

To These Belong the Kingdom

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Money, power and privilege. These are the things that make the world go round. It's what opens doors to the most exclusive clubs in the world or gets you access to the most important people or secures you that job you really want.

If you haven't got any of these, then the next best thing is to have talent or good looks. Be the best tennis player in the world. Have supermodel looks or even score a perfect ATAR and the world will sit up and take notice, give you special treatment, give you that advantage you're looking for. Now, you may not like this. You may not think it's fair and I don't. But unfortunately, that's how the world works. And face it, you probably do the same thing. If you needed money to start a business, who would you rather have coffee with? Bill Gates or me?

If you wanted to be an ordained minister, that's become ordained in the Anglican Church, would you meet with the archbishop or me? There's no point coming to me, right? I have neither money or power or authority.

That's the way the world works. But let me tell you, if you don't have money or power or privilege tonight, don't despair. Conversely, if you do, don't be smug.

[1 : 43] Because in our passage today, the good news is the kingdom of God doesn't work like this. We caught a glimpse of it last week already with a crippled woman and the synagogue leader.

But in today's passage, Jesus makes it explicit. The laws of the kingdom don't conform to the world. And praise God for that.

Instead, how God works will surprise us. And we need to come to terms with it. We need to understand it. Otherwise, we will find out that we will be outside the kingdom. We will miss out and not belong.

So if you've picked up an outline on your way in it, there is the sermon outline. And you'll see three aspects of the kingdom in our passage today.

First, in verses 18 to 21, we see the unseen and unstoppable growth of the kingdom. So look with me in verse 18, right at the start, where Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?

[2 : 41] It is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and it 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 60 pounds of flour. It's quite a lot, isn't it? Until it worked all through the dough. Our first analogy Jesus makes is that of a mustard seed. It is tiny. And yet within it lies all the potential, all the DNA as it were, from which a huge tree can grow. Now how does it become, how does it grow from such a small seed into such a huge tree? That's a bit of a mystery, isn't it? And yet once the seed takes root and starts to grow, it's really unstoppable, isn't it? Even uncontrollable.

The same goes for yeast in our second example. We don't see yeast at work, do we? In fact, if we stare at the dough while it's proofing, we don't see the dough rise, do we?

[3 : 53] It's imperceptible. And yet if we walk away for an hour, we come back, its growth is clear, isn't it? It's rather like me too. Some years back, I was really enjoying my food, having the best roasts, all-you-can-eat buffets.

And then one day I turned 40 and woke up. And to my surprise, I found that I had added about three or four inches around my waist. And my cheeks as well.

And you know what? I couldn't imagine how that could have happened. I mean, all through my 30s, I was, you know, nothing happened. And then turned 40 and straight away, a few inches.

But that's just how organic processes work, don't they? It's not like building a house or a car, say, where you can see bit by bit how each component is added and the car or the house is built up. When it's organic growth, you don't sort of see it grow, do you? It just does. And kingdom growth, which is what Jesus is talking about here, is very much like that.

[5 : 01] That's how spiritual growth happens. So take churches, for instance. We often mistake church growth, visible church growth in numbers, for kingdom growth.

Now, there's a correlation, of course. Growing churches always, often indicate kingdom growth. But you can have visible church growth, that is, visible number of peoples increasing in the church, without having kingdom growth.

That's true even about baptisms. Here you might say, surely people are professing their faith at baptism. Surely this must be a sign, a true sign of kingdom growth.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm always full of joy when I witness baptisms. And I never doubt anyone's conversion. Never. But the reality is that, not all those who are baptized, sadly, finish the Christian race.

That's true, isn't it? Some will fall away. Only God knows what is real and true kingdom growth. But, of course, we mustn't go to the other extreme, and then to start doubting that none of that is true growth.

[6 : 14] We mustn't doubt that God is indeed at work in our lives, that if we are, in our hearts, we are sincerely trying to follow God, then yes, His promise is that He will grow us by His Spirit.

In fact, God's desire is to keep us growing. Regardless of how old or young we are, regardless of how many years we've been a Christian. In fact, many of you will know, the longer we've become, or we are Christians, the more we realize how much room there is still to grow, isn't it?

So much so that Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 16, that even though our outward body might be fading, yet inwardly, what the Spirit does is to renew us day by day.

And so that's the great news, isn't it? Even as we grow older, and some of us, for us, our bodies, we can feel our bodies failing, and aching, and diminishing, yet, if we are Christians, if we have God's Spirit, we're actually growing, more healthy.

We're being renewed day by day. But such growth isn't seen with the naked eye, is it? And yet, God is at work, and it's unstoppable, because it's God's work.

[7 : 34] And that's why I want to say again, that prayer is so important for us individually, but also for us as the church, because it is God's work, not our work. And so again, I say, I want to encourage you, and admonish you even, make every effort to come to Kingdom Growth Night, where we pray for the church.

It's important. It's what Kingdom Growth is all about. Also, give yourself to the study of God's Word, because that's the soil within which the Spirit uses to grow us.

So again, at the start of the year, I want to encourage you to join a small group, to study the Bible together. Not just hear a 20-minute sermon from me each Sunday, but no, come together during the week, and grow together by studying God's Word.

Now, I know for some of you, bless your soul, the opposite is true. You're only too eager to see growth in your own life, and see the church grow. You're like those little school kids, with their first science experiment, you know, trying to grow plants from seeds.

You put that bean or whatever in the cotton wool or soil, and you water it, put it in the pot, and put it on the windowsill, go to bed, and then you wake up the next morning, and you rush to it, and you go, you want to see that it sprouted, don't you?

[8 : 53] So you go, where, mummy, daddy, where is the plant? And then you're a bit disappointed when you say, well, it hasn't happened yet. But you see, when you think like that, you're sort of treating Kingdom Growth like building a car.

You feel like if you've just followed the instructions, voila, you know, it's going to work. But that's not how God works, as I said. Often the growth is unseen.

And we mustn't be disappointed when we don't think we see growth, whether it's in our lives or in the church. For example, say you're starting a new ministry as a leader.

You've got all these great plans, and they're good plans too, to grow people in word and ministry. But then what happens is that you fall sick in a big way, and you think, how can God allow this to happen?

I'm meant to be helping the church to grow. All these plans that I had will go down to drain. But actually, that may be how God intends for you to grow, to use your sickness to help you grow in patience.

[9 : 58] And perhaps with the other members, to teach them to step up, to lead in your place, and to rely on God rather than to rely on you as the leader. So you see, it doesn't hinder growth necessarily, does it?

But actually, God can still grow in spite of what we think. The same goes with persecution. We look at places like China and Iran, and we think the government crackdown is bad.

But as you've heard me say before, the fastest growing church at the moment is in Iran. And it wouldn't surprise me that this crackdown in China is actually strengthening the true church in their faith.

But on the other hand, when a country suddenly experiences religious freedom, God can use that also, can't He? Because missionaries are finally allowed in freely to train up the church.

So you see, God can grow His kingdom any which way He likes. It's unstoppable, it's unseen, and it's often unexpected. So we need to trust God that He's doing His work.

[11 : 04] We need to pray, we need to be obedient, but then we need to trust that God is at work among us. Well, let's turn now to the second aspect of the kingdom, and that is the way into the kingdom is narrow and therefore difficult.

So verse 22, Jesus went through the towns and villages teaching as He made His way to Jerusalem. Someone asked Him, Lord, are only a few people going to be saved? He said to them, make every effort to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, Sir, open the door for us. But He will answer, I don't know you or where you come from. Then you will say, we ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets.

But He will reply, I don't know you or where you come from. Away from Me or you evil doers. What's Jesus saying here? Well, at one level it's obvious.

Jesus is warning that there will be many in the kingdom, many who think that they are in the kingdom, who will be in for a shock. The door closing comes when Jesus returns or else if we die before that.

[12 : 13] And at that time, some will find themselves outside the kingdom and wondering why. Now notice Jesus isn't here talking about pagans or atheists. No, He's talking about people that think they know God.

Religious people like the synagogue leader. He knew God's law. He had authority in the religious hierarchy. And Jesus says that many like Him and in Jesus' day there were the Pharisees and the priests, they will find themselves outside the kingdom.

Verse 28, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God. That is, they will see their forefathers in the kingdom, but you yourselves, Jesus says, as their physical descendants will be cast out.

The point is that they had all that they needed. They had the scripture, they had access to God's promises handed down to them. Of all the people, these were the ones who had the natural advantage of entering the kingdom.

And yet, they didn't. Instead, verse 29, Jesus says, others will. People will come from east, west, north, south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.

[13 : 26] God's kingdom will be open to those who don't expect to enter. People from all nations. Now for the Jews, that was really confronting when they heard Jesus say that because they thought they were the chosen ones.

But of course, if they had read the Old Testament clearly, like what we did with Helen in Isaiah 60, you see that that was exactly what God promised.

So verse 3, it's an example which I've got on the slide. Isaiah said, nations will come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn. That is, come to Jerusalem which was the proxy for God's kingdom.

And if you understand Isaiah, the whole of Isaiah, the theme is that of exile. people have been exiled by God because they were rebellious and had sinned.

But come the second half of Isaiah, God returns them after a time of repentance, of soul searching. And God says in Isaiah 60 that this opportunity is not just for the Jews but for everyone, everyone among the nations.

[14 : 31] And so when Jesus says here, back here in verse 24, make every effort, what he's saying is he's not trying to say to people that they have to prove themselves, do better, like I said last week.

No, the effort required is to look into ourselves, into our hearts, and to repent of wrongdoing, to repent of our pride, selfish living, hatred of others, envy, jealousy, our unwillingness to forgive. And that's hard work, isn't it? Anyone here think repentance is easy? It's never easy, is it? Because, what does it require? It requires us to really look into ourselves and confront the ugly side that is in us.

That's why it's hard to enter God's kingdom. Because people try to do it every other way. They would rather work harder, they would rather improve themselves, they would rather do good things to make up for the bad things they've done.

Everything but admit humbly that they are powerless, that they are sinful, and need to depend on God to enter. And that's the whole irony, the whole surprise about God's kingdom.

[15 : 51] Those who try to enter don't. Those who trust do. those who think they're most able to enter don't, and those who don't do.

It's upside down, isn't it? Verse 30, Indeed, there are those who are last who will be first, and those first who will be last. Now, many of us don't think like that because we don't think we're Jews, but we still think, don't we, that somehow, whether it's our achievements, our talents, our knowledge, whatever it is, somehow we still feel like that must count for something when we come before God. Because that's how the world, the way the world works, isn't it? It's so ingrained in us that we always think it must be because of something that's to do with me, rather than all to do with God. So our association with all things Christians, because we come to church, because we're baptized, because even that we have the right theology, none of these things count towards entrance into God's kingdom.

Things we do for charity, our efforts to make the world a better place, they don't get us into God's kingdom. Only real realization that we need to depend on Jesus.

whether we're the archbishop or simple parishioner, whether we're the prime minister or homeless person, the only way to enter God's kingdom is through humble dependence on his son Jesus.

[17 : 28] And so as a church, if we do realize this, then we ought to live like that as well, don't we? That is, we shouldn't be showing favoritism, shall we? We shouldn't be favoring the rich and the powerful among us, or just because they're the CEO, then we're going to treat them differently.

Just because they live in a posh house, they're going to get more attention than us. On the other hand, we shouldn't be looking down on the poor or the weak as the world sees them.

We should do the opposite, shouldn't we? We should honor the weaker parts of the body. We shouldn't be fawning over those who are more gifted or influential, who have more gifts in the church, or if you're like me, we're leaders, we need to check ourselves, don't we, and our attitudes all the time to see whether we're prone to pride.

Because at the end of the day, it's what Jesus has done, and not who we are, that gets us into the kingdom. Which brings me to the third point, and that is the costly price Jesus has paid for those who enter the kingdom.

So verse 31, at that time, some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you. Herod hates Jesus because he's a rival king.

[18 : 42] On the other hand, I don't know why the Pharisees are warning Jesus. Maybe they're truly concerned for him, although I'm a bit skeptical about that, but I think they're simply using that point to try and drive Jesus out of town.

But in any case, they want Jesus out of Jerusalem because that's where the center of Jewish influence is. If you want to lay claim to God's authority, then you have to be in Jerusalem, God's well in place.

And even though that's true, what is surprising is how Jesus as king, as he comes to Jerusalem, how he will reign. And so he continues. He replied, go tell that fox, which is Herod, I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.

In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow, and on the next day, for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem. So Jesus knows the mission he's on, he's not deterred, he will keep healing and driving out demons because that's a sign of God's kingdom coming.

But then his goal, his goal is on the third day, right at the end, that is to die in Jerusalem for the people. He moans, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hand gathers her cheeks under her wings, and you were not willing.

[20 : 04] Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus is like a loving but unappreciated parent, is he?

Some of us parents, you may identify with that. He goes out of his way to love and care for children, gives them the very best, even to the point of sacrificing their needs, their spare time, their sleep, whatever, and yet the children respond by turning their backs on the parent.

It's heartbreaking, isn't it? And parents do that not because they want to, you know, be stifled their children, no, they're doing it out of love, just as what Jesus is doing here, just as what God is doing here.

He's trying to draw His people back into the kingdom, and yet they hate Him because He's trying to control them, they think, so much so that they end up killing Him.

But again, the irony of it is that this is exactly what Jesus needed to do. He needed to die in their place and our place so that we can be saved from sin and death.

[21 : 18] And that's why Jesus says, I'm going to keep doing this. I'm going to keep going to Jerusalem even though I know that it's going to cost me my life. Because that's the costly price that has to be paid for anyone to enter God's kingdom.

Just interestingly, that last phrase, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, that comes from Psalm 118, which is on the slide. It's the psalm that people sing as a sort of a victory psalm when the king comes back to Jerusalem and they're exalting him for all the things he's done to save them from their enemies.

And if you read on, come Palm Sunday, that's exactly what happens to Jesus. He enters Jerusalem and the people sing this psalm. But again, ironically, a week later, how does he exercise that rule? By hanging on the cross for them as their king and savior. Well, the title of the sermon today is To These Belong the Kingdom.

kingdom. And so you might think, who are these people that I'm talking about? Well, the answer is those who humbly depend on Jesus and the price he paid for us to enter.

[22 : 29] And so if there's anyone here today that's still of the view that your own work, your achievement, or your goodness is what will get you into God's kingdom, well, Jesus has already worn us, hasn't he?

you might find yourself waking up one day, and all that you thought counted for something is not going to be worth anything.

It's hard to enter that way, but it's also very easy, because it is open to the most powerless, the most helpless, and the most humble of humans.

All we need to do is recognize that and come to Jesus instead. Now, for those of us who already do that, then praise God. But again, I want to encourage us not to lose heart.

Often, we want to see signs of God's kingdom growth, but sometimes that's just not visible, and we need to trust God that he's doing his work, which means actually being faithful.

[23 : 28] Faithfulness is a simple thing, and yet it's one of the hardest things, isn't it? To keep persevering in prayer, in word, in serving him week in, week out, for the rest of your life.

And let me give you a specific encouragement for those of you who are leading kids and youth. You may wonder sometimes as you come to Sunday school or to youth group, week in, week out, you might be wondering, is this all worth it?

You still have kids running around, making lots of noise, you're not sure whether anything's sinking in. But friends, the Bible says that these, as it were, are the least in the kingdom, aren't they?

We may not see that our effort week in, week out is making a difference day and day. But rest assured, God will use you to grow his kingdom.

And so if you're doing that, as we start into a new year, let me encourage you not to lose heart, to keep persevering. And for those of you who aren't and would like to serve God, that's such a great

way to offer yourself to help with kids, help with youth ministry.

[24 : 37] And then one day when you are in the kingdom, we'll probably get there before those we lead, we'll see people coming in as well. And we'll see the fruit of what we've been doing here on earth.

Well, let's pray and ask God to help us do that. Father, help us to recognize that only the lowly and humble enter the kingdom. Help us to make every effort to see that we need to depend on you, depend on your son who has taken our place on the cross.

Help us not to be discouraged when kingdom growth is invisible to the naked eye, but to keep trusting that like a mustard seed, like the yeast in the dough, you are growing your kingdom.

You're growing your kingdom by your spirit. And thank you for Jesus who's paid the costly price so that we may enter that kingdom. in his name we pray.

Amen.