

## **Luke 13:18-21**

### **The Nature of the Kingdom**

Every person has his favorite subject. Every person has that topic about which they can talk and talk and talk about until their listeners are wearied. For some it is their grandchildren. For others it is sports. For others still, it is their favorite hobby. Everyone has their topic, and the irony is that though they can remember every detail about that particular subject, they cannot remember that they have already told you about it a dozen times!

Jesus was no different. He was, after all, a teacher (in whom this quality is more exaggerated than in others), and a constant focus of the teaching of Jesus was the kingdom of God. After His baptism, “<sup>14</sup>Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15). During the extensive time He spent in Galilee, “He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:1). In perhaps His most well known sermon, Jesus began “blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). In fact, we are told that preaching the kingdom of God was what Jesus had been sent here to do, “He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose’” (Luke 4:43).

Not surprisingly, His preaching about the kingdom of God attracted the attention of the religious leaders. When challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus responded “if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). Later, when they pressed Him for further details, there occurred this encounter, “<sup>20</sup>now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; <sup>21</sup>nor will they say, ‘look, here it is!’ or, ‘there it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst’” (Luke 17:20-21). Even after His resurrection, Jesus continued preaching the kingdom of God. Luke records that “He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

That Jesus taught about the kingdom of God is clearly indisputable. How people received and interpreted that teaching was not. It had long been an assumption of Jewish belief that the Messiah, when He came, would free Israel from its oppressors and restore the nation to its former glory. This is what even His closest followers believed. Anticipating the benefits of having supported the future king, they asked Him bluntly “grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:37). They seem naive to us, but they were only going along with their own understanding of the kingdom of God, derived from, and supported by, what Jesus, Himself, had said. For example, when accused by Pilate who “asked Him, saying, ‘are You the King of the Jews?’” Jesus “answered him and said, ‘it is as you say’” (Luke 23:3).

Jesus claimed to be a king, and He claimed to bring about the kingdom of God. At the time of Jesus, the oppressors were Romans, and the expectation was that if Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, He would turn them out with a political and military revolution that would leave Israel the independent and powerful nation-state in the region. That He did not do so, or even appear to be trying to do so, was the problem.

The teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God was not well-received because it did not align itself with current expectations.

Another reason why the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God was not received enthusiastically was that the Jewish religious leaders of the time rejected Jesus. If He truly was the Messiah, if He truly had come to restore the kingdom of God, then obviously the gifted and specially chosen religious leaders would see that. Surely they, first of all, would rally to His cause. Yet, Jesus had nothing but trouble with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of His day. They accused Him of being in alliance with Satan, and He in turn called them hypocrites.

Not surprisingly, then, the kingdom about which Jesus spoke so often grew slowly. His closest associates were from the middle and lower classes of society. There were no wealthy or influential followers of Jesus at the beginning. They were so poor that they had to depend on others for their sustenance, as the Bible is compelled to mention specific individuals and then “many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means” (Luke 8:3). When the earthly ministry of Jesus was completed, there were few followers. In Jerusalem there is mention of 120 or so, and it seems there were a few hundred elsewhere according to a later source, “He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time” (1 Corinthians 15:6). Not much of a kingdom when you think about it.

Perhaps such notions as these led Jesus to speak again about the kingdom of God as He did in this particular passage. Things are not always what they seem, and Jesus knew the hearts of men. He understood that they had, and continued to, misunderstand His meaning when He spoke of the kingdom of God. He knew their preconceived expectations had not been, and would not be, fulfilled. He knew that the religious leaders of His day had rejected Him. He knew that His kingdom was small. Yet, Jesus had come to preach the kingdom of God, and so preach it He did.

### **The Kingdom of God in the World**

Luke connects this passage with what had happened previously, though Matthew and Mark have these illustrations being used in Galilee at an earlier time in the ministry of Jesus. This ought not to concern us. First, as we have seen before, Jesus often repeated teachings that were particularly significant, depending on the situation and the audience. Just because Jesus said the same thing two (or more) different times does not mean that there is error in Scripture when the same conversation or illustration is repeated in two different contexts. Second, Luke may be including the parables here because they connect topically with the events that had recently happened. Having just demonstrated the power of the kingdom of God by healing the “woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit” (Luke 13:11), He now went on to give illustrations of the power of that kingdom. Since “the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him” (Luke 13:17) this was an opportune time to explain how the kingdom of God worked. Both explanations work together to explain the context.

Jesus began with His usual approach of asking a rhetorical question, “what is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it?” (v. 18) Jesus had used this strategy before. Indeed it was a familiar convention in Jewish speaking.

“To whom then will you liken God?

Or what likeness will you compare with Him?" (Isaiah 40:18).

The point of such a conversational device was not so much to get an answer as to get His disciples, and any others who might be listening, to begin thinking. Ever aware of His audience, Jesus chose as His illustration a concept that would be familiar to all who lived in the agriculturally-rich area of Israel. "It is like a mustard seed" (v. 19). The word for seed can be used to mean offspring, such as "the seed of Abraham" but certainly that is not the context here. Jesus is talking about seeds used for planting.

In Matthew's narrative Jesus added "this is smaller than all other seeds" (Matthew 13:32). The mustard seed was, indeed, very small. In fact, approximately 21,000 weigh an ounce. However, it certainly is not the smallest seed in creation. Does this mean Jesus was exaggerating to make His point? Was He simply ignorant or misinformed about other, smaller seeds? The first thought is not possible because exaggerating would be lying, and lying is a sin. Since Jesus never sinned, that cannot be the explanation. The second option is equally impossible, since "by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things have been created through Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16). Since Jesus created everything, He was not ignorant or misinformed regarding the size of the seed to which He was referring.

What then is the explanation? Simply this. Jesus was referring to seeds used to produce food crops. This was an agricultural world. The people to whom He spoke farmed. They handled seeds. The mustard seed, so small as scarcely to be seen, would have seemed infinitesimal compared with the seeds of the wheat, barley, lentils, beans, and other crops regularly planted in the region. In fact, the only other crop regularly cultivated that had smaller seeds was tobacco (one ounce contains 300,000 seeds!), which was unknown in the area at the time as it was only cultivated in the Americas. In other words, the mustard seed was the smallest seed known to those who lived in the area and was the smallest seed with which they would have been involved in agriculture. The illustration was not meant to be literal.

Yet, despite its insignificant size, the mustard seed produced a tree of some fifteen feet in height. Again, as Jesus elaborated in the account recorded by Matthew, "when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants" (Matthew 13:32). So large, in fact, that "it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches" (v. 19). Not considered a plant at all, the smallest of seeds had produced a tree large enough to accommodate wildlife. This was especially true in the fall, when the branches became more rigid. The birds did not just land briefly to rest their wings. The tree was large enough that they could live there. That is what is meant by the word nested. It literally meant to pitch a tent. These were permanent nests to which the birds could return time and again as they raised their offspring.

One point Jesus was making was that God's kingdom was not exactly as it appeared to the disciples at the time. They had anticipated a kingdom of power and sovereignty, yet they were faced with the reality of following an itinerant rabbi who was rejected by both the religious and political leaders and who eventually would die a criminal's death. The greatness of the kingdom was to come, but not at the first Incarnation of Jesus. The disciples could not understand that the consummation of the kingdom of God was in the future.

<sup>11</sup>And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. <sup>12</sup>His eyes are a flame of fire, and on

His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. <sup>13</sup>He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. <sup>14</sup>And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. <sup>15</sup>From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. <sup>16</sup>And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 19:11-16).

The rule of the king in this future kingdom will be absolute.

"<sup>7</sup>I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:  
He said to Me, 'You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
<sup>8</sup>Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,  
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.  
<sup>9</sup>You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
You shall shatter them like earthenware'" (Psalm 2:7-9).

In this future kingdom the righteous will flourish and there will be peace.

"In his days may the righteous flourish,  
And abundance of peace till the moon is no more" (Psalm 72:7).

The perfections of this future kingdom were described eloquently by the prophets, as in Micah 4:1-8.

The power of the kingdom of God in the world was not its immediate impact, but its eternal destiny. At the beginning, the kingdom was led by the son of a common workman and was supported by other members of the working class. The kingdom was established in the remote corner of a petty province of a great empire. Its first teachings caused its leader to be "to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23). In its early years the kingdom was persecuted violently.

Yet it grew. Yet it prospered. Over time, others joined the kingdom. The kingdom spread from its remote outpost to the center of the empire itself and eventually even the leaders of that empire embraced the kingdom. Then it spread further, to the then unknown parts of the world. That "the birds of the air nested in its branches" (v. 19) may be a reference to the fact that other nations of the world would benefit from the coming kingdom of God. Jesus had prophesied that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14).

This seemed to echo the intent of Ezekiel's prophecy of the coming kingdom of God.

"<sup>22</sup>Thus says the Lord God, 'I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup>On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. <sup>24</sup>All the trees of the field will know that I am the Lord; I bring down the

high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will perform it” (Ezekiel 17:22-24).

Even now Christianity works to ameliorate many of the world’s practical evils such as abortion, hunger, and crime. Such are examples of the common grace given to all mankind. The seed is of which Jesus spoke was the kingdom of God. The responsibility of the disciples, and ourselves, to that kingdom is to obey. We can trust that God will cause the growth He deems best.

### **The Kingdom of God in the Believer**

Jesus continued, repeating the same rhetorical question, “to what shall I compare the kingdom of God?” (v. 20). And again He gave the answer, “it is like leaven” (v. 21). Leaven is a substance, usually yeast, which when added to dough causes it to rise. As the yeast ferments, it creates pockets of air and these, in turn, cause the dough to expand. It is what makes the difference between a loaf of bread and a cracker. In the specific example which Jesus gave, “a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened” (v. 21). That is a significant amount of leavening. Three pecks is about fifty pounds of dough. Yet, just a small amount of the leavening agent would eventually work its way through the entire batch.

Many different interpretations of this parable have been suggested. Some argue that the leaven represents the sacraments. Others that the woman represents the Church. Still others that this is Satan at work and the leaven is a negative element disintegrating the body of Christ. As for the first interpretation, it requires an allegorical approach to biblical interpretation, which once begun can quickly, and easily, get out of hand. As for the second interpretation, there is nothing at all unusual about a woman making bread in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, so there is no need to expand the interpretation to include the Church. As for the third interpretation, it is not suggested anywhere else in Scripture that the leaven was an act of Satan.

So what then what Jesus talking about in this parable? It seems that the simplest explanation, in accordance with the context here and in other passages of Scripture, is that the leaven represents the kingdom of God working its way in the human heart. The power of the kingdom in the life of the believer is such that it so permeates the believer that their entire life is transformed. Perhaps it begins by hearing a single sermon or worship song. Perhaps a rebuke from a friend, or a conversation overheard at work. Perhaps a random tract or knock at the door. In any case something begins, perhaps even unnoticed by the recipient. Over time and with the indispensable help of the Holy Spirit, it starts to do its work until there is the urge to go to church, or to read the Bible, or to pray. Irresistible grace begins to draw the person closer until the moment of conversion. There is that precious moment when “the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The two parables converged quite beautifully. The power of the kingdom of God in the world was, and is, directly related to the power of the kingdom of God in individual believers. As individual believers are transformed by the Holy Spirit, they influence others. This is why the work begun by a few hundred believers two millennia ago has enveloped billions. That was the point Jesus was making. The small, insignificant kingdom of God that the disciples were a part of has proved capable of influencing the entire world.

But how does this work practically in the believer?

It begins, as it must, with God's grace in conversion, "<sup>14</sup>a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. <sup>15</sup>But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. <sup>16</sup>For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

It continues with the process of sanctification as "we are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5)

And we take captive those thoughts by remembering that "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

And we must remember always "that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). The work of the leaven is a process. The dough does not all rise at once. Yet, in each child of God, this is what ought to be happening. This ought to be the impact of the kingdom of God in our lives daily. We must be ruled by heaven. We must cultivate the mind of Christ and be filled with the Spirit. It is challenging and costly, but we must

"<sup>18</sup>consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21).

### **Takeaways**

May we recognize that the power of the kingdom of God in the world is related to the power of the kingdom of God in believers, and as believers, may we earnestly pursue righteousness in order to further that kingdom as God allows.