

The hidden kingdom

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[0 : 00] Sunday evenings we've been considering Matthew's Gospel and we've been looking at the sections on Jesus' parables. and most recently we've been considering parables that are to do with the growth of God's kingdom.

! And that's what we're going to be thinking about tonight, how God's kingdom grows. And if you recall a couple of weeks ago when Ben was preaching, he reminded us that the parables, rather than nice stories to act as illustrations, the parables function to both conceal and to reveal truth about the kingdom.

They function to conceal truth of the kingdom to those shallow listeners and unbelievers that Jesus was encountering in his ministry at that time. Now he was confronted with increasing opposition by the Pharisees and the people who were more interested in his signs, in his wonders, in his miracles than his message about the proclamation of the kingdom.

So the parables acted as a kind of judicial hardening for those who didn't want to accept his message. They didn't want to come out of darkness into the light.

They also functioned to reveal truth to those who were earnestly and truthfully seeking. Those who it had been given to know the secrets or the mysteries of the kingdom.

[1 : 34] And tonight, as we consider the text, I'd like us to be like the son in Proverbs 2. Proverbs 2 says, My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding.

Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as hidden treasures, that you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

So these parables before us, they speak of the kingdom of heaven. We're talking about the kingdom. The kingdom is our focus. If you notice, the parables start with, The kingdom of heaven is like.

And I think it's helpful for us tonight just to reconsider, just to remind ourselves, what do we mean by the kingdom of heaven? Well, when we talk about the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, we're dealing with the rule of God.

His kingdom is present wherever his saving or moral rule is established among his people. Now, that can be in the human heart. That can be in a family.

[2 : 56] That can be in a church. That can be in a nation. And one day it will be upon Christ's return. Now, think for a minute of the, imagine the hopes of the first century Jew.

Let's think a little bit of the context that Jesus is teaching in. They were a conquered people. They were in a land that was occupied and dominated by Roman rule.

They'd known nothing but occupation for generations. Although they had peace under Caesar, the land did not belong to them.

And the promises of God of their own land seemed to be unfulfilled and far away. They were awaiting and anticipating a coming Messiah.

But they wanted someone that could bring military and political rule. They were awaiting a messianic king. They wanted freedom from Rome and they wanted the kingdom of glory to be ushered in with military might and power immediately.

[4 : 04] They were awaiting a new Moses. A greater than Moses. They were awaiting a new King David. They wanted a kingdom of power. They wanted might.

They wanted strength, force and political rule. Now, back in chapter four, Jesus had preached, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And then what does he do? He calls a band of unlikely characters to be his disciples. Now, these weren't choice men. They weren't the kind of men that you would choose for a great military and powerful kingdom.

And he then preaches a sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, that speaks of values that are the exact opposite of what you would expect from a kingdom of power and a kingdom of strength.

I've heard it called the upside down kingdom. And they largely reject his message and they reject him. So what does he do?

[5 : 12] He then speaks to them in veiled, mysterious parables. This wasn't the king or the kingdom that they were looking for. Now, these parables, they were an encouragement to the disciples and believers as they were longing for a kingdom.

But if you like, these parables, they were meant to recalibrate their expectations concerning that kingdom. Now, the parables we're considering tonight, they're concerning the growth of God's kingdom.

And it's using imagery and pictures from everyday life. They show how God's kingdom is moving forward. It's ever-growing. It's unstoppable. And it's expansive in its scope.

That's what we're focusing on. So we see a theme here tonight of God's unstoppable kingdom. And how typically God's work moves forward. It expands.

It permeates. It grows. It gradually grows. To dominance and ultimate victory. So as we consider this tonight, I want to...

[6 : 17] I've got three main points. Firstly, the small beginnings of the kingdom. Secondly, the growth and ultimate victory of the kingdom.

And thirdly, the king of the kingdom is fulfilled in prophecy. So my first point, small beginnings. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour. Now in both these parables we see that although the kingdom would grow into a prominent kingdom that's everlasting, it has very small beginnings.

Now although it's a kingdom that's invading the world, it's a hidden kingdom. It invades quietly. Now at that time Christ and his disciples, they would have seemed like nothing in comparison to the Roman Empire.

You think of its military might, you think of the world dominance, you think of the power of Rome. The Pax Romana signified a long period of peace and stability under Roman rule.

[7 : 37] They would have had great pride in their ability and their power. But I ask you, where's Rome now? Now this is the context these parables are in and Jesus likens the kingdom to a small seed, a mustard seed.

Now a mustard seed was something that was proverbial for being small. This was not literally the smallest seed in existence, but nonetheless it was a very small seed.

You notice that a man took it and sowed it. A seed that is sown, it's invisible, isn't it, for a period. It's underground. It's germinating.

You think of the leaven it's taken and it's hidden in three measures. Three measures of flour. So there's something here about the kingdom being hidden, unobservable, imperceptible, incombiculous, secret.

There's something about the kingdom that's unimpressive. Certainly at the beginning. It's insignificant. So Jesus announces the kingdom, then chooses, as I've said, a small band of men, and then moves forward to the book of Acts.

[8 : 53] Look at the church. It has very humble, simple beginnings. A band of disciples praying in an upper room in Jerusalem. They've been beleaguered.

They've been confused. They're not the power brokers of the day, are they? They're not transforming culture through a kind of top-down political agenda.

They're not among the elite scholars or philosophers of the day. A band of simple believers of one accord praying in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's remarkable. After Pentecost, we see unstoppable growth. Despite the best efforts to hinder the church. Now this doesn't happen through intellectual means.

It doesn't happen through military might. It doesn't happen through political strategies. We see a small band of unsophisticated, uneducated fishermen.

[9 : 54] Filled with the Holy Spirit. And they're said to turn the world upside down. Now I think here we learn that not to judge the kingdom of heaven in the same way that we judge things in the world. I think it's very easy, even in the church, that we can be very impressed by large numbers. Slick marketing.

Charismatic speakers. Professionally executed music. Programs. Big names or affluent figures coming to the church. Now none of those things in themselves are bad things.

I'm not down on those things. Yet even as Christians we need to be mindful not to mistake those things for a sign that the kingdom is here. Now judging from a worldly perspective, look at us. Look at us as a church, Calvary Church. We're small. We're weak. I would gather from the world's perspective we're pretty irrelevant.

[11 : 01] We're hidden, aren't we, in Brighton? We have little power or influence. In comparison even to other local churches, we don't have much influence.

I've met Christians that I know from other churches that when I say to them, I belong to Calvary, often where? Who? That's even among evangelicals in the city.

They don't know we exist. We've little power. And we're relatively hidden. But when we judge things from a worldly perspective, we struggle to see the kingdom.

Because we're prone to see with eyes full of the world's values and standards. We need to see with eyes of faith.

We need to walk by faith and not by sight. We mustn't, as Zechariah says, despise the day of small things. We must remember that in God's economy, as one sinner repents, one sinner repents and believes, the whole of heaven rejoices.

[12 : 13] Small things are of immense value in the kingdom. Now I've got a question to put before you. Do you ever, don't speak out loud, just think of this in your hearts.

Do you ever look at the size of the church or the way the church is and feel discouraged? Do you ever look at the impact that we have in the city and sometimes just feel some discouragement? Do you ever think about Christianity as a whole in this nation and the impact of Christianity upon the nation and feel discouraged? If you can answer yes to those questions, well I think these parables are a source of great encouragement for us.

Because we can be so attached to the immediate, the spectacular, the big, the powerful. And I think these parables, they help us to trust the ordinary means of grace.

Preaching God's word. It seems contemptible and pathetic, doesn't it? Me up here, to many. The world craves the sensational and all the senses to be stimulated and overloaded and with emotive and persuasive rhetoric and various things that pull on the emotions.

[13 : 32] Steady, consistent prayer in the prayer meeting, quietly done by members. That back room, behind the scenes, hidden.

It's kingdom work. What about those small acts of kindness that many of us, if not all of us who are members of this church, would have experienced?

The love, the compassion, the words of encouragement that we've received. Small things by the world standards. What about one-on-one discipleship?

Brothers and sisters getting alongside each other, building each other up in the Lord. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Little bit of bread, little cup of wine or juice.

We can also look at the application of these small beginnings of the kingdom in our own hearts. And another question for you.

[14 : 32] Do you look at your progress in the Christian life? Do you ever feel a discontentment? A dissatisfaction with your conquest over sin?

Or your lack of progress in maturity? Well, again, I find this very, very encouraging because mustard seed and leaven growth, it's more the norm for Christians.

It's a small start with gradual progress. Now, we see the hidden nature of the kingdom in the weakness and the foolishness of the cross.

There was no outward glory in the cross, was there? This was a despised, ignoble form of death, and it was preserved for the most despicable criminals. Now, this small beginning of the kingdom doesn't mean that we don't pray for big things.

It doesn't mean we don't have a big God. It doesn't mean we don't pray for revival and trust God for amazing things. That's not what I'm saying. Actually, I believe this enables us to pray for God, to do far more abundantly than all that we can ask or think.

[15:47] Because God works through and is pleased to use the small, seemingly irrelevant and weak things like you and like me. As I was preparing, I think there's a lot of examples you could draw on from church history.

And I'm no historian. My knowledge of church history is very limited. But I remember hearing or reading somewhere about William Carey, the father of the modern missions movement.

William Carey, when he had a real desire to go to India to be a missionary, he went to express that desire before elders. He went before the elders, and I can't remember the exact wording, but one of the elders got up and said something along the lines of, Young man, young man, if the heathen needs to be converted, God will do it without you.

Or something along those lines, kind of dismissing William Carey. And look at William Carey now, the father of the modern missions movement. Seemingly small and irrelevant.

By the way, that's taking the doctrine of God's sovereignty in a very negative and bad direction. God uses means. Chris Fry recently has been spending time in the Isle of Lewis and has taken a keen interest in the revival in the Isle of Lewis.

[17:04] Again, I don't know much about that, the history of it, but one thing I do remember reading or hearing somewhere was that this started. There were two sisters. Peggy and Christine Smith.

Elderly ladies. One was blind. And one had arthritis. And it was a little prayer meeting of these two elderly ladies. What followed was this immense revival.

So we see through these small things, these small people, despite being veiled, the kingdom is pervasive, it's growing, and God uses small things.

Despite being insignificant to the unbelieving world, the kingdom is immense in the eyes of God. Immense in the eyes of God.

Well, my second point is the growth and ultimate victory of the kingdom. The passage says, but when it is grown, meaning the mustard seed, it becomes larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

[18:13] And then when it speaks of the leaven, it says, till it was all leavened, signifying growth. Now, I'm no baker, but I've read in the commentaries that leaven was a piece of fermented dough from a previous batch, which you would put into an unleavened batch, and it would pervade the whole lump, and it would raise the whole lump.

So free measures was about, apparently, 40 litres, and it would have produced enough bread to feed 100 people. It's remarkable. So here we're hearing about spreading, permeating, and turning dead dough into a large living thing.

The whole lump is transformed. Now, I think it's important to mention leaven can often be spoken of negatively in the scriptures. Leaven can be spoken of to symbolise sin or evil, and that's how some people take this.

You recall the passage where Christ speaks of the leaven of the Pharisees, meaning the corruption and evil of the Pharisees.

I don't think that's the point here. I think the point here is more about penetrating and growing and transforming. And it's helpful to think that in the Bible, different words can have different meanings.

[19:38] The Bible uses different metaphors. A good example is the lion. You think about the lion. The lion prowls like a roaring lion, signifying Satan.

But the lion is also the lion of Judah, signifying Christ. So that's an important thing to think about, you know, the context of what we're looking at. So the point here is penetrating, pervasive, and positive power which spreads and transforms.

And the kingdom of God will eventually transform the whole of creation like leaven transforms the flower. So Jesus is speaking positively as the kingdom of heaven is like leaven which is working and pervading throughout the world.

We see in redemptive history how the kingdom, it spreads, doesn't it, from Israel, again in the book of Acts. Spreads throughout the Gentile nations like the leaven.

It's permeating, it's pervading, it's transforming. One day this will reach a glorious crescendo upon Jesus' return and rule where the entire cosmos will be transformed.

[20:51] We see this spoken of beautifully and very poetically by the prophets. I think of Habakkuk 2.14, Isaiah 11.9 where the prophets say, For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the water covers the sea.

Beautiful picture. So the mustard seed growing into a dominant plant and the leaven transforming the dough signify Jesus reigning until all his enemies are put under his feet.

Now this doesn't happen immediately, does it, in the parable? It doesn't happen immediately in history and in our lives. There's gradual growth. Now remember, the disciples had an expectation that the kingdom would be established immediately.

This is not so with the kingdom. In this life, there's wheat, there's tares. It's a mixed bag, isn't it? The growth is more gradual.

Now like the early church, we are called to spread, we're called to grow, we're called to impact those around us. But again, we mustn't become enamoured with instant success.

[22 : 08] A bit like size. Sensational and spectacular growth aren't the ordinary way that God works. And praise God that he would work like that.

But we should expectantly seek revival. We shouldn't despise the norm of mustard seed and leaven type growth. And again, this applies to our personal growth as Christians.

God's rule takes its root in our hearts, doesn't it? And it's like a seed or like the leaven. And then it slowly and gradually permeates and grows and takes dominion over our whole being.

Overcoming sin. Overcoming wickedness. Rebelliousness. Unrighteousness in our lives. But if you're anything like me, you know there are pockets of resistance.

They're still indwelling sin. We progress more in certain areas and we feel like we're making progress. Then in other areas, it's not the case.

[23 : 13] However, it's impossible to contain a true work of grace in the heart. It will grow. We will persevere until the end. And like leaven, the kingdom of God changes us.

There's no such thing as a true believer that isn't changing. It changes all aspects of our being.

Our minds. In the way we think about ourselves. As Christians, there's this weird paradox that the more we walk with Christ, the more we realise how sinful we are.

But we also realise how glorious Christ is. We know our need and our weakness more. It changes the way we see the world. We look at this world and we see so much beauty.

We see the wonder of God's creation. But we also see it's marred by sin and the curse. It changes the way we see other people. We see other people with compassion.

[24 : 17] It changes our wills, our affections, our desires. We want to align ourselves with the will of God. We don't do it perfectly. But our wills are changed.

There's great power in the gospel and how it works in a person's life. And we see this in these parables. It leads to a life of sacrifice for Christ.

The kingdom is doing its work in quiet ways. Now, it's not always manifested in outwardly great ways. Now, people should hopefully see a change in us.

And they should see a sanctification. They should see a holiness. We mustn't be just like the world. We mustn't. But certainly in the earlier stages, it may be quiet. And it may be throughout our Christian life.

It's not always in showy and outward ways. It's just a diligent, faithful Christian going about their business. Being faithful in small things.

[25 : 15] So this gradual kingdom, it works in a comprehensive way. And it leads to the entirety of our being changing. And people of God, I think it's important to say, we're not just Christians on a Sunday.

Then during the week, we put on another hat and we've got another identity. This is our whole being that's being changed. The theologians call this progressive sanctification.

This is something that the spirit does. But we also act. There's effort. There's diligence that we put in. Philippians 2.12 says, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you. Both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Now in one sense, there is an instantaneous, almost cataclysmic change in us.

We were once in the darkness. We're transformed into God's light. But at the same time, God is establishing his kingdom gradually in our hearts. There's a sense where this can be hidden and inconspicuous.

[26 : 20] And it's almost like a kind of mystery. It's a bit of an enigma, really. Because it's not always seen and it's not always obvious. And I think we need to be very careful in how we judge others by outward appearances.

I'm not talking about flagrant sin here. I'm just talking in a more general sense. Now we know that Christian growth can be beset with challenges. Christian growth in the scriptures described as warfare.

It's an arduous thing. It's a run. It's not like the instant triumphalism that we sometimes hear of that promises immediate success. Maturity and real progress come with time.

We stumble and fall. We need to get up again. Progress is slow. It's gradual. Making lasting change is difficult. Putting to death the old man. And dying to self every day.

It's hard. Dying to self. It's hard. Now we know deep in our hearts as believers that any doctrine of higher life or instant perfection or abundant life or whatever you want to call it.

[27 : 31] We know that can't be right. It's not true. It's arduous. It's warfare. It's battling. It's putting to death. Paul says, I'm sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

So we need to exercise the fruit of the spirit patience when we're considering our Christian growth. I come on to thinking a little bit about ultimate victory.

So despite small beginnings, the mustard seed, it becomes the prominent and dominant plant. So despite the struggles, there's inevitable, unstoppable and eternal victory of the kingdom.

One day we will be perfected saints. We have been saved. We're being saved. We will be saved. We have been justified. We're being sanctified. We will be glorified.

It's a certain thing. It's so certain that Paul can say in Romans 8 that those whom he justified, he glorified past tense. We will win.

[28 : 38] And this parable, I think, says something of this. We will have the final victory. God will rule our hearts and God will have ultimate victory. Calling the mustard seed a tree is Jesus' way of using what's called hyperbole.

He's kind of making a point. It's like an exaggeration to make a point. The mustard seed grows into a large plant. But I think it's interesting here because we see a reference to Old Testament prophecies.

When it speaks of the birds of the air nesting in its branches, we think of Ezekiel 17 and 31. Daniel 4. The birds symbolize the Gentile nations.

And they're coming to the tree for shelter. The tree is the kingdom. They're coming into shelter. And I want to just for a moment consider Ezekiel 17 because I think this is helpful for us.

It speaks of God taking a shoot. You don't have to turn there. But it speaks of God taking a shoot from the very top of a cedar and planting it on the Mount of Israel where it will produce branches and bare fruit and become a splendid cedar.

[29 : 47] So we see a parallel here. Very similar. The shoot in Ezekiel refers to a representative of the royal house of David.

And many commentators, Calvin and many others, they think that this ultimately refers to Christ as the greater than David. And I think they're right.

I think that's wonderful. So we see in this parable, we're not just thinking of the kingdom. We're thinking of the king of the kingdom as Christ represented as the greater than David. We see the worldwide dominance of the kingdom of God.

And if you notice in the parable, it doesn't eliminate all the other plants. It grows up. It's taller. It's greater. But it doesn't eliminate them. So it doesn't point to an overthrowing entirely of all other kingdoms.

Now there's a view of the end times before Jesus returns that sees a golden age where the entirety of all the nations will be Christianized.

[30 : 52] And these parables are often cited to support this view. Now there's some very, very good men that take this view. And I think there is a truth in this view in that there are places in scripture that speak of great growth.

They speak of gospel growth. They speak of progress and victory. There's plenty of places in the Old Testament that speak of this great victory concerning the kingdom. So I agree with them. But there are also other scriptures that speak of persecution nearer the end.

They speak of apostasy. They speak of tribulation and conflict before Christ's coming. And we think of the parable that we heard about last week about the parable of the wheat and the tares.

They grow together. So the Bible, I think, it holds both an optimistic and very positive view. And we're seeing that in this parable. But there is also a darker view of what will happen before Jesus

returns.

So, but what we can all be agreed on, that this parable speaks of small beginning and great victory of the gospel. And I think that it's ultimately realized that the glorious consummation of Christ upon his return.

[32 : 08] But we shouldn't push the parable too far to say what it may not be saying or be unnecessarily dogmatic. That's unnecessarily dogmatic. Well, my third point is the king of the kingdom is fulfilled in prophecy.

Jesus said nothing to them without a parable so that what was spoken by the prophets could be fulfilled. This is mysterious.

What does he mean by this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets? Now, this method of teaching that Jesus is employing, speaking in parables, would be the fulfillment of Psalm 78 too. The psalm says, I will open my mouth with a parable and utter dark sayings from of old. So certainly we have a clear indication that this is a fulfillment of that verse, 78 too.

But I think there's a broader sense to how we can understand this section. I think Jesus quoting Psalm 78 and referring to the psalmist as a prophet tells us something.

[33 : 17] He's a prophet because all that is written in that entire psalm prophesies of Christ. And if you think about it, the entirety of the Old Testament speaks of Christ.

But the psalm particularly, Psalm 78, recounts the redemptive history of Israel. And it ends with details of God choosing the tribe of Judah and David as his servant.

Now, as I've already said, Christ is the greater than David. He's the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy. 2 Corinthians 1.20 says that all the promises of God find their yes in him.

Here we see Christ fulfilling this prophecy in a typological sense. And what I mean by types or typological is simply that specific people and aspects of the Old Testament, they prefigured and pointed to Christ.

The parables, although they're about the kingdom, they're ultimately about the king of that kingdom. They reveal to us Christ as the king in a veiled and concealed way.

[34 : 26] His ministry, his person, his work was anticipated and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. But it can be helpful to think of the Old Testament as promise and as the New Testament as fulfillment.

All the institutions of the Old Testament, they were ultimately fulfilled in Christ. We think of the sacrificial system. We think of the tabernacle. We think of the priesthood, all pointing to Christ's priestly office.

He's a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Psalm 110. We think of the kingly line which David partially realized has now been completed in Christ.

He's the prophet who Moses pointed to. The whole history of Israel points to the Messiah. Exodus 4.22. Israel is my son. My firstborn.

Jesus is the true Israel. The true son of God. We see this in Matthew where Joseph and Mary, they flee to Egypt with Jesus, don't they? At the beginning of Matthew. And then they're called out of Egypt, like Israel.

[35 : 38] In Hosea 11.1. Out of Egypt I've called my son. Jesus, like Israel, after his baptism in water, is sent out to the wilderness.

Where he's tempted by the devil. He's thrust out to the wilderness. Well, similarly, Israel. As they went through the Red Sea, they went into the wilderness. We see in the wilderness the water that came forth from the rock.

And we see that the rock is Christ. And the bread from heaven points to Christ. You think in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus proclaims the law of the kingdom as the true fulfillment of Moses.

Echoing Moses receiving the law from Mount Sinai. And then he teaches Israel. So as we draw to a close tonight, let's be encouraged and stirred by these parables.

But more importantly, let's have a renewed sense of love and wonder for our Lord Jesus Christ.

[36 : 43] As we consider him as the king that these parables they point to. This is how we'll have assurance. This is how we'll have confidence as Christians. That he will bring us as citizens of his kingdom.

From our small beginnings. To ultimate victory and glory. Amen. Amen.