

The Growth and Patience of God's Kingdom

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 0 0] Well, I want to add my welcome to David's welcome this morning. And those hymns that we sing today, they really have a lot to do with our passage today.

And I invite you to take them home and read over those words again about God shedding his light when the horrors of night is surrounding us. This is a passage that we're in on chapter 13 on page 818 that is the middle of a section of parables that Jesus is telling about the kingdom of God. And as we look at this passage, I am reminded of a conversation that I had a few years ago with my Jewish neighbor, who our family was very close friends of them. And they moved, unfortunately, a couple years ago. But one of the conversations I had was about who the Messiah is, whether Jesus is the Messiah. And it's not that I'm bold at bringing up my faith with him. It's just that in his dinner conversations that he had at his house, when many people would come and visit and we'd come, they talked about three things.

[1 : 1 0] He loved to talk about three areas of life, politics, religion, and sex. So it was no problem bringing up something like, who is the Messiah?

And I said to him, why is it that you cannot accept that Jesus is the Messiah? And he said this, he says, I can't accept that Jesus is the Messiah because everything was not made right when he came.

He says there continues to be evil and pain in this world and throughout human history. That should have come to an end when the Messiah came.

And you know, that's exactly what Jesus' disciples wondered as well. And the crowds that were listening to Jesus and the Pharisees. If Jesus brings his kingdom, why didn't all things become right?

Why didn't Israel enter the golden age? Why were the Romans still around? Why was there pain and suffering? And the disciples must have wondered, why isn't our movement taking off with a bang?

[2 : 2 0] You know, why doesn't everybody accept Jesus as the Messiah and his teaching? And even John the Baptist, you remember a couple of chapters ago, he sent his disciple to Jesus and said, are you the one who is to come?

Or shall we look for another? Why is that? It was because even though he saw the great miracles that Jesus had done, he was expecting something much more, that tremendous things were supposed to happen.

And that was the vision of the people in Israel as well. Well, a similar question today that you may be asking, that people in your life may be asking if God is all powerful, why does he allow the evil that we see in our world around us every day?

If Jesus is Lord, why doesn't he make all things right now? He has that power. Well, Jesus helps us with these questions in these three parables today.

And he teaches his crowds. He gives encouragement to his disciples in telling them the nature of the kingdom of God.

[3 : 3 3] There's three things about the kingdom that these three parables tell us. It tells us about the loving patience of God's kingdom, the hidden growth of God's kingdom, and thirdly, the final glory of God's kingdom.

And you might be wondering this morning, what does Jesus mean by the kingdom? What is the kingdom of God? Well, very simply, when Jesus teaches about the kingdom, he is always talking about the kingship, power, and authority of God shown in Jesus.

God's power, his authority shown in Jesus Christ. That is the kingdom. And it's shown then in the flesh that we read about in the Bible.

It's shown now in people's lives. And one day, when all things come to culmination, we see that kingdom in all of its glory as well, in a way that is not hidden at all.

So I want to look at, first of all, God's kingdom and his loving patience. You see this in the first parable of the weeds and the wheat. Look at verses 24 at the bottom of page 818 and then going up to 819.

[4 : 48] It's the story of a farmer who grows seeds. He sows seeds into his field. But while his men were sleeping, the enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat and he goes away.

And the weeds that he planted, by the way, are something called the bearded darnel. How many of you know what the bearded darnel is? It sounds a little bit sinister. Well, it is.

It's something that looks a lot like wheat. But when it grows to its maturity, the seeds in it are quite toxic. And the roots underneath are wide running.

They go all over the place. They entangle plants around it. So when the plants came up and bore grain, those weeds appeared also, Jesus said. And the servants of the house, the master of the house, came to him and said, Master, didn't you sow good seed in your field?

How then does it have weeds? And he said to them, an enemy has done this. And I want to stop there for a moment and talk about the enemy. Because Jesus says in verses 37, if you jump down, he says, He, the Son of Man, Jesus, is the one who is planting the good seed.

[6 : 05] He is planting people, sons of God. He was there at creation. And the field is the whole world that he owns, that he is sovereign over. But an enemy, who is the evil one, Jesus says, has corrupted the world.

He sows weeds that he says are called the sons of the evil one, people who are in the grip of the evil one. So here we see Jesus saying that this personal evil being is the source of all evil.

He is God's enemy, Satan, who is working against God's purposes in this world, corrupting God's good creation. And Jesus doesn't tell us where Satan came from.

There are hints in the Bible that he was a fallen angel. But why did God create a fallen angel? And the Bible doesn't say why he is in the world, only that he is behind all that is wrong in the world.

And Jesus says in this parable that the kingdom, his good work is invading this fallen world, where there will be both people who accept his rule who are the sons of God and those who are in the grip of Satan.

[7 : 18] They will continue to coexist side by side in this world. And in this story, the servants ask this kind of impatient question.

Should we rip up those weeds? Jesus' answer is very important for us this morning. He says, He says, No, because you might uproot the wheat.

Let them both grow together until the harvest, the end of the age. And here's the patience of God. This is what is crucial for us in understanding the kingdom of God.

That Jesus is in charge. He oversees the advance of his kingdom. And he deliberately delays. He delays taking final action and allows Christians and those who are in the grip of Satan and sin and death to exist together.

So the purpose of his delay is to allow the ongoing spread of God's kingdom until harvest time, which is the final judgment. Now I find when I was reading this parable, I found a man named C.S. Lewis very helpful.

[8 : 28] You may know who he is. But in the dark days of World War II, when it seemed like the world had gone crazy, when evil had the upper hand all around, C.S. Lewis gave 15-minute talks regularly on BBC to all of Britain and well beyond in the world.

And those series of talks were about the fundamental teachings of Christianity, about the kingdom of God in this darkness around them. And it was turned into a classic work called Mere Christianity.

It is a great book. If you have not read it, read it. You can even get it free online. But if you have read it, it's worth reading again. In part of it, he talks about the impatience that we have with God, wanting him to get rid of evil right now, as I'm sure people in Britain wanted at that time.

And he says this. He says, And you see what he's saying here.

This is what the harvest day that Jesus speaks about in this parable is all about. It is a day of finality, a day of judgment, when he brings the glorious new heaven and the new earth.

[9 : 59] But it's also the end of the world when there's no more chance for people to come into Jesus' kingdom, to accept his authority and his rule in their life.

I love the fact that Peter wrote a letter, who is a very impatient person we see in the Gospels, and he spoke the most clearly about God's patience in 2 Peter 3.9.

Listen to what he says. He says, You see, that's God's loving purpose in the kingdom.

It is that no one should die, but that all should turn to Jesus, who is their rightful king. We say that every morning prayer, like we did this morning, that this is what God's will is.

Not wicked perishing, but all coming to repentance. So we live in a time of God's patience, before the last day, when he is bringing his kingdom as people hear his word, with the good soil that we heard about last week.

[11 : 14] And I think this brings us to our own patience as well. Because you might wonder right now, why am I in a place that is so resistant to God?

Why do I feel like such a minority? Why am I in a place so lacking in morals, that is so confused about sexuality? Why is it that people don't understand what basic identity is all about?

Why is there so much evil in the news that I see every day? We might say, I want nothing to do with this world. I want to give up on it. Kind of withdraw from it.

But Jesus in this parable says, You are the good seed. He says, I have planted you. You are my son or my daughter, and you are meant to be in this world to bless the world, just as Abraham was sent in the world to do that.

So it's no accident that you're surrounded by evil. That's the way it's supposed to be in this kingdom. It is the nature of the kingdom. You're meant to be light and salt in this world, and to the people around you.

[12 : 23] You're meant to bless them, and to make them a little bit upset at times. You know, that's what it means to be part of the kingdom of God. You are shoulder to shoulder with those who do not belong to God yet.

August said once this lovely truth about this parable. He said, Those who are weeds today may be wheat tomorrow.

Very profound. Because he's writing around the year 400 or so, and he's telling us what is true in this world, and what he has seen, and what the church has seen, that God makes weeds to be wheat.

And the work of Jesus' kingdom is to work for that change, to seek that change. You know, the people who are in your life and my life, who are in Satan's grip of sin and unbelief, may look fine. They may look a lot like you and me. They look like wheat. But they are spiritually lost in the weeds, Jesus is teaching. And God, by his word, can make them become wheat.

[13 : 31] And that's why God is patient. God has given us a patient work that we should not uproot yet. It is to ask God's help to speak for him, to live for his change in the weeds to become wheat.

And for this to happen in our friends' lives, in our family, in the people in the office, we do that as we patiently live for King Jesus and find ways to speak about him.

Jesus tells us, keep on ministering to them. Don't give up. Patiently persevere. That's God's character. That is why he has planted you in the world.

So there's the patience of God. God's kingdom. Secondly, Jesus teaches us about the hidden growth of God's kingdom. He tells two stories about two of the smallest things you can imagine. Seeds and yeast. That's put in just a little bit of sourdough. Now Jesus chooses the mustard seed for farmers because it becomes the biggest plant in all the field.

[14 : 42] You know, six to ten feet high when they harvest it. And Jesus is teaching that the kingdom of God always has small beginnings. Small beginnings.

Even temporary decline as well. But in those beginnings and in that decline, there will always be growth. God's growth will come, he is saying.

It's as inevitable as this mustard seed growing or the leaven going through all of this flower. We see this in Jesus' own life. Jesus had no money.

He had no political influence. He had no army at all. He was considered to be very, very small. He had a very unimpressive group of followers, almost all of whom fell away by the time that he went to the cross.

And of course, it's on the cross that he dies between two criminals and he is completely despised and rejected by the world. There is the beginning of the kingdom.

[15 : 44] Because after Jesus rises from the dead, people begin to enter the kingdom of God. They begin to experience the power and the authority of the risen Jesus in their lives.

How did it happen? Well, in an awfully small way. The disciples very simply retold the story of what happened with Jesus. That he died on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins according to the Bible. That he was buried, dead. And that he rose, he was raised from the dead on the third day, all according to the Bible. And that he was seen by Peter, by all the disciples, and by 500 other people as well.

That was it. That was the message. And it was a message that was foolishness to the intellectuals of the day. And it was a scandal to the religious experts and the godly people of that day as well. It was small to them, easily discarded. But when people trusted that message, their lives were changed and people began to grow in number.

[16 : 56] And what's interesting about how they grew, if you look at what historians say, and there's been a lot of work by social scientists on this now, is that that growth was very slow but steady.

Two to three percent growth. And it was growth that was a minuscule part of the Roman Empire until a couple of hundred, three hundred years later. And yet here was God, slowly but surely, bringing his growth into this world through very, very small beginnings.

This has happened throughout human history. It happens now in different parts of the world as well. Small beginnings bringing about huge growth. And very recently, we have been in the last 30 years in a time of great moral decay and decline in the world.

You look on one hand of all the evil that we see through the internet and so forth. And yet, on the other hand, we can look at another piece of information.

It is the growth of the kingdom of God. Of course, we know in Africa in the last hundred years, phenomenal growth from 10% of the population to 50% of the population.

[18 : 11] Over 500 million Christians in Africa. But there's also the Chinese church with a church that became virtually non-existent through this cultural revolution.

And you may all know that now, because of growth from 1979 of 10% every year, there are over 100 million Christians in China. And in 10 years, that number, if it keeps going, will be, they will be the largest Christian country in the world.

Largest population of Christians. This is God's work from very small beginnings because people heard the gospel. And I want to bring up New York City as well.

New York City, we heard in the children's talk today. That has been a place of great decline in church membership.

Since in 1989, only 1% of the people in central New York went to a gospel-believing church. And that's because there were lots of idols.

[19 : 17] There was materialism. There was secular thought, sexual freedom, and so forth. The moral life went down. That's why there's so many Yankees fans there.

But what has happened in the last 25 years is phenomenal. Here's how you could believe in God's work. Now 5% of that population goes to a gospel-believing church.

That is phenomenal. And the gospel churches in that area believe that they will reach 15% of that population in 10 years from now.

It's like God's work, deciding to go into the places that seem most resistant to the gospel and bringing growth. Going to the place of great smallness so that the gospel, the kingdom, can show forth.

You see, all of these places, the gospel, the kingdom grew out of a very small start. Listening to God's word in a living room, conversations about Jesus with a friend, praying for somebody over time as well, looking so insignificant in many ways.

[20 : 29] I was talking to somebody on Friday night who prayed for her husband for years and years and years. And he became a Christian in the most unlikely way later on in life and walks with the Lord in a wonderful way now.

You see, over time, God brings growth as people persevere with their gospel work with patience. And what we see in the third parable is that there is a concept in our understanding of power that's very visible.

But Jesus says the kingdom of God is very hidden in a lot of ways. The kingdom of God will be glorious in the future, but now it remains largely hidden.

You see that in the teachings of the New Testament. I don't know if you noticed the epistle reading today, but Paul was boasting about all the terrible things that happened to him.

You know, I was shipwrecked. I was beaten. I was hungry. I was cold. It was terrible. And he says, I want to boast in the fact that I'm weak because when I am weak, God is very, very strong.

[21 : 37] This is a theme throughout the New Testament. There is this secret, hidden, unnoticed power of God. And verse 33, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in 60 pounds of flour, but it was all leavened as a result.

You know, a whole village could eat that bread. It was so big. You see, the kingdom that seems small permeates societies and people's lives in very powerful ways that you don't often see. It touches hearts and souls. It transforms. And in our church, there are many unnoticed works of the kingdom that are very powerful. They are by God, but small.

It happens in the visit that you make with somebody and you pray for them. It happens in those prayers for someone over many, many years. It happens in the encouragement of God's word that you spoke to a friend.

It's the halting conversation about God with a stranger that is the beginnings of the transformation of this change, this transformation in people's lives.

[22 : 46] And maybe personally, you might ask the question, as I do too, how have I been growing as a Christian? It doesn't seem like it's happening as it should be. But it's amazing to see if you haven't seen somebody for a while and they come back, how God's change has taken place.

It's very good to have a conversation with a fellow Christian and say, and talk about how you see God working in their life. You're surprised. God has come into your life and touched it in different areas of your life in remarkable ways.

This is the leaven of God's kingdom. And that's why at St. John's, we believe that the way God works is not in spectacular ways necessarily.

We want to make sure that the entry of God's power and authority is real because the end result will be this transformation, this growth.

We're not after quick results. We want the power and authority of God to enter into our lives. And that happens as God's word is planted in us. He will do His powerful work like the leaven of that flower.

[23 : 57] You know, for a young person, that's why youth is so important. You think about that. If they come to receive God's kingdom and enter into it, we know that within 30 years a whole family will be affected.

Their friends will be affected. Their work life will change and affect people's lives as well. And if people come in later on in life, there's a whole network of friends that have already been built up. And in the same way, the leaven of the gospel goes through them into those relationships. There is transformation that happens in very small beginnings.

And I want to close this sermon briefly with the glory of the kingdom. It is a picture that is vivid that Jesus tells. He finishes his parable of the weeds, Jesus does, with a harvest day.

And look at verse 40. This is how he describes it. He says, Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so it's going to be with the clothes of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels.

[25 : 02] They will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers. All causes of sin. And he's going to throw them into the fiery furnace. And in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears let him hear. That is a picture of the day of the Lord.

It is a day of awesome glory when the kingdom of God is revealed. But it is therefore also a day when the awfulness of rejecting that kingdom is also revealed as well.

That's why Jesus' language is so vivid. Jesus says, listen to this. Hear this. He is uttering what has been hidden from the foundation of the world as verse 35 says.

And therefore there are really only two ways to live. For King Jesus and for that day or to reject him and to live for yourself.

[26 : 09] Those who reject God and his Son, Jesus will experience the horror of separation from God. This is what Jesus is teaching. But those who receive his power and authority will be utterly transformed by him.

And I want to close with a quote from that same C.S. Lewis because he summarizes so well this day of judgment, this day of the Lord, this day of glory and how it affects us. He says this. He says, God is going to invade all right. He says, you will see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something that never entered your heart to conceive comes crashing in.

Something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. For this time it will be God without disguise, no hiddenness.

something so overwhelming that will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror in every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side.

[27 : 20] There's no use saying that you choose to lie down when it's become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realize it before or not.

now, today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever.

We must take it or leave it. And so this parable says, will you shine like the sun or will you reject the power and the authority of Jesus, the kingdom of God, our Father?

Paul teaches us, it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Therefore, do all things without grumbling or questioning, you know, with patience, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

may God give you his grace. May he give you his Holy Spirit that you may indeed shine like the sun of the glorious kingdom of your heavenly Father.

[28 : 46] Amen. Amen.