

# What is the kingdom of God like?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our Bible reading this morning is from the Gospel according to Luke, Luke's Gospel, chapter 13, and reading from verses 10 to 21.

Luke, chapter 13, from verses 10 to 21. On a Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years.

She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.

Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, There are six days for work, so come and be healed in those days, not on the Sabbath.

The Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?

[ 1 : 19 ] Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for 18 long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated. But the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

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 30 kilograms of flour, until it worked all through the dough.

[ 2 : 23 ] Amen. So, what is the kingdom of God like? Twice in the four verses that we're considering today, Jesus asks this question.

Sorry, wrong button. Twice in the four verses that Jesus... Twice in the four verses we're considering today, Jesus asks this question. What is the kingdom of God like?

And he introduces really quite brief teaching on the subject. Maybe you noticed that the reading began a good few verses earlier, with the section that we considered last week, with the healing of the woman on the Sabbath.

We're focusing on these verses from 18 through 21, the last verses that Brian read for us. But it seems to me that it would be helpful for us to start our reading earlier than that, because that preceding incident gives us some context for these two little parables.

At least to some extent, it's because of what's just happened that Jesus says these things here. Maybe he's not necessarily stood still in the same synagogue.

[ 3 : 30 ] This doesn't read like an ongoing dialogue with the synagogue leader from verse 14. But at least for Luke, as he compiles his account of Jesus' life, for him, these two incidents are related.

And so this question, what is the kingdom of God like? This arises in some sense from the healing of this woman, and perhaps more so from the opposition to that healing.

I think what we're meant to see here is that the opposition of the synagogue leader, that that makes it look like God's kingdom is going to fail. All the powerful people stand opposed to Jesus, don't they?

The synagogue leader and his friends, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the teachers of the law, the scribes. At various stages, we hear all of these different groups objecting to Jesus, complaining about what Jesus says and does, trying to stop what he's doing, and just getting in his way at all occasions.

The religious authorities of the day, they do not like what Jesus is doing. And therefore, with that opposition in full force, we have to ask, where is this kingdom of God going then?

[ 4 : 39 ] A few chapters earlier, Jesus was setting out on this journey down to Jerusalem. He sent out those 72 disciples, two by two, into the towns and villages. He sent them out to say, the kingdom of God has come near.

And even as they went out and did that, they met opposition. In some towns, they were rejected. And here, the opposition to Jesus seems to be increasing and increasing and increasing. So then, is this promised drawing near of the kingdom, is it going to fail?

Will it perhaps come near, but not quite fully arrive? Will it come and then go again? Or arrive and then be snuffed out, fritted away into nothing?

This Jesus. Is there something to him? Is there really something here? Or is this just a flash in the pan? Well, these are the sorts of questions, I think, that are in people's minds as Jesus asks, what is the kingdom of God like?

And in many ways, our situation is not all that dissimilar today, is it? We once again, we look around and we see, we see powerful forces and powerful people arrayed against the kingdom of God.

[ 5 : 51 ] Not all of them are doing it deliberately. Not all of them realise what they're doing stands opposed to God. But the opposition is there nevertheless. I mean, I don't think that the synagogue leaders are in his friends.

I don't think they thought they were opposing the kingdom of God, did they? They thought that they were opposing an itinerant teacher with delusions of grandeur and some dodgy interpretations. That's what they thought they were doing. But the reality was they were working against God's purposes in the world. The reality is they were opposing the kingdom of God. Now, I don't think that the Scottish government's intention is to criminalise Christianity.

And yet, you look at some of the proposed legislation and it looks like that will be the functional result. And when poorly planned legislation becomes a weapon that is wielded by those who are unequivocal in their hatred of biblical Christianity, well, aren't we prompted to ask, what is the kingdom of God like?

Where is this going? And of course, in other places, the opposition to the kingdom of God is much more open, isn't it? More as it was in Jesus' day, perhaps. The Chinese government is not pulling any punches when it comes to early reign covenant church.

[ 7 : 06 ] We've been praying for them amidst their persecution since December 2018. And their pastor is still imprisoned today and set to be for years to come.

So, when things look hopeless for the Christian faith, when powerful forces are opposed to us, opposed to the proclamation of the kingdom, opposed to the kingdom itself, when that is the reality, don't we find ourselves asking, what is the kingdom of God like?

Can this really be the plan? Can this be the plan? Jesus answers to his own questions here. They show us the unexpectedness of the kingdom of God. From this mustard seed, we see primarily extensive growth.

And then from the yeast, we see powerful transformation. Extensive growth and powerful transformation. First up, the mustard seed promises extensive growth in the kingdom of God. Jesus says in verse 19 that the kingdom 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.

[ 8 : 18 ] This is what the kingdom of God is like. Now, we know, don't we, that most seeds are pretty small. And mustard seeds are one of the smallest seeds around.

Certainly one of the smallest that people were familiar with in Jesus' day. In fact, to the extent that it was proverbial for its smallness. And at first glance, as you see this tiny little ball, it doesn't look like much will come of it, does it?

If you weren't an experienced gardener, you wouldn't expect that a large shrub or a small tree would come from such inauspicious beginnings. And actually, with more experience, with more gardening knowledge, will perhaps your doubts increase, though in a different way.

Because yes, you know that tiny seeds can grow into large plants, but you also know that lots of things could stop that happening. The birds could eat the seed before it has a chance to sprout. The seed could go mouldy instead of germinating. It could lack sufficient water or have too much water. I remember in, I think it was GCSE Biology, back at secondary school, I remember being given a computer programme where you could change a variety of different parameters.

[ 9 : 30 ] You can change how much water the seed gets and how much sunlight the plant receives and how much potassium there is in the soil and so on and so on and so on. And the programme would tell you, as you adjusted these parameters, what happens to your plant.

And in almost every case, move any of the sliders more than one or two notches away from the ideal and the plant dies in one way or another. A plant needs particular circumstances, particular environment to grow and flourish.

Lots of things can stop a seed growing into a healthy plant. And it sure looks, doesn't it? It looks like lots of different things could stop this seed of a kingdom growing and flourishing.

After all, this kingdom, it depends on one guy, with a few scruffy fishermen following around after him. This kingdom exists only in an insignificant backwater province of the Roman Empire.

It's so vulnerable. What if in the next town, the synagogue leader gets wind of Jesus coming before he arrives and decides not to let him stand up and teach?

[ 10 : 40 ] What if a gang of robbers meets them on the road and takes everything they have, leaving this ragtag group destitute and bleeding, or worse? What if the Roman governor decides he doesn't like the idea of a rival kingdom and he locks him up?

Countless things could go wrong. It looks like this kingdom is walking on a knife edge. It looks like an insignificant seed falling to the ground. But Jesus says this kingdom is not just like any seed. It's like a seed which was planted and which grew and grew. Jesus looks ahead and Jesus knows what the outcome is going to be for this kingdom. Jesus knows the end before the beginning. Jesus knows that this seed is going to grow even beyond normal growth for a mustard seed, that it's going to grow to the height of a tree to the extent that birds come and perch in the branches. There's a good chance that the birds coming and nesting in the branches, that this is a reference to the participation of all nations in the kingdom of God, that it's not just for Israel, but rather for all the kingdoms of the earth.

Definitely that's the idea of birds nesting in the branches. It's used as a metaphor for the nations coming in, in both Ezekiel and in Daniel. And also, we can say that's certainly true on the basis of other biblical evidence and on the basis of the evidence of history, that other nations are drawn into the kingdom of God.

[ 12 : 14 ] I mean, we're sat here today, aren't we? So maybe that's part of the point that Jesus is making. But it doesn't seem to be the main idea that Jesus is getting at. The focus really is on the enormous size compared to the tiny start.

The birds that come and nest in the branches, I think they function mostly to show that this isn't a tiny little bush, but it's grown to a considerable size to the extent that birds come and nest in the branches.

I did briefly consider trying to calculate the percentage increase in size between that tiny seed and that massive eight-foot tree.

I decided the actual sums wouldn't be a great use of my time. But you see the point, right? The increase here is phenomenal, isn't it? Tiny start, massive results.

The number of new seeds that this large tree is going to produce over its lifetime. The numbers are staggering. The seed looks insignificant.

[ 13 : 13 ] The seed looks trivial. The seed looks fragile. But the end result will not be. And that shouldn't be a surprise to us, really, should it?

I mean, a God who can create a universe from nothing, well, a tree from a seed is small potatoes. And so, too, is a global movement that begins with one man in one place.

And we have other precedent for that, don't we? We're acquainted with the idea that big things sometimes start small. I mean, who would have imagined that a woman sat in a seat on a bus would change the face of a nation?

Who would think that the company that began with two guys in a garage would become the world's most valuable brand? A company valued over \$2 trillion, last I saw.

Small beginnings. Insignificant starts can have massive results. We know that that sometimes happens. But it's not always easy to predict when that will happen, or what the trigger will be, or which small starts will produce massive results, and which small starts will fizzle away.

[ 14 : 24 ] What of Claudette Colvin, who refused to give up her seat on the bus nine months before Rosa Parks, and a number of others who were quietly fine and the world moved on?

What makes the difference? Plenty of failed small businesses out there. What makes the difference? It isn't easy to predict, is it? Which seeds will sprout and which will not? But Jesus says the kingdom of God absolutely will grow in such an explosive manner. In fact, he speaks in the past tense. He says it's like a tree that grew.

What makes the difference? Well, it's not just a human plan, is it? It's God's plan. This isn't an earthly kingdom. This doesn't depend on one person.

This is the kingdom of God. It looked impressive. It looked unimpressive. As Jesus walked along that dusty road. It didn't look like there was much there.

[15:23] It looked like it was going to fail as its founder hung dying on a cross. And maybe today it looks like it will fail. Maybe we feel in 21st century Scotland, maybe we feel at times like a beleaguered minority.

Maybe we feel like the world is standing against us. Maybe we look at our own resources and we think, what chance of success here? What likelihood of growth? Well, this parable says no.

The kingdom of God is not like a seed that fell and rotted away to nothing. The kingdom is like a seed that was planted, which grew and became a tree and the birds perched in its branches.

That is what the kingdom is like. And that's not all. Jesus asks the same question over again. What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

Verse 20 there. And this time the answer moves from the garden, moves indoors, moves to a woman baking her bread. She takes her yeast, she mixes it into the flour and away it goes.

[16:25] The NIV translators have helpfully translated the amount of flour for us to about 30 kilos or about 60 pounds, depending whether you have the UK or the US text.

And that's helpful. But if you're like me, you probably don't have a mental picture of what 30 kilos of flour looks like. Although maybe if you got carried away with your sourdough making in lockdown and like us started buying flour by the sack load off of Amazon.

Well, 30 kilos is almost too sackful. This is a big quantity of flour. In fact, this is enough to feed something like 160 people. Now, on the domestic scale of this parable, one woman in her kitchen mixing some bread.

On a domestic scale, this is a colossal amount, isn't it? Think about the increase in size from, admittedly, a large heap of flour from two sacks worth. Think about the increase from that to enough bread to feed 160 people.

This is a huge increase and there is staggering growth in this parable as there was in the mustard seed. But the growth is not the only thing going on in this parable.

[17:36] In fact, the growth is perhaps slightly less impressive here than in the seed. Here, I think there is more of a sense of transformation. And I think there's three points that we might note with respect to this transformation of the flour into dough.

Firstly, the transformation is largely quiet and unseen. I mean, this is how yeast goes, isn't it? Over a period of hours, yes, yeast causes flour to change dramatically.

There's a big transformation. But if you stand there looking at it, you don't really see much going on, do you? You just watch and it just kind of sits there.

You have to watch for quite a long time for anything to be different. It isn't like an explosion going off. This is much less dramatic. Less dramatic, but profoundly significant.

And so too with the kingdom of God that grows through the transformation of individuals, that grows through the Holy Spirit at work in people's hearts, not in anything immediately visible.

[18:43] Yes. Yes. Yes, you should expect there to be outward consequences to a changed heart. Yes, you should. And yes, Jesus' own ministry was at times much more dramatic with exorcisms and healings.

But that's not the norm. The majority of it is internal, quiet, and frankly often unimpressive. And it happens within, doesn't it?

Yeast doesn't really work if you just kind of sit it on top of a pile of flour. You have to mix it in for it to have an impact. And the kingdom too works internally, long before anything is visible externally.

Nevertheless, note that the transformation does require something external. Not an external impact so much as an external source of power. A pile of flour left on its own.

A pile of flour does nothing. You can watch that pile of flour as much as you like. It isn't going to grow. It isn't going to turn itself into bread. It's just going to sit there. Maybe it will get blown away by the wind.

[ 19 : 50 ] It's not going to change. It doesn't produce its own yeast. And so too the kingdom of God. Human beings individually and corporately. Human beings left to our own devices.

We do not get better. We are not naturally inclined to glorify God in our lives. We do not instinctively obey God's commands. The flour needs the yeast to come from outside.

And we need Jesus to come from outside. He needs to get in, as we've said already. But we need God to transform us. Not to think that we can do it ourselves. So the transformation is internal. It's quiet and unseen. And it requires something external. And thirdly, it is a comprehensive transformation. A significant thing. Folks, the bread you eat is pretty different to the bag of flour that you buy from the supermarket, isn't it?

The impact of God's kingdom is huge. The transformation that should occur in an individual's life, the transformation that should occur in the world, is immense.

[ 20 : 55 ] The kingdom of God will not be like how things were before. The end will not be like the beginning. The transformation is huge.

It is comprehensive. Because of a small bit of yeast, a whole batch of dough is transformed. Because of the ministry of one man in a backwater province at one moment in history, the whole world is transformed.

And friends, when you look at the state of the church in Scotland and you think, you think this is so small. This is so insignificant. How can this go anywhere?

How can this have a global impact? How can this be the answer to the world's ills? When you look there and you think that, well, consider instead the mustard seed and consider what the seed grows into.

And consider instead the impact of a little bit of yeast on a mountain of flour. Consider instead the power and the character of the one who has chosen to do these immense things in these unlikely ways.

[ 22 : 00 ] Consider who it is that says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. And who says the kingdom of God is like yeast that worked or throw the dough. It isn't me saying that.

God Almighty says it's like that. The power is there. The promise has been made. And consider too what's already happened.

I mean, remember those inauspicious beginnings. The gospel began as a feeble-seeming religion. Helpless. Helpless. Powerless.

Founded by one who was poor in the world. Who never travelled any great distance on a global scale. Who did not address directly more than a drop in the ocean of the world's population even in his own day, let alone considered through history.

Consider that the founder of this religion died a criminal's death, condemned and punished.

Consider that at the time of his death, the people following him, maybe a thousand people if we're being generous.

[ 23 : 01 ] And most of them were hardly the cream of the society of the day. And it began in a nowhere place, in an insignificant province of this vast empire. And consider too that the tenets of this religion seem calculated to offend, don't they?

To be a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. And consider that in its fledgling days, the persecution of those who believed this gospel, who followed this way, that persecution was intense. Consider that this fledgling movement was opposed from all quarters, from authorities, both religious and political. Consider where this began. Consider the odds that were stacked against this tiny seed of a religion.

And then consider what followed afterwards. Consider where we actually are today. Consider that by at least some estimates, well over two billion people right here, right now, follow this religion.

That's about a third of the global population. It's quite an increase, over a thousand people in a backwater province. Consider the impact on the world already.

[ 24 : 10 ] See how this is already coming to pass. And look too at your own life. Consider honestly, who you would be if it were not for Christ's power in your life.

The fact that you heard about this in the first place is evidence of kingdom growth across the world. And if you can look and see a transformed life, then that is evidence of kingdom growth in your heart.

That is evidence that the yeast is working its way through the dough. That the seed is sprouting into a sapling, into a tree, into a great tree where the birds come and nest.

Consider too, consider too your own life. Friends, the beginnings of the kingdom of God could hardly have been less auspicious. But look what God has already done. And he is not finished yet. The kingdom has not yet grown to its full extent. So do not be tempted to despair when things are not as you wish they were.

[ 25 : 11 ] Do not be tempted to despair when it looks like things are not succeeding. Do not worry that the seed is going to fall and die. It won't. This is God's own kingdom.

And he has promised. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, give us confidence, we ask. Give us confidence in who you are and in what you have done.

Give us confidence that you will achieve that which you intend. Give us confidence that the power of your blood is sufficient. Give us confidence that you are building your kingdom.

Give us confidence that you have your plans and your purposes. Give us confidence in who you are and what you have done. Amen.