

The Kingdom of God is Like...

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[0:00] Well, how many here like to garden or take care of plants? Well, not as many as I thought! How many of you here like to bake?

It's kind of similar people. How many of you here have never watered a plant or baked anything in your life? Okay, so everybody's done at least a little bit.

If not, then maybe you've at least enjoyed someone else's baking or something that came from their garden. Well, this morning we're going to hear is Jesus talks gardening and baking.

And some of you at this moment are wondering if you came to the right church this morning. But I assure you, this morning's message is not Jesus' five tips on how to get a better garden or better bread.

You can probably find that in the Davidson Leader. We've been hearing Jesus talk and teach about the kingdom of God.

[1:05] And Jesus often used the ordinary and everyday stuff of life in his parables to teach about the kingdom of God.

So we're going to hear a little bit about gardening and baking. But Jesus is going to use those things to point to something far greater.

Let me read our passage for us this morning. It's short. It comes from Luke chapter 13. Starting in verse 18. Then Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like?

What shall I compare it to? It's 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's like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about 60 pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.

[2:17] The first thing we notice about these parables is that they're really short compared to some of Jesus' other ones.

They're kind of like mini parables. And we also notice that compared to some of the parables that we've heard from Jesus recently in this gospel, the parable of the rich fool, the parable of the sower, there's no explanation by Jesus as to what they mean or how to interpret them.

And so the question, of course, is how is the kingdom of God like these little stories? The story of the mustard seed and of the yeast.

What does Jesus want us to understand from these parables? Let's start with the mustard seed.

Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like?

What shall I compare it to? It's 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.

[3:32] Now there's been lots of discussion over the precise species of mustard plant that Jesus is referring to. Of course, commentators and scholars love to do that kind of thing.

Most people agree that it likely wasn't the same as the mustard plants that are grown in today's farmer's fields. It could be a reference to a black mustard plant with black seeds.

They're really small seeds. And these, I guess, can grow as high as 8 or 12 feet if they're just let to go. Another good possibility is that it was this plant that they call it *Salvadora persica*.

That's probably the Latin technical name. This one is also called a mustard tree, and it grows to over 20 feet tall. It has these small berries that have a pungent mustard flavor.

But the point of the parable, of course, is not a lesson in archaeology or botany or to prove the accuracy of the Bible. Sometimes we get all caught up in this.

[4:41] You know, is the mustard seed really the smallest of all seeds? What about the poppy seed? Isn't that smaller? You know, did Jesus mean the smallest of every seed on earth?

Or did he just mean of the seeds that would typically be sown for gardening purposes? At some point, we just have to acknowledge this was written over 2,000 years ago in a region of the world that's different from ours.

And, you know, are we here to critique Jesus and his use of metaphor? Or are we here to understand the point that he's making through the everyday common thing of his people's day? And that's why Jesus chose this, because it was common to the people that he was speaking to in their region of the world. So we'll give him the benefit of the doubt, and we'll assume that there was a kind of plant that was typically grown in or near the garden back then in the Middle East that had a really small seed, but then would grow to be a large tree.

Now, when we look at the details of this little story, we notice Jesus brings a few things in particular to our attention.

[5 : 53] The first is the size of the mustard seed. In Matthew's Gospel, it's phrased a little bit differently. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, Jesus says.

So he compares it to other seeds. And again, not every seed on earth, but probably those in the gardening arena. The word for plants that's used here is specifically those that are like vegetables, things that would be grown in the garden, or herbs.

Now, for those of you who like to eat vegetables and fruits, texture some of those seeds in your mind. You've got your pumpkin seeds, which are quite large.

You've got your watermelon seeds. You've got your apple seeds, which are about the same size as watermelon seeds. The amazing thing is that inside that little seed is a whole tree waiting to happen.

Then you've got your cherry tomato seed, even smaller. And then you've got your mustard seed, which is like a tiny little black speck of dirt, like a mini peppercorn.

[7 : 12] And then the next thing we notice is this mustard seed, what it becomes. Depending on what species of tree, what kind of garden, we get a different picture here.

But either way, Jesus' point is the same. Relative to all the other plants in the garden, it's now the largest. It's the greatest. And Jesus' point here is not simply to compare the mustard seed with other seeds or trees with other trees, but to point out the vast and perhaps surprising difference between how the mustard plant starts and how it ends.

Though it is the smallest, it grows and becomes the largest. This is the first truth that we're meant to understand about the kingdom of God.

It's a kingdom of surprisingly humble beginnings. It began with people like Abram, a nobody from Ur of the Chaldeans, that foreigner who lives over there in the tents, and yeah, the nomadic shepherd guy.

It begins with a baby in a feeding trough in a little town, not the capital city, in a backwater region of the Roman Empire.

[8 : 46] And Jesus, from the perspective of the world around, not a great son of nobility, but the son of a carpenter, maybe conceived out of wedlock, or so it was rumored, a guy who would later grow up in Nazareth.

And can anything good come from Nazareth? It's a kingdom of surprisingly humble beginnings. Some guy named Jesus, out at the lake with a bunch of fishermen and a tax collector and some others, to many, a pathetic excuse of a movement whose Messiah or King was executed like a criminal only three years after it started.

The smallest and humblest of beginnings. There was very little by way of pomp or fanfare. And yet, the kingdom of God will become the largest of all kingdoms ever to be seen or known in this world. Interestingly, this is not the first time in the Bible that we have this sort of comparison of kingdoms. Long ago in the days of the exile, there was a man named Daniel. He was one of the wise men who served King Nebuchadnezzar.

And in his days, this was the Babylonian Empire times, God gave Nebuchadnezzar these visions, these dreams.

[10 : 26] And in these dreams, he reminded Nebuchadnezzar that even his great empire, his great kingdom would not be the greatest that the world would yet see. Maybe you know the story if you've read that in Daniel.

Nebuchadnezzar's first vision is of a statue with a head that's made of gold. And the meaning of the dream as you read the story, his him and his kingdom are that head of gold.

Several kingdoms would follow after, that's the rest of the parts of the statue, but they wouldn't compare in greatness and splendor to his. And then, in his vision, along comes a rock and smashes the statue to pieces.

And we learn that the rock is the kingdom of God. A kingdom that will never be destroyed, that will last forever. In the dream, it becomes, the rock becomes a mountain and it fills the whole earth. That was the first dream God gave to Nebuchadnezzar. In the second dream, God shows him a great tree. So we've got a tree thing happening here again.

[11:45] And it's the tallest and the greatest tree on earth. Daniel says that the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom. But then, as the vision continues, an angel comes down from heaven and calls for the tree to be cut down.

And it's left as a stump on the ground. And the meaning of this was that Nebuchadnezzar would be humbled until he acknowledged that the one true God of heaven rules.

And that's exactly what happened. There came a day when Nebuchadnezzar himself, the king of the Babylonian empire, said, the Lord's dominion is an eternal dominion.

His kingdom endures from generation to generation. The kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven will be the greatest of kingdoms that this world has ever seen or known when it comes in its fullness.

No nation, no empire, no kingdom will compare, not in size, not in splendor, not in any other measure of value or greatness.

[13:04] But it doesn't start that way. The kingdom of God doesn't come like a flash of lightning out of nowhere, but like a tiny seed which over time gradually becomes the great tree.

On another occasion, Jesus said this, he said, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Now, he was talking about something else in that particular statement, but what we see here is that there is sort of a progression that's been happening, a growth.

This kingdom has been a long time in the making starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and it's a kingdom that grows to be the greatest from generation to generation over a long period of time starting from the smallest and humblest of beginnings, men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, shepherds and nomads.

But then when it is fully grown, it will be like that mustard tree which stands taller than all the other plants. The final detail in this parable is how the mustard seed after it becomes a tree, the birds they come and nest in its branches.

[14:52] Mark adds in his account the detail of how its branches are large and give shade for the birds to nest under. What does this mean?

Well, this is not the first time that the kingdom has been described as a tree. We've kind of seen kingdoms are described that way in the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar's vision is an example and if we look a little more closely at that example from Daniel chapter 4 verses 10 there's just a little snippet of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

I looked and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky.

It was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter and the birds lived in its branches.

From it every creature was fed. And Daniel says the tree which you saw Nebuchadnezzar you are that tree.

[16:04] You have become great and strong. Your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. And there's a few other places which describe sort of the birds nesting in the tree.

And it's a positive thing. If the tree is a kingdom then those who come to live in the tree and build their nest in it and live under its shelter and shade, they're the people of the kingdom.

Going back to our passage in Luke, my translation doesn't quite capture it here. It says perch, but it's better translated as nest. The tree, it grew and became a tree and the birds nested in its branches.

Let's just kind of zero in on this idea of birds and trees a little bit. What is a tree to a bird? Or we could flip it this way first.

Where's all the best places here in town to find birds? Well, if you've been walking around Davidson at all, or maybe if you're in Crake, the streets that have all the trees have all the birds, or at least more of them.

[17 : 31] What is a tree to a bird? To a bird, a tree is a place to find shelter from the elements, shade from the heat, a hollow maybe inside the tree that protects from the storm.

A tree is a place that offers protection from predators because its branches are high up. A place to hold fast to when the wind blows too wild in Davidson for the bird to be airborne.

A tree is a place with numerous perches to gather with other birds for a feast of berries. Both wax wings and sparrows have this in common.

They all perch together sometimes in one tree or hedge or bush, sometimes by the hundreds. And what do they do? Well, I guess they just sort of hang out and sing together.

A tree is like a giant choir loft with numerous perches and positions for every song in the book. A place from which to see and to find food.

[18 : 47] A place to find nesting materials. A place to find leaf-eating insects and seeds and berries and fruit. In fact, a tree is so well-suited to a bird's life and needs that we almost have to pause and wonder, which came first?

The tree or the bird? Or perhaps God made them with each other in mind. A tree is a wonderful source of life and provision and protection.

It's the ideal place to settle and build a home for a bird. So, too, the kingdom of God, when it's fully grown and fully established, will be the perfect place to settle and build a home for its people.

A place where all who live in it will find their needs met, opportunity to flourish without fear of any danger or threat. That's what the great kingdom of God will be one day to all the children of the kingdom who are in it, to all the citizens of it.

The kingdom of God will be the greatest and most glorious kingdom, the perfect place to live, when it comes in its fullness, but a kingdom which, to the surprise of many, had the smallest and humblest of beginnings.

[20 : 20] Let's now look to the second parable that Jesus told, the yeast. What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

It's like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about 60 pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough. Yeast is a fascinating thing.

Some of us simply know it as that stuff that you buy in the jar and you just sort of put it into your baking to make things rise. But yeast actually has some really surprising characteristics.

things like that. The most notable, perhaps, is its potency. It's powerful stuff. As the old saying goes, which is quoted in the Bible, a little yeast leavens the whole lump.

And that's the amazing thing about it. The amount of yeast that you put into the mix is very small compared to the amount of flour that goes in. I'm not a baker myself or a biochemist, so I shouldn't say too much here.

[21 : 30] But part of the reason why it's like that is because yeast is alive. It's a single cell living organism, technically a fungus. According to some estimates, one teaspoon of active dry yeast has up to 40 billion living yeast cells in it.

And those cells, they eat sugar. And as they do, they reproduce and they multiply and they do that while it's getting mixed into the dough until they're all throughout the whole lump of dough.

They're eating sugars, they're producing carbon dioxide gas, and these little gas bubbles are then trapped in the dough. And that's what causes the dough to rise.

And so the next time you slice open a freshly baked loaf of bread, look at the holes. Look at the evidence of just how thoroughly a little bit of yeast worked through that entire dough mixture.

It's incredibly potent stuff. Only a little is needed. The second thing we notice here is how much flour the woman mixed the yeast into.

[22 : 54] Sixty pounds of flour. That's a lot by one person's calculation enough to bake bread for about 100 to 150 people. But while the amount of flour goes up, the amount of yeast doesn't go up by nearly as much.

change. Again, we can see a similar truth emerging in Jesus' parable. The kingdom of God is like that, he says. What comes from above, what comes from God, is powerful stuff.

What began with something very small and seemingly unimpressive has the potential to utterly transform and bring great change in ways we never would have guessed?

What kind of changes are we talking about? I mean, we could talk about a couple different things. We could talk about this in terms of the kingdom citizens and how they become as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

It's like that multiplying of the yeast. Or we could talk about how even the smallest bits of truth from God's word have the power to totally change a person's life when they embrace those truths and those truths are added to the mix inside of them.

[24 : 23] But, as with the parable of the mustard seed, we also notice that this isn't immediate transformation. It's a gradual process.

I don't think they have a lot of yeast. But, we kind of know it takes time for yeast to do its job and for the dough to rise. It's a gradual process.

At the end of the process, the difference is obvious. I mean, that lump is maybe doubled in size.

But, if you're just sitting there staring at it, it doesn't look like anything's happening.

Kind of like how children grow and change. If you just look at them from one day to the next, you don't really notice much. I see my own children every day, and they look the same as they did yesterday.

Then I look back on photos when they were little, even younger, and I barely recognized the kid in the photo. Is that Laura or is that Callie?

[25 : 35] It's amazing. And this is kind of, I'm going to call this the invisible aspect of the kingdom of God. Just like the yeast, you don't see much going into the mix, and once it's mixed in, you can't see at all what's going on with that lump of dough.

But just because the change and the growth is gradual doesn't mean that it's not happening. Time will allow the difference to be seen. that's how it is with the kingdom of God.

It's expanding. It's rising gradually. The number of citizens in the kingdom is growing from generation to generation and to use Jesus language, one day when this bread comes out of the oven and Christ returns, the world is going to go, wow, where did this come from?

just like all the holes in the bread. Where did all these people come from? Millions and millions of them. When did this happen?

And it all traces back to a single book and the God who has revealed himself in its pages and his son. Sometimes that's how it works in our own lives too and in the lives of our loved ones.

[27 : 00] We have maybe the best intentions to change, to become model citizens of the kingdom, to live holy lives, to stop sinning, to get our priorities straight.

But that transformation is often gradual over time. It's happening. The difference will be noticeable over time but right now we might not see it.

One time a little bit later in the same gospel, the Pharisees come around and they ask Jesus, when's the kingdom of God going to come? It's in Luke 17 verse 20.

On being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, the coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed. Nor will people say, here it is or there it is because the kingdom of God is in your midst.

Isn't that something? I mean, here they are asking Jesus, when will it come? And Jesus is saying, it's not something you can see.

[28 : 19] In fact, it's coming, it's happening right now. And you can't see it. It's right now in your midst.

And yet, you're asking, where is it? When will it happen? There's this invisible quality to the kingdom. And Jesus is clear in this passage that it is temporary.

It's not always going to be invisible. Just a few verses down, he's going to tell about how the coming of the Son of Man will be visible to all, just like lightning flashes across the sky and everyone can see it.

But the kingdom of God begins with something seemingly small and insignificant. It rises gradually over time. And it's not till the end of the story when God's transforming power is seen for what it is and the effects are undeniable and take the world by surprise.

I wonder if all too often we think of things the way that the Pharisees did here. We see the kingdom of God as only something that will come in the distant future.

[29 : 38] A future event when Jesus comes back. And perhaps some of us even treat our faith as a ticket to get into that event someday and a little more.

But for those of us who believe in Jesus what difference would it make if we truly embrace this truth that the kingdom is now. It's growing now.

We're part of it now. It goes from generation to generation. It's here in some measure already.

Imperceptible to many perhaps.

Insignificant to most. Yes. But we are here and through us as followers of Jesus it can be said truly the kingdom of God is in your midst.

our faith is not just something that we keep in our pocket until the end to get into the big event. The kingdom and the life that we're meant to live as citizens of the kingdom is today.

[30 : 56] It's now. We are part of a nation today. And I'm not talking about Canada. We have our allegiance and our obligation to a national leader today.

And I'm not talking about Mark Carney or King Charles. Listen to these words of Peter, the apostle. He says, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

I like to think when I read this verse of rider nation, I always like that term, because even though it's primarily made up of people from Saskatchewan, it's a term that sort of transcends the geopolitical boundaries, the provincial boundaries.

Rider nation is made up of rider fans from all over the country. In some cases, people are even in the midst of other team loyalties, and yet they belong to rider nation.

They cheer for the riders. It is truly, in a sense, a nation within the nation. I think that's a good picture, a helpful picture of the kind of thing that Jesus is describing.

[32 : 28] The kingdom of God is right now in your midst. It exists, and I'm not talking about the riders here, so don't be offended. It exists imperceptibly and unimpressively as a nation within the nation.

It's a nation made up of people from all the nations. It transcends political boundaries. I mean, if we consider ourselves to be a part of rider nation, how much more should we consider ourselves as followers of Jesus, to be a part of his nation?

Those of you who love to watch or play sports, do you wear your colors proudly at your team's games?

Do you wear your colors proudly even when you're not at the game? Do you make much of your team at every opportunity, especially if someone decides they're going to talk down against them?

Does your heart swell with pride whenever they score or whenever they win? That's just sports and recreation. We should be no less as Christians.

[33 : 49] Do you wear your colors proudly as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Even when you're not in church? do you make much of your king, Jesus, and his kingdom, even when you're not in church?

This is where the trouble lies though. We don't like to make much of something that not everybody can see. Even sometimes people oppose it.

And so we don't want to make much of a kingdom that's invisible or that has humble beginnings because our world values what's impressive.

The fast growing, the stuff that starts with greatness. is yet these parables help us see that there is this tension and it's normal.

People will look at our faith and say what is that? What difference is that going to make?

[35 : 04] Just like a little seed or a little bit of yeast. But listen again to what Peter said to the churches in his letter. 2 Peter 3.9 or 3.3 I should say.

He said above all you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say where is this coming?

He promised. Ever since our ancestors died everything goes on as it has since the beginning. In other words they'll be saying we don't see it.

Where is the kingdom? Where is the king? He goes on to say the day of the Lord will come like a thief. Jesus said that too. The world will look in complete surprise at this unexpected reality and realize all along this kingdom was there among us and now it's risen.

It's the thing. the people of the kingdom they were there all along. They were trusting in this. If you could lay your life down for one cause what would it be?

[36 : 29] If you can use your words to sing the praises of one thing what will it be? I hope it's not writer nation. I hope it's Jesus nation.

For you are a chosen people a holy nation God's special possession that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
God is building his kingdom. It may not look like much now but in time it will be the greatest that this world has ever known. It will be the most amazing place in which to live and build a home and it's what we should be setting our hearts and our hopes on.
Let's pray. Father in heaven it takes faith for us to embrace this in the world that we live in. You know that and so we ask for your help in these moments to really believe these words and to put our lives on these words.
[37 : 48] these words that you gave us Lord they are the rock and what the world is telling us is important is the sand.
Help us build our lives on your words and trust them deeply. We ask this in your name. Amen.