

JESUS' JOURNEY to the CROSS
Jesus Explains His Kingdom
Luke 13:31-35
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When you hear the phrase, “The kingdom of God,” what comes to mind for you? Do you think of heaven, or maybe a world where Biblical values are held by all, or perhaps a nation led by a man or woman who is a follower of Jesus? If we were to poll people across various denominations in our country asking the question, “*What is the kingdom of God?*” we’d get a wide range of answers. I see differences of opinion on the nature of God’s kingdom among the local pastors in the network of which I’m a part. In planning for our upcoming Good Friday Prayer Walk we’ve had discussions about what our goal is. Are we attempting to make a show of strength by having several hundred followers of Jesus walk and pray in groups through our community? Should we call attention to what we’re doing by having each group carry large crosses, by wearing special colored T-shirts or by inviting the media to our event? Is our purpose to display our strength or to love and bless our community by inviting God’s purposes to be realized in our town? We point to Jesus’ prayer—“*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”—as something with which we can all agree, but what are we really asking for when we ask God for his kingdom to come?

Jesus was repeatedly asked the question, “**What is God’s kingdom like?**” The question was asked by truth seekers, who saw in Jesus one who could point them in the right direction. It was asked by his adversaries, who always seemed to be trying to trip Him up, so they could accuse Him of heresy. And it was asked by his followers, who had trouble grasping the nature of God’s kingdom values, which were so different from their culture’s values. Jesus told most of his parables to explain the nature of the kingdom. In one chapter—Matthew 13 Jesus said,

- *The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field...*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls...*
- *The kingdom of heaven is like a net...*

Jesus told these parables and many others to explain aspects of the kingdom of God, but all of his parables and the teaching He did didn't seem to help clear up the fuzziness. People still struggled to understand the nature of God's kingdom.

Uncertainty surrounding the nature of God's kingdom continues today. Have any of you seen the movie, "The Kingdom of Heaven?" I haven't actually seen it, but I hope to at some point. It's a movie about the Crusades, which were military attempts by followers of Jesus in the Middle Ages to reclaim the holy city of Jerusalem from pagans and followers of other religions. As you watch this movie trailer, think about how it represents many people's understanding of what the kingdom of God looks like.

We live in a different era, but the thinking behind the crusades still colors our thinking. We gravitate toward strength and domination and uncertainty about what exactly "the kingdom of heaven" is and how it will come about remains.

In Luke chapter 13 Jesus attempts once again to explain God's kingdom and I can picture a growing intensity in his communication, because He knows his time on earth is growing short. As chapter 13 begins Jesus is speaking to the crowds and addressing people who come to Him, but as the chapter closes Jesus has shifted his focus to begin speaking specifically to his followers. He knows his arrest, trial and crucifixion are drawing closer. I'll begin reading at verse 18 of Luke chapter 13...

Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough." Luke 13:18-21

These are short parables, but the meaning is clear. The Kingdom of God starts small and unimpressively, but over time it steadily grows, until it becomes prominent and has a significant impact. Jesus' view of the kingdom was radically different than what the Jewish people were anticipating. The coming of the kingdom of God for them called to mind military takeovers and the forces of nature being unleashed against the ungodly. They didn't think about mustard seeds and yeast. Can you think of anything more unimpressive than a yeast spore or a tiny mustard seed? I'll continue reading beginning at verse 22:

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Luke 13:22 & 23

The statement “*as he made his way toward Jerusalem,*” may seem to be a passing comment, but it’s significant. Jesus was moving toward the Holy City, Jerusalem, where He’d be welcomed by the crowds on what we now call Palm Sunday. He was teaching and ministering in towns and villages as He and his disciples walked toward Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Jesus was literally on a journey to the cross.

Then Jesus was asked another question about the end times. “*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*” In response He told a parable about a homeowner closing up his house and not allowing anyone who arrived late to enter. Jesus’ points out that not everyone who thinks they are saved will be saved and He reemphasizes that kingdom values and the values of the world are often very different. That brings us to our text for the day, “Luke chapter 13 verses 31-35. I’ll read verses 31-33...

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, “Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.”

He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’ In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! Luke 13:31-33

Does it strike you as odd that the Pharisees, Jesus’ arch rivals, seem to be looking out for his well-being by warning Him about King Herod’s plot to kill Him? They weren’t really looking out for Jesus’ interests. They were hoping to scare Him and entice Him to run away in fear, knowing that if Jesus took flight and hid He’d be discredited in the eyes of his followers and the crowds. Jesus addresses their threat head on by saying He will continue to minister by driving out demons and healing people of their sickness until the third day—a reference to Jesus’ resurrection after his death. Then He points to his coming death again by saying that no prophet can be martyred outside the Holy City. In hindsight, Jesus’ words make sense to us. We understand now that He was pointing to his crucifixion, but at the time, the religious leaders and his disciples had no idea what He was talking about. Let’s pick up reading at verse 34:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Luke 13:34 & 35

Luke chapter 13 is a forward-looking chapter. As we saw in the previous verses we read, Jesus points several times toward his coming death. In these verses He continues that emphasis by tying his own life to the prophets the Israelites have killed who came before Him. And Jesus closes these verses with the statement, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*"—the words the crowds chanted as they waved palm branches and threw down their cloaks in front of Jesus on Palm Sunday as He rode into Jerusalem as a conquering king.

There are numerous prophetic references to Jesus' upcoming arrest and death in this chapter, but what I most want us to see in these verses is Jesus' heart of love for the people of Jerusalem and for us, because it's Jesus' heart of love for people that is most characteristic of the kingdom of heaven. Listen as I read these verses again...

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

When I read those words my mind immediately goes to another place in the Gospels where in the midst of his ministry to people, Jesus' deep compassion for people is evident. In Matthew chapter 9 verses 35 & 36 we read,

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:35 & 36

When Jesus saw the crowds of people coming to Him to be ministered to through his teaching and healing He was moved with compassion. The word used for *compassion* indicates an actual physical response—Jesus felt sick in his stomach—because the people coming to Him were harassed and helpless, they were like wandering sheep who had no shepherd—vulnerable to attack and limited in their ability to meet their own basic needs of food, water, shelter and rest. Jesus' heart of compassion was evident throughout his 3 years of ministry, but as the cross approaches, we see more and more of his deep heart of love for people.

The Scriptures we looked at in chapter 13 today begin with Jesus' question, "*What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?*" and end with Jesus speaking words of

compassion over the people of Israel. The Jews' expectation was that the kingdom would come all at once and with great power and fanfare, but Jesus' parables of the yeast and the mustard seed portray a different picture. The kingdom Jesus emphasizes will start out small, but eventually will cover the entire earth. And after chapter 13 Jesus begins to focus on teaching his disciples—preparing them for what was to come.

We're 2,000 years removed from the days Jesus walked the earth, but we're still awaiting the kingdom of God. And the question, "How will God's kingdom come?," remains. Will it come through political power? Will it come by the Church reclaiming our secular culture for Christ? Will God's kingdom only arrive when Jesus returns for his church? I'd like to share a quote with you from Darrell Bock, a seminary professor and Bible commentator who wrote commentary on the Book of Luke. Referring to the Scripture we're looking at, Bock writes, "[For many centuries] the church has struggled with her identity by thinking a [scripture] like this is a call to exercise increasing power. The way of discipleship, however, is the way of service and sacrifice. The church is not called to the sword or to power but to service. Whenever the church has confused the two, it has had disastrous results. God will bring transformation into our world at the time of Christ's return. Until then **we must minister in faithful service to the believing community and to society at large as a testimony to the love and care of God.** We can do so with the confidence that God's plan will advance no matter what we face." Darrel Bock, NIV Application Commentary

You and I live in a strange time, a time that some have referred to as, "*the already, but not yet.*" Jesus has already come and his coming marked the onset of the kingdom of God. God's kingdom has come. But God's kingdom won't fully arrive until Jesus returns for his church and sets everything right. And so we also await the coming of God's kingdom. God's kingdom has already come. God's kingdom is here. And God's kingdom will come.

So, as children of the kingdom, who live in the *already, but not yet*, how are we to live? Jesus didn't call us to embrace power and strength and might, even though those can be tempting. He called us to embrace his love and to share that love boldly and generously with others. He called us to be salt, light and yeast—none of which draw attention to themselves or at times are very noticeable, but all of which have a tremendous impact on their surroundings. Jesus told us that like the tiny mustard seed, his kingdom starts small, but grows to become a tree where the birds come to rest in its branches. So what does it look like for you and me to

follow Jesus' example to be people who seek to establish his kingdom on earth through our heartfelt love for people?

During Lent we're focused on the Gospels—the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Most of the rest of the New Testament—with a few exceptions—is written by the Apostle Paul and others who making connections between Jesus' ministry and teaching and how we as followers of Jesus are called to practically live. Most of these letters begin with theological teaching and then transition to practical instructions about what living out what Jesus taught looks like in everyday life. As we conclude, I'd like to read a section from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome from chapter 12. My Bible has the heading, "Love in Action" over these verses. Listen to these words from The MESSAGE Paraphrase...

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good. Romans 12:9-21 The MESSAGE