

How the Kingdom Ordinarily Advances

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] Next weekend, Friday through Saturday, one of the most important events for the health of our city is going to be held at the Vancouver Convention Center.

Thousands of people are going to be gathering for the annual Missions Fest. How many of you have ever participated in one of these fests over the years? Quite a few of you.

This year's theme is Hidden in Plain Sight. Lifting up the fact that the mission field is right in front of us if we have eyes to see.

This year's fest features a number of outstanding plenary speakers. Mark Buchanan, Beth Guckenberger, and Josh McDowell. Between these plenary sessions, another 100 seminars are being offered by women and men who are in frontline mission projects.

There are also 250 exhibits from mission agencies all over the world. So I hope you have an opportunity to at least be part of that this coming weekend.

[1 : 10] Neil Redenbaugh is taking our youth there on Friday night. Then here at FBC, we'll be offering a number of other ways to focus on the mission of Jesus in the world.

Tuesday night, the members of CLT are going to be serving at shelter. On Wednesday night, at our Heart and Soul Gathering, we're going to hear a report on the gospel and human trafficking.

On Saturday, we're hosting a seminar by Brian Fickert, who is the author of the book, *Helping Without Hurting*. It's subtitled, *Could Our Aid Actually Be Hindering the Poor?*

And *What You Can Do About It?* And then next Sunday, I've invited Dr. Joseph D'Souza, who is a Christian human rights activist, working among the Dalit people of India, to come and share very moving stories about what God is doing in that part of the world.

You received, as you came into worship, I think, a packet, updating us on the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada. And in Pinderhall, you can obtain a copy, a list of all of the missionaries that we support out of this church.

[2 : 22] This morning, as we continue in our series of studies in parables of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke, I invite you to give your attention to two short but complementary parables through which Jesus gives us his perspective on his mission.

Jesus is going to give us his perspective on his mission in the world. When I look out at the flow of history through these parables, when I look at what is going on in your life and in my life through the lenses of these parables, I breathe a sigh of relief and I'm filled with hope.

The parables are recorded in Luke 13, verses 18 through 21. But as our habit, we also want to hear and see them in the immediate context in which Jesus spoke them.

So we're going to be reading from Luke 13, verse 10 through 22. Miriam, would you come and read the Word of God for us?

This morning's reading is from Luke 13, verses 10 to 22, and is printed in your worship folder. If you're able, would you stand for the reading of God's Word? Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

[3 : 53] And just then, there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. And she was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

And when Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, Woman, you are set free from your ailment. And when he laid hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, There are six days on which work ought to be done.

Come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath. But the Lord answered him and said, You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it to water?

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?

[5 : 07] When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at the wonderful things that he was doing.

He said, therefore, What is the kingdom of God like? And what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden, and it grew and became a tree. And the birds of the air made a nest in its branches. And again he said, What should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it all was leavened.

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear God, we believe that you enabled Luke the physician to write down these words accurately for us.

[6 : 27] And I pray now in your mercy and grace you would help us live into the reality they describe, as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. You notice that two times Jesus asks the question, What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

On other occasions we hear him simply say, The kingdom of God is like. But this time he begins with the question, What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

I. I. I. The emphasis is on the I. The point being that the one who brings the kingdom of God into the world, the one who is bringing heaven to earth, the one who is answering the prayer he taught us to pray, Your kingdom come, is now telling us his understanding of how the kingdom comes.

Jesus is giving us his perspective on his mission in the world. The kingdom of God, the advancing of the kingdom of God, is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw, and like leaven, which a woman took and mixed.

[7 : 59] Now even on a casual reading, you can see that these two parables belong together. Many New Testament scholars refer to them as twin parables. Not only because they teach complementary truths, but because Jesus employs the two complementary genders to illustrate his rule in the world.

The kingdom of God is like a man who, and like a woman who. Now what is significant to realize is that in using both male and female in a story to illustrate something about the living holy God was an unheard of and radical thing to do in Jesus' day.

No rabbi or scribe or Pharisee would ever do that. But Jesus did, and this is not the only place he did it.

Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will be teaching about his second coming, and he will say, two men were in the field. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding at the same place.

One will be taken and the other left. And then in his most famous parables, recorded in Luke 15, Jesus will explain his seeking sinners, his welcoming them into his family and eating with them, by speaking of a man seeking sheep and a woman seeking coins.

[9 : 36] unheard of and scandalous. The coming of the holy God to reign as king is like a man sowing a mustard seed in his garden.

The coming of the holy God to reign as king is like a woman putting leaven in a lump of dough. Okay.

Let's step back now and review the larger context in which Jesus speaks these twin parables. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, living out in the desert away from all the hype and glitz, senses that there is something cataclysmic in the air.

He is shown by God that this something cataclysmic is taking place through his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth. So he cries out, prepare the way of the Lord.

After John is arrested, Jesus comes on the scene from 40 days in the wilderness where he has wrestled with the cosmic power of evil and won. He comes on the scene with his gospel or actually with what he calls God's gospel.

[10 : 49] The good news that has huge implications not only for the private religious realm, but for the public secular realm. Today, he says. The time is fulfilled, he says.

Today, in him and because of him, history has reached a major turning point. A great threshold is being crossed. It is time. Time for what?

For the inbreaking of heaven. For the rule of God to invade the world. It is time for a change in government. It is time for God's new world order.

Jesus then begins healing people and freeing them from the demonic. Not to prove that his good news is true news, but because the kingdom he is bringing is all about healing and freedom.

Jesus preaches his sermon on the mount in which he describes what happens to people when the kingdom of God comes. They become beatitude people. Poor in spirit, mourning over the condition of the world, gentle and hungering and thirsting for justice, merciful, pure in heart, makers of peace.

[12:03] People who no longer echo the behavior of those who hurt them. People who are learning to bless those who curse them. People who are learning to love their enemies. Jesus sends out his first group of disciples on a short-term mission project to announce his gospel.

In towns and villages, they announce what Jesus was announcing. The kingdom of God has come near. People are healed. People are freed. People begin to move toward wholeness.

But for all of that preaching and teaching and healing, life is still profoundly broken. For all of the light that is breaking into the darkness, the world is still a very dark place.

John the Baptist is confused. He is in prison. He hears the reports of what Jesus is doing. Good reports, but not good enough for John.

Good, but not as good as he expected. There's something cataclysmic in the air is not coming cataclysmically enough. So he sends messengers to Jesus saying, Are you the coming one?

[13:13] Or should we look for someone else? Jesus increasingly finds himself in trouble with the religious leaders. He's not religious enough.

He's not doing things the way religion is supposed to be done. He heals a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. And all he gets is a complaint that he did it on the Sabbath.

And then he speaks his twin parables. I think we can summarize what Jesus is saying in them this way.

The kingdom of God does not come the way other kingdoms come. The kingdom of God does not come the way other kingdoms come.

That something cataclysmic in the air does not come in cataclysmic ways. Not ordinarily. There are times when it can come in that way.

[14:14] But not ordinarily. Mustard seed. What is the kingdom of God like? Jesus asks. To what shall I compare it?

It is like a mustard seed which a man took and threw into his own garden and it grew and became a tree and the birds of the air nested in it. The language of the parable is very appropriate when speaking of kingdom.

For in a number of Old Testament texts, God pictures human kingdoms as trees that grow large enough for birds, other kingdoms, to come and live in them.

So for example, in Ezekiel 31, God speaks of the kingdom of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, as a tree growing very tall and quote, all the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs.

Close quote. In Daniel chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has a dream of a tree very large and quote, the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches.

[15:23] Close quote. In Ezekiel 17, God speaks of his own people in such terms. God speaks of taking a sprig from a cedar tree and planting it himself.

And says God, it will bring forth boughs, bear fruit, and become a stately cedar and birds of every kind will nest under it. They will rest in the shade of its branches.

Jesus hooks into all that Old Testament background to give his perspective on his mission in the world. The kingdom he is bringing into the world will one day grow as John the Baptist expected until it is large enough for all the other kingdoms of the world to nest in it.

But, the kingdom begins small, much smaller than John expected, like a mustard seed.

You might know that that phrase, like a mustard seed, is a proverbial saying in the first century to describe something very small.

[16:34] Very small. A mustard seed is not even a millimeter in diameter. Very tiny. It takes 750 mustard seeds to even weigh a gram.

Yet from a tiny mustard seed will grow a tree anywhere from 8 to 12 feet high. Large enough for a man to climb in it like you would climb in a fig tree.

Jesus is saying to John the Baptist and to us, yes, the kingdom is not coming as you expected. It's not coming as cataclysmically as you would like.

It looks very tiny right now. But you just wait and see. Do not despair. Hang on to the potency of the tiny mustard seed.

So tiny and so apparently insignificant alongside all the other kingdoms. Yet it grows larger than any plant in the garden.

[17 : 40] And do we not 2,000 years later see the fulfillment of Jesus' word right before us? This tiny seed has grown way beyond its tiny beginnings.

The gospel has spread all over the world. Yes, there are people and people groups that have not yet received the gospel and I want to do everything I can to make sure that they do. But think of how far the gospel has already spread.

Millions and billions of people have already come to nest in the branches of Jesus' tree. When Jesus first spoke his parable he likely had fewer than 100 followers.

Only 12 enrolled in his intensive training course one betrays him and one James the son of Zebedee is murdered just as the movement starts.

Yet look how it grew. Peter took the gospel to Asia Minor to Jews living in the diaspora.

[18 : 50] Andrew took the gospel to the people of southern Europe. Thomas planted the gospel among the Parthenians and eventually brought the gospel to south India. Matthew bore his witness in the land among the cannibals in Anthropogahia where he was executed.

An act that so troubled the king that as Matthew is killed the king is converted. Philip bears witness to a man from Ethiopia who then takes the gospel to his people.

Philip also plants his churches in Athens and Hierapolis where he was executed. Simon the zealot and Judas form a team and they take the mustard seed to Persia to Iraq.

Bartholomew takes a copy of Matthew's gospel to India and eventually to Armenia. Tiny. So tiny.

Yet how it grew and how it is growing. Jesus' followers on every continent in nearly every country of the world. This tiny seed is growing and growing and growing.

[20 : 01] And the leaven is leavening. The invisible leaven is leavening. To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? Jesus asked a second time.

It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal until it is all leavened. leavened. Now in some biblical texts the word leaven is used to refer to something evil.

But I think you can see in this text it is used to refer to something good. Now you have to make sure you look at context to determine whether a word is referring to something evil or good.

For instance the word lion. Lion is used to refer to the evil one in some texts but lion is used to refer to Jesus Christ in other texts. So leaven sometimes is used negatively besides in this parable Jesus is not so much focusing on the leaven itself but on the leavening process.

One scholar puts it this way the kingdom is being compared not to the leaven but to what happens when you put leaven into a batch of meal. In Jesus' day bread was the basic food staple and because there were no bakeries or supermarkets women would bake the bread in their own homes.

[21 : 16] Leaven or yeast was put into a mixture of wheat and barley to cause this mixture to expand and to rise. I remember when my mother used to make bread and just loved watching this thing rise.

Now the women didn't use fresh yeast every time but they would keep a fermented piece of the lump and then work that into every other time that they were making a new batch.

And the leaven or the yeast had a remarkably big effect. The little hidden leaven had a remarkably big effect.

Big and visible. The hidden leaven had a big effect. Put the leaven into the dough and the leaven changes the dough from this lifeless mass into a seething swelling bubbling heaving mass.

So it is with the kingdom of God. Often unseen. Actually usually unseen. Yet its effects are visible everywhere.

[22 : 21] Swelling bubbling heaving turning things upside down or more exactly turning things right side up again. The kingdom of God hidden in the dough of the world is powerfully at work.

And for 2,000 years now people have been benefiting from the gospel even when they do not know the gospel. Do you realize that?

Hospitals schools women's rights racial equality and democracy are all the consequence of Jesus bringing his kingdom.

Do you realize that? Jesus came into a world that marginalized the sick and weak. He came into a world that marginalized men and women and people of different color and social status.

In first century Sparta for instance, when a child was born who was weak or deformed, he or she was simply left on the mountain to die. The hidden leaven of the kingdom of Jesus changed all that. [23 : 33] Disciples of Jesus took such children into their homes and raised them as their own. The first home for the blind was founded by a Christian monk named Thalasiaus.

The first free dispensary was founded by a Christian businessman named Apolloninas. The first hospital was founded by a Christian lady named Fabiola.

Again, I encourage you to read Rodney Stark's The Triumph of Christianity. Especially read his chapter Misery and Mercy. In that chapter he describes the awful filthy disease ridden conditions of the cities of the first century.

And he describes how the disciples of Jesus entered that mess and brought the transforming power of the gospel. Stark quotes William McNeill from his book Plagues and Peoples where he speaks of these nursing ministries Christians formed and McNeill makes the claim that because of Christian nursing the death rate was reduced by two thirds in the Roman Empire.

Every time a person goes into a hospital whether he or she knows it or not they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus kingdom.

[24 : 59] every time anyone receives an education in our world whether they know it or not they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus kingdom.

Every time anyone does science whether he or she realizes it or not they are benefiting from the leaven of Jesus gospel.

The gospel gives us a vision of the world a vision of the cosmos which allows for science to emerge. The scientific method which has given us all these marvelous technological advances was born out of the leaven of the gospel.

Now I know that in our time the Christian faith gets bad press. Some of it is deserved. Christians are not perfect people and we've done some imperfect things.

And besides not everyone who labels themselves as a Christian is a Christian. So some of the bad press is warranted and we need to repent of the bad things done in the name of Jesus.

[26 : 15] But where would the world be without Jesus and his gospel? I mean just look at the places in the world where the gospel has not yet infiltrated. Do you want the world to be like that?

Or look at the places of the world that one day once did embrace the gospel but no longer embrace it. Do you want the world to be like that? Now clearly the obvious point of Jesus' twin parables is that the little will become big and the invisible will become visible.

But the deeper point the mystery of the kingdom is that the little is powerful and the hidden is transformative.

That is the encouragement of these parables lies not in the eventual consequences of sowing the seed and putting the leaven in the dough. The encouragement lies in the mustard seed itself and in the leavening process itself.

The mystery of the kingdom this is the mystery of the kingdom Jesus wants us to know and it is that littleness is powerful and hiddenness is transformative.

[27 : 34] Yes the kingdom does come sometimes in big and visible ways. Think day of Pentecost when Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit and 5,000 people come to follow Jesus Christ.

And think of those other times in history when the Holy Spirit moved in such power that whole cities were converted in the so-called great awakenings for which I pray my heart out for our time with many of you I'm asking the Holy Spirit to just come and move in our city and just take over the city he can and he has you might know that right now in Latin America 3,000 people an hour are coming 72,000 more people will have come to Christ by this time next Sunday a half a million more people will come to Christ Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world but the encouragement lies in a deeper place in the power of littleness and hiddenness the kingdom of God ordinarily comes in the little and hidden which means we can resist the temptation to spruce up the gospel to make it bigger and more visible the gospel can do just fine on its own thank you let it stand seemingly as small as a tiny mustard seed seemingly as insignificant as invisible leaven one day the kingdom is going to come in a cataclysmic way

Jesus says of that day the sun will be dark and the moon will not give its light the stars will fall from the sky the powers of the heaven will be shaken and a new heaven and a new earth will descend

but before that day the kingdom ordinarily comes in little hidden ways will hurry and time will do it just fine.

Now has this not been God's way in the world throughout the centuries? Of all the people groups, God could have chosen to be the first covenant people.

Whom did God choose? The big and the visible? No, he chose the Jews who at that time were not a great nation. In fact, at that time they weren't a nation. Just a man and a woman, Abraham and Sarah of Iraq.

[30 : 26] And when God wanted to raise up a king for his people, whom did he choose? The big and visible ones? No, he chose David, the smallest, the youngest of a forgotten clan.

And when God chose a mountain on which to uniquely dwell, was it the big and highly visible mountain? No, he chose Mount Zion. It's the smallest. It's the most obscure hill in Jerusalem.

When God chose to come to earth in our flesh and blood, when God became human and lived among us, where was he born? In the big name, flashy cities of the world, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Athens, Rome.

Surely, God, you would choose to be born in Rome. No. Bethlehem. A little, seemingly insignificant village off the jet-set path.

In the last book of the Bible, in those grand apocalyptic visions of the glory of God, what is the central thing that grabs hold of you in those visions?

[31 : 32] The grandeur of it all? The size of the throne? The lightning and the flashing? No. The thing that grabs you is a lamb. A little lamb. Who, though little though he may be, stands at the very center of it all.

In the new heavens and the new earth, he's still this lamb, this little lamb, but he turns out to be the lamp of the glory of God. He turns out to be the source of all the glory of God. To what shall I compare the kingdom?

Asks the one who brings the kingdom. Mustard seed, littleness, leaven, hiddenness, and through littleness and hiddenness, transforming the cosmos.

I want to conclude this morning with my favorite story of how Jesus does his ministry in the world. It involves the former bishop of the Church of South India, Leslie Newbigin, to whom I owe so much. He received a message one day asking him to come to a remote village in South India, which he had never heard of before, to baptize 25 families.

[32 : 44] He goes, he sits down with them, and listening to the story, was able to piece together how all this took place. He says it was a story in four acts.

Listen to it in his own words. Act 1. A water resources team has come to assist the villagers in digging a well so that they could have clean water for the first time in their history.

The man in charge of this team was a Christian. He was not formally trained, even theologically naive. He was not good at communicating and verbalizing his faith, but he made it clear he was a Christian. He left behind the impression of a good, caring, honest, sincere man.

Act 2. Three or four months later, one of the people of this village was visiting a neighboring town to do some shopping. A representative of a Bible society sold him a copy of St. Mark's Gospel.

The man brought it back and started reading it. Now, reading in an Indian village means reading aloud. So this man sits on his veranda of his house reading this strange book. And of course, people with nothing better to do gather around and listen and they start discussing.

[33 : 49] Week after week for several months, you have a group of people reading St. Mark's Gospel, which is totally strange, to them. They try to make out what it's all about. Act 3. Along comes what we call an independent evangelist.

We have a rather remarkable breed of such evangelists in South India. Each one has a hotline to God, knows exactly what God intends, and they go around to villages preaching fiery sermons. One of these independent evangelists dropped in on our village, preached a fiery sermon, and left behind a track which simply said, if you die tonight, where will you go?

Act 3 closes with alarm and despondency in the village. Act 4. The village decides they better do something about it. They will try to find out what this Christian faith is all about.

They remember a village five miles away where there's a Christian congregation. So they write and ask these people, tell us about this man, Jesus. Now, these Christian people are village coolies, day laborers.

One of them had broken his leg and was unable to work, so the people said, you go to the village, spend a month, and tell them what you have. And he did. Then Newbegin writes this, the result of these acts was that I was sitting down in front of 25 families as eager for the gospel, as well instructed as any group in that circumstance you could find.

[35 : 09] And now listen to this, none of us knew about the four acts. No agency of the church had any idea what was going on.

The strategy was entirely in other hands. And that is what's happening in your life and in mine.

It is what is happening in your workplace and in mine. It is what is happening in your neighborhood and in mine. It is what is happening all over this city.

It is what's happening all over British Columbia. It is what is happening all over Canada. It is what is happening all over the world. Jesus invisibly leavening the dough of the world with his gospel.

Jesus working his little but powerful mustard seed conspiracy to him. be all the glory now and forevermore.

[36 : 18] Amen.