

The Kingdom of God

Luke 13:18-21

Prayer: Father, your kingdom is advancing. It's marching forward in ways we can't quite see or understand. It had a small, humble beginning when Jesus was on the earth, but has grown and is growing every day. King Jesus is on his throne, and we look forward to the time when we see his reign complete. In the meantime, give us patience, give us endurance, give us steadfast faithfulness that we would not be discouraged by opposition. In King Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Intro: The best speeches we can think of in history are those speeches told in the face of great adversity. The Gettysburg Address from Abraham Lincoln amidst the carnage of a Civil War battlefield, where he told Union soldiers and the American people that if the people resolve themselves to defending this grand idea, government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from the earth. Winston Churchill in a speech to Parliament, after the British evacuated Dunkirk, losing a foothold on the continent, committed the British forces and people, in the face of great tyranny to "go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender". When Scott Smalls got his sandlot baseball team in the greatest pickle they'd ever seen, Babe Ruth's reminded Benny "the Jet" Rodriguez that "there's heroes, and there's legends; heroes get remembered, but legends never die" and next thing you know,

Benny's in a fresh pair of PF Flyer's running away from the Beast with a drool-covered baseball in hand.

I don't know why God has wired us this way, but there is something about human beings that if we are shown a better future, a really bad situation starts to seem a whole lot less worse. A great leader can inspire his people to move, to action, to avoid despair. He can point at the gore of the battlefield, or the humiliation of defeat or the baseball knocked over the fence and say, "I know this looks bad. But look out there. Look to the future. Look at what can be if we do not compromise our morals, or if we fight till the end, or we lace up our sneakers and hop that fence into old man Mertle's back yard to face the beast.

Jesus and his followers are in a similar situation. Jesus has been preaching, he has been healing people, and he is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will die. But all along the way, he has been facing opposition. Just now, the Gospel of Luke has told us, that after healing a woman, hunched over for 18 years, bound by Satan, a religious leader has publicly rebuked Jesus and the synagogue he is teaching in for healing on the Sabbath, for restoring life on the Sabbath, for fulfilling the very purpose of the Sabbath all along. The leader is a voice that would have carried a lot of weight in the community. The woman Jesus healed, people on the fence about Jesus, and even his disciples may have felt discouraged. "If the movers and shakers in our community are against us, how are we going to succeed? How will the God's Kingdom be revealed and advance if the people with cultural caché keep telling Jesus to cut it out?"

And so Jesus gives them a pep talk. He seeks to encourage them. In the face of adversity, he is going to tell them about the kingdom of God.

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Verse 18: He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I

compare it?”¹ Jesus is going to paint an image of the kingdom’s growth and advancement that they will understand. It’s going to be tangible to them. Maybe not for us, we’ll get into that, but it makes sense to his target audience. But before we dig into the actual images, it might be helpful for us to define exactly, “What is the kingdom of God?” Theologian George Ladd defined the kingdom of God like this:

The Kingdom of God is his kingship, His rule, His authority.²

Jesus’ primary message, the drum he was nearly constantly beating, was the coming of the kingdom of God.³ Before Jesus’ death and his resurrection, the take away he wanted for his followers and foes was that he had brought and was begun the kingdom of God. The people of God had been hoping and praying for coming of the Kingdom of God. They wanted God to swoop in and rescue them from the kingdoms of men that constantly harassed and oppressed them. They wanted a primarily political kingdom, but the Kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual kingdom, and it is at war, not with the Roman Empire or whatever political foe we face at any given moment. Rather, the kingdom of God is at war with the kingdom of Satan which tries to bind people, like this poor woman back in verse 16.

What’s crazy is how big and powerful the kingdom of Satan looks to us. We experience its effects every day. We experience it when the fallenness of the world rears its ugly head, and our kids get sick. We experience the kingdom of Satan when our friends get diagnosed with

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 13:18.

² George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1959), 21.

³ George Eldon Ladd, [A Theology of the New Testament](#), ed. Donald A. Hagner, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 54.

cancer. We experience the kingdom of Satan when we find ourselves having a hard time repenting of sin, like the guy who can't shake a porn habit he's been fighting for years or the woman who feels shame every time she sees herself in the mirror. We experience the kingdom of Satan when our brothers and sisters in Christ are persecuted around the world. The woman Jesus healed experienced the kingdom of Satan when she was crippled and hunched over and again when a religious leader who should have been happy she was healed, failed to understand the true, restorative meaning of the Sabbath and instead scolded her for experiencing true Sabbath and healing from Jesus.

And when we experience the kingdom of Satan, it's easy for us to look toward Jesus and wonder, "What is going on? I thought you brought your kingdom? Shouldn't things be better by now?" So Jesus gives his followers two analogies that will help them understand what is going on.

The Mustard Seed – Small Beginning, Many Blessed

First, Jesus describes the kingdom of God this way, in verse 19: **It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.**" The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed. Now mustard seeds start very small. They are among the smallest seeds out there. But if the conditions are right, the mustard plant can become a 10-foot-tall shrub, which is pretty impressive in the desert. Not only that, but the mustard tree, Jesus says, becomes a haven for birds of the air. They make their nests there. In other words, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God may seem small right now. It may seem like the few people who traveled around with Jesus. In that room, it might be that one woman and couple of other people. The kingdom of

God might feel lonely. I look around this room, and all of sudden the kingdom of God doesn't feel too lonely. We don't feel outmatched here. But when we walk out those doors in the back of the room, on the march, on mission, headed to your neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces to be a light in the world that bears the name of Jesus, it can get mighty lonely. You might be the only Christian in your workplace. You might be the only Christian in your classroom. You might be the only Christian in your family. It is hard to remain faithful to the kingdom of God when you feel outmanned and outgunned. Imagine for a moment how the first 120 Christians felt between the day Jesus was murdered on a Roman cross and his resurrection. I guarantee you those 120 people felt very, very lonely in their world. And yet, there are nearly 2 billion people in the world who claim the name of Christ today. Some of the evangelical statisticians believe that around 300 million people alive now believe what is necessary actually to be a Christian by the Bible's standards, but throughout history, there has always been growth as a percentage of the global population, recently, especially in the global south and in the 1040 Window. At times, the growth has seemed slow. Sometimes it seems to go backward, because a lot of people who claim the name of Christ, but aren't really Christians just get more honest. But the growth of God's people is an indicator that the kingdom is moving forward. People are being saved. They are finding rest in the saving grace of Jesus Christ and coming under his authority, rule, and reign.

In fact, that's exactly what Jesus is saying when he says that the birds of heaven make their nests in its branches. The people of Jesus' day spoke the Old Testament like a second language. It was just how they talked. There a couple of guys here that I'm in a text message feed and about all we do is send each other gifs, memes, and quotes from Star Wars or the

Office. That's how these folks operated. They made allusions or quoted the Old Testament like some people quote movies or TV shows. They made memes of that time Moses got mad and hit a rock and posted them on their Facebook pages. They would have noticed that Jesus was quoting from Ezekiel 17:22⁴ where God says,

"I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. ²⁴ And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it." ⁵

They would have realized that Jesus was saying, look the Kingdom of God is going to be so big, that not just people from Israel, not just Jewish people will have a place in the kingdom of God. People from all over the world will be a part of the kingdom of God. But the kingdom of God isn't simply a numbers game. There is another analogy that Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of God.

The Leaven – Small Beginning, Much Changed

Jesus says, **"[The kingdom of God] is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."** ⁶ Mustard seeds are small. Leaven is actually microscopic. My wife actually bakes a lot of her own bread and bread that she bakes is amazing. It always has this crunchy crust that you might think means it's hard throughout, but

⁴ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 242.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eze 17:22–24.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 13:21.

once we slice into, the inside is so soft and fluffy. It tastes amazing too. Bekah is a great cook, but that bread is primo stuff. And you may know this, but the reason that bread is so fluffy and good is that early on in the baking process when the dough is just wet flour and salt, she adds leaven or yeast. Instead of a tough, bitter, rock of grossness, the yeast add carbon dioxide as it grows and multiplies in the original mixture and then dies, leaving those awesome, fluffy pockets of goodness that also capture butter really well in case you're wondering how my maintain my figure. The leaven changes the whole composition of the bread. But it must be inside the bread to do so. It can be sprinkled on top or added after the fact. It is in the bread.

Likewise, the small addition of the people who are faithful citizens of the kingdom of God into this world changes the composition of the world. We're not just trying to add numbers to a spreadsheet. We are to be a people that when we come in contact with the wider world, leave it changed. One of the things I've heard Pastor David say over the years that captures this idea is that Redeemer should be a church that if we got hit by a cruise missile, our city would miss us. That our city is better for us being a part of it. Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17, saying **"They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."**⁷

Every time a Christian makes this world a better place, every time they help a brother combat pornography one more day, or remind a sister that her identity is not in the mirror, or let a refugee know some cares about them, or builds a house for a family in poverty while sharing the love of Jesus with them,

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 17:16–18.

Every time we see a marriage stabilized because a husband learns to be self-sacrificial like Jesus was,

Every time a child comes to know Jesus as their Savior after their grandmother has been on her knees praying for that kiddo,

Every time a Christian leader trains and raises up another leader in the kingdom,

Every time an AIDS orphan is brought into a Christian orphanage, clothed and fed, and told the Good News about Jesus,

Every time a Christian confronts racism or proactively pursues racial reconciliation as an effect of the gospel,

Every time this world is left better by Christians than we found it, the kingdom is advancing. It seems slow, it seems small to begin with, but the kingdom of God beats back the darkness of this world until one day, Jesus returns, and the front lines of the enemy are totally and finally demolished. Until then, this world is changing for God's glory and our good.

What Jesus is asking us to do in the meantime is to be faithful, to be patient, to be active, looking forward to the future when the King of Kingdom of God, when Jesus himself, steps off of his throne in heaven and reenters the fray. In the meantime, we will see the kingdom of God grow like a mustard seed into a tree. We'll see more people come to know Jesus as their savior. We will see the kingdom of God transform this people and transform the world we live in by his people displaying with their life and declaring with their words the love of Jesus in a lost and dying world. Standing on the battlefield or sandlot, saying, "Hey, something better than your situation is coming!" all the while pointing to Jesus as our rescuer.

Works Cited

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1. Describe a season of your life that the Kingdom of God seemed very small. How have you seen God change or grow the situation? If you are still in that season, what are the ways your group can pray for you?
2. How can you be a part of growing the kingdom? Who in your life needs to hear the gospel from you? Who can you invite to church or community group? (Easter is coming up and a great time to invite people, but you don't have to wait!)
3. How can you be a part of kingdom transformation of the world? What are examples of brokenness that God has given you the opportunity to help fix for his glory?