expect to get quick results, we’ll stop when we don’t see any! / Or if we only do it when I feel like it, Satan will find millions of ways to play with our emotions, so that we don’t ever feel like doing it!

If he knows discouragement or persecution or seeing people you thought were converted defecting from the faith will get you to stop, he’ll bring it on! Or if he knows that causing your heart to find more pleasure in worldly things than the things of God will stop you, he’ll gladly take you out of the picture, by enticing you with what the Apostle John calls the “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

You name it and Satan will use it, if he knows that BY DOING SO, it will get you to stop sharing the Gospel and thus effectually stunt or halt the advance of the Kingdom (at least with regard to YOU!)

So I ask you again: *Will you pledge yourself to sharing the Gospel with others?*

Will you determine (right now) to commit yourself to be more active in doing so, whether you feel like it or not, or whether you see visible results of not?

Because the shared Gospel IS the “yeast” that makes the “dough” of the kingdom rise or expand, and the “seed” that makes the tree of the kingdom grow so large that “birds” can perch in its branches. “Birds” in Scripture, often symbolizing the nations of the earth! (Ezek. 17:23 / Dan. 4:12).

It assures us that Jesus never left His disciples to doubt that one day (ever so slowly and over time) His kingdom would spread over the whole earth, or as the old hymn puts it, “from shore to shore!”

And it’s a task, my friends, that still remains unfinished, due (at least in part) to the FACT that we as His people have NOT made it OUR PRIMARY GOAL IN LIFE to:

- 1.) *Seek FIRST His Kingdom and His righteousness.*
- 2.) *Share the Gospel or Good News of the Kingdom with others. A Gospel which Jesus tells us is the primary God-ordained means for the growth of His Kingdom on earth!*