

The Advance of God's Kingdom

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Date: 10 August 2022

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[0 : 00] passage this evening. Luke chapter 13 and especially the verses from verse 10 on to where we finished reading. Oh man!

He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath and there was a woman who had a disabling spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her he called her over and said to her, woman, you are freed from your disability.

That was true of the Bible as a whole. It's certainly true of all these passages that we read in the Bible. They're not a loose collection or strands of truth just brought together in any old way.

There's always some connecting points that you can trace through especially when you look at it in within the confines of one book of the Bible such as Luke. And it's true also in this particular passage here as well because if you look at verse 18 there he said therefore. Why is that therefore there? It's a connecting word but what does it connect with? Well it connects with what has just been said before. In other words Luke is saying there's a connection here between what the Lord did to this woman and did for this woman and what's before that but also what comes after in the two parables where Jesus compares certain things to the kingdom of God or compares the kingdom of God first of all to the grain of mustard seed and then to this measure of leaven that a woman took and worked into the dough that she was preparing. So there are these connections here and the Lord is really connecting them if you like by Luke rather is connecting by the Lord's teaching that takes us to the whole theme of the kingdom of God because we'll see that the kingdom of God was such a prominent feature in Christ's teaching. Sometimes it's explicit. Sometimes it's implicit. It's not as obvious but nevertheless

Jesus speaks of things that belong to the kingdom of God. God's kingdom where God reigns and of course God reigns everywhere but in his kingdom where his citizens if you like are made willing subjects of his kingdom where willingly we receive the kingship of God over our lives and acknowledge his kingship. Well in that sense of God reigning over us we've come into the possession of membership of the kingdom.

[2 : 40] And in this passage there are people who would have said of themselves almost as a matter of right we already belong to the kingdom of God such as the ruler of the synagogue but then so did Nicodemus.

In John chapter 3 we have that window into the kingdom of God that Jesus provides for us as he interviewed Nicodemus a ruler of the Jews just like this man a ruler of the synagogue one of the Sanhedrin one of the top religious leaders of the time. And here he was somewhat fascinated by Jesus.

He came to him by night Nicodemus did and of course in John's gospel that itself is significant and symbolic. It wasn't just the darkness of the night literally that John was taken up with but the fact that Nicodemus took an interest in Jesus when he himself was in spiritual darkness.

He was a ruler of the synagogue. He was a ruler there in the ruling party the ruling the ruling group of leaders of Israel and your member Jesus said to him except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

He's effectively saying to Nicodemus you think you're actually already in the kingdom actually you're outside and you can't get in. There is no way in except through rebirth. Except through a radical change in your whole disposition including how you see me. And of course that follows through into every single one of us who have come to put our trust in Jesus through being born again by the power of God's spirit brought enter entering into his kingdom. So there's the the entrance to that's important in the teaching of Jesus and you'll find features of that in this passage as well. Here is the ruler of the synagogue who actually comes to complain about what Jesus has

done yet he himself would have said that he would already be in the kingdom of God. Of course he would. And then Jesus told the parable of the barren fig tree and what does that remind you of? Well it reminds you as you go back into the Old Testament that very often Israel the covenant people of God were represented by a tree of various kinds or a fruit tree and a fig tree such as you find here in this particular passage or vine tree. He had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and he found none.

[5 : 17] And so the vine dresser said look for three years I've come seeking fruit on this tree cut it down.

It's useless. There's no point to it. But he said he said the vine dresser said let it alone this year until I have done some more work. I dig round it and put on manure then if it should bear fruit next year well and good but if not you can cut it down. In other words there is Jesus and he has come seeking fruit on the people of Israel just as God did down through the years of the Old Testament and finding all too little and sometimes none. Here is Jesus saying effectively by this parable I'm giving you some more time.

And it's the wonderful patience of God, the long suffering of God, the fact that God doesn't rush into a judgment to destroy them. All of that is built into the passage and then follows the passage.

We're going to look at the part we're going to look at tonight from verse 10. And there are two things here that you find really about the kingdom of God. First of all the kingdom of God and its advance you might say that the kingdom of God advances by setting people free. That of course brings us to freedom from sin and freedom from the guilt of sin very often symbolized by some physical ailment or other. But we mustn't say that people who are suffering a physical ailment are doing so because God has something against them. But in this instance in the days of Jesus he makes it clear when that was in fact the case. That this woman represented a need that belonged to all the people in a spiritual sense from which they needed to be set free. And the kingdom of God advances by setting people free.

Secondly, the kingdom of God advances despite first appearances. And that takes us to the two parables from verse 18 through to verse 21, the parable of seed, mustard seed and the leaven. Let's just look at these two points briefly. The kingdom of God advances by setting people free. Now look at this woman and how she was described because it became a controversial healing. He did it because the Lord did it on the Sabbath.

[7 : 50] This woman had been disabled for 18 years. She was bent over and couldn't straighten herself up. And of course that would inevitably mean she was not able to do certain things that other able-bodied people could. But in Jesus' answer to the ruler of the synagogue, he speaks about the woman as a daughter of Abraham, reminding the ruler of the synagogue that she is one of the covenant people just as he is.

And that he shouldn't actually look at this woman at its disparaging way. And that he is. But, you know, he also, when Jesus dealt with, in answering these, should she not, whom this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 years.

One of the features of the advancing of God's kingdom is that the king himself conquers the enemy, the great enemy, the spiritual enemy, Satan himself. All the way through the gospels, you find in the record of the gospels that the casting out of demons by Jesus was itself an indication that the kingdom of God was advancing. That the kingdom or the ruling of darkness was being diminished and overcome.

And Jesus casting out demons was one of the most obvious evidences of that. You'll see that in all the different passages in which you find casting out of demons mentioned as Jesus performed that miracle.

Well, this was done, as he says here, on the Sabbath day. And the minute rules of the Pharisees, such as this ruler of the synagogue, we're not told that he was in fact a Pharisee, just called a ruler of the synagogue. But many of them were. The minute rules, I mentioned this last Lord's Day when I looked at Sabbath day or the Lord's Day, the minute rules that they had invented and added on to the law of God was so burdensome to people and kept them so burdened, even represented by the stooping woman.

[10 : 09] These people were burdened under the Pharisees restrictions and the Pharisees requirements. They couldn't live their lives the way they ought to. They needed to be set free from the enmeshment of all of these minute rules that were really human inventions.

And the ruler ignored the synagogue. The ruler of the synagogue ignored the miracle. He just didn't really, it's not that he ignored it fully, but he didn't take it up at all. All he was concerned was that Jesus had done this on the Sabbath day and he was indignant. He was absolutely as annoyed over this as you could be. And that reminds us of something too, that he was ignoring the miracle because this was not in accordance with his rules, with how he saw things.

And he could not see the compassion that Jesus had shown to this woman, because his own mind was so fixed on his own rules and on his own way of looking at things. The likes of compassion on the part of Jesus just passed him by. He just didn't notice it. He didn't think about it. It didn't enter his mind for a moment. That this was really tremendous compassion and love on the part of Christ. Christ. Christ. And that's how it is still today, of course, because in so many cases, it's people's prejudice that blinds them to the reality of Christ's love.

Prejudice will always blind you to something and very often something important. And we all have our prejudices. We all have things that come from our own thinking until God straightens that out and corrects it. And every time we have whatever prejudice it is, and especially if it's to do with the workings of God or the workings of the Holy Spirit, then that prevents us from seeing the miraculous, from seeing the compassionate Christ at work as this ruler of the synagogue himself was.

[12:17] And of course, he would have felt his own position threatened. And very often, that's what you come across when you're dealing with people and setting out the gospel for them, talking to them about the claims of Christ. You inevitably go and come across as it was for ourselves, for most of us at least.

Our position, our standing, our own thoughts, what we have made of ourselves is really seriously under threat because here's somebody who wants to take over your life. Here's somebody who wants to change your thinking. Somebody who wants to really turn things completely on the head so as to be born again.

And you enter the kingdom of God. And this man feels that his own position is really under serious threat because Jesus is doing what he's doing and showing his power and showing his authority. And he's dealing with these things in such a way that the people here rejoiced Christ had all the glorious things that were done by him. And so that's so applicable to our own age as well.

Whatever way we try and present the gospel by our evangelism, whatever it is, whatever type of outreach it might be, whatever type of personal evangelism you're involved with, this is often what you come across almost inevitably. You'll find people threatened. We have to take account of that.

[13:41] You have to try and understand where they're coming from. And you have to try and remember this is where we were ourselves, where we felt threatened by the gospel coming to present the claims of Christ to us.

And where even the most tactful presentation can sometimes and often meet with that reaction on the part of those who are called by the truth of God to repent and to give up their lives to Jesus.

And then there's this condemning reply on the part of Jesus for the man. This was a really controversial healing because it was done on the Sabbath. It was against his way of looking at things. And you notice how Jesus replied. First thing he said was, you hypocrites. I see this man had spoken not to Jesus himself in his his objection to what Jesus had done. You see that he spoke to the people.

That's what the ruler of the synagogue indignant because Jesus said to the people. He didn't turn down to Jesus and said, why are you doing this? Maybe he thought that he just couldn't argue with Jesus successfully anyway. I don't know. But he spoke to the people. That's what Luke noticed. And he said to the people, there are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed and not on the Sabbath day. But Jesus, of course, knowing what was in his heart and knowing the need of the people said, you hypocrites. And he illustrated that by how they themselves were compassionate even to their animals. So that they would lead an animal out on the Sabbath, his docks or his donkey, from the manger and lead it away to water it. And really, Jesus is saying effectively and powerfully, you're actually treating your animals on the Sabbath better than you're treating your fellow human beings, your fellow covenant members such as this woman. You have more compassion for your animals than you have for her. That's a really condemning statement on the part of the Lord. And it shows, of course, Christ's own insight and his compassion towards sinners, what he calls this woman, a daughter of Abraham. Not this woman, a daughter of Abraham. That's also getting to the rule of the synagogue because he had missed out

completely the fact that this woman was a covenant member of Israel. She belonged to the covenant people of Israel and therefore she ought to have been dealt with compassionately, just like the compassionate God they believed in.

[16 : 25] And the kingdom of God then advances by this woman being set free, just as it does for you and for me. When we're set free from our sin, from the guilt of our sin, from God's condemnation.

By coming to Christ, there's an advance in the kingdom of God. The kingdom moves a little forward from every sinner that's converted. That's a further step forward for the kingdom of God.

God. And of course, it shows too that the meaning of the Sabbath itself, or the Lord's day as we now call it, doesn't actually exclude the doing of good works on the Sabbath. That's another time that Jesus met with those who objected to his working on the Sabbath. It is, he said, lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Lawful to actually be involved in acts of mercy, acts of kindness, especially acts that relieve human beings of a desperate need, or even a less desperate need if it's a real need that they cannot meet. And so here's Jesus saying, this is in reply to the objection. As he said these things, verse 17, all his adversaries were put to shame. Now that's interesting too. There's a penetration there of the hearts of these people who saw this and who now listen to Jesus. And that gives us tremendous, tremendous encouragement, doesn't it? Sometimes you come across situations where you say, well, I can't see them ever becoming converted. I can't see them actually ever coming to accept Christ.

I can't ever see, even though we know in our heart of hearts that everything's possible with God, still we sometimes have that reaction over certain situations or people where our instant reaction is or thought is, I don't think they'll ever come to the Lord. I don't think that'll ever happen.

But here are his adversaries. And he's made an opening, at least in their minds and thoughts, because they were put to shame. They thought about themselves in the light of what Jesus had done and what Jesus had now said to the ruler of the synagogue, and he felt full of shame.

[18 : 50] It came back on themselves so that they really had a bad conscience about things. And for many of them, that may have been the very start of their life being changed and to become followers of Christ. But the people rejoiced. The people who weren't his adversaries, they all rejoiced at the glorious things that were done by him.

There you see the contrast. The ruler of the synagogue is indignant. This is a terrible thing that's happened. This man has to be called to account for this, this ruler is saying about Jesus. And yet the people, the ordinary people, they rejoiced at the glorious things done by him. You see, that's why, as we said earlier, they were burdened under the minute laws of the Pharisees, burdened under these all due the course of their lives.

And, you know, that's also very much part of what Jesus said in that famous statement in Matthew 11. Come unto me, who? All you who are burdened and heavy laden.

All you people burdened and heavy laden from human rules and human commandments. Come to me and I will give you rest.

I'll take that yoke off you if you take my yoke and wear it instead. That's still essence of the gospel. That's still the essence of what we keep in mind as we reach out with the gospel.

[20 : 27] So the kingdom advances by setting people free. You know, we heard tonight in prayer very rightly and very readily, the state of our nation, the state of our society, the state of our governments as well, by and large.

And how no human wisdom on earth will ever get us through out of a dilemma, any dilemma, let alone the ones we're facing in our present age. But this will.

And let's pray that God will come as was prayed for this evening. And open hearts and minds and set people free from human logic and human wisdom.

And bring them into the logic and the teaching and the freedom of the Holy Spirit. By the blessing of God's word and the witness of his people.

The kingdom advances by setting people free. The kingdom advances despite first appearances. First of all, it grows from small beginnings.

[21 : 36] And secondly, it grows into a transforming power. It grows from very small beginnings because in verse 18, he compares it to a grain of mustard seed.

You've probably got mustard seeds. All those of you who are doing any cooking, you might have mustard seeds in your cupboards. Tiny little mustard seeds, so small. And yet if you plant that seed

and it grows, it grows into a great tree.

As Jesus says here, it grew and became a tree. And the birds of the air made nests in its branches. Who is this woman? What's one woman in terms of advancing the kingdom of God?

Well, you might have said in the days of the apostles, just before the day of Pentecost. Who is this small group of people sheltering in a room for fear of those who are outside, wanting to do them harm or put them into prison?

Who is that? How is that small group going to be in any way effective to change the direction of the whole people? Act chapter 2.

[22 : 44] The Holy Spirit breathed out by God. 3,000 conversions in one day. The kingdom of God sometimes advances slowly from small beginnings.

But even from small beginnings, sometimes come giant leaps. As God blesses his word. Who are we tonight to think that we can be means of changing the thinking of our society or the thinking of our own community even?

Well, we're not any worse off, are we, than this woman, than this small church in the days of the apostles? Has the Holy Spirit changed?

Has he disappeared from the working of the kingdom? Of course not. We're thankful even for those. But then who knows when the next step is going to take place? And the small steps become a great advance and a great leap forward for the kingdom.

[24 : 14] So don't ever lose hope. Don't ever think that it's not worth praying for conversions anymore. Don't ever think that such and such a person or such and such a people are never really going to embrace the gospel.

They're just too keyed into their own prejudices. That's why we pray for those who are leading movements against the gospel. And pray for their conversion.

Because as far as we can see, they have qualities that would serve the kingdom of God so well. A sense of real commitment.

An intellectual ability. A great interest in people. A desire that people will actually have the best things. Even if they're not looked for in the right areas.

Still that person or these people can serve the kingdom of God with the God-giving, even natural qualities they have. Especially when they're changed and transformed by the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 12] Pray for those. Make it your business. To find out who are the leaders of the local anti-gospel movements.

And if you never speak to them or never have the opportunity to present Christ to them. Go into your closet and pray for them. And pray for God to change their lives. And pray for God to do what he did for Saul of Tarsus.

And meet them on the way of their opposition to Christ. So that they will come to face this Jesus and have their lives changed.

And just imagine the impact. Just as it says here, all his adversaries were put to shame. When leaders of anti-gospel movements are themselves converted.

Well, that causes massive tremors through the kingdom of Satan. And it causes people to think, what is going on? What is there to this Christian thing that I didn't really think of before?

[26 : 22] That's what we pray for. That's what we hope to see happening. The kingdom advancing despite first appearances that may not seem really very encouraging.

And then it grows too by a transforming power. Because he goes on to speak about this woman that took a measure. Or a leaven that woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

Well, we know what leaven is. It's yeast. And yeast has its own properties. When you apply it to a batch of dough, the properties of the yeast take over that batch of dough.

And if it's left long enough and in the right conditions, the yeast doesn't just cause the dough to swell and to rise as it does that. But it actually permeates all parts of that batch of dough.

Doesn't leave any part of it unaffected. That's what he's saying about the kingdom of God. What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

[27 : 35] The emphasis is not on it being very small. Even very small compared to the whole batch of dough into which it was worked.

And the emphasis is on this small measure of yeast becoming so large that it actually affected all parts of the dough and made it change.

It works from inside, you see. It works from inside and then the effect of it is seen gradually outwardly moving out as the dough actually expands with the power of the yeast inside it.

Well, that's the kingdom of God. That's an element or an image of the kingdom of God. When God gets into a person, it doesn't just affect a small part of your being.

It affects every single aspect of your being. When your soul is occupied by the Holy Spirit, it affects how you think. It affects how you see people.

[28 : 42] It affects how you look forward. How you project into the future as far as you can. It affects how you think of your past. It affects how you think of your neighbors. It affects every aspect of your being.

And that's why it's such an incredibly relevant image of the kingdom and the way the kingdom advances and the way things in a person change from the inside out.

Except a man be born again. He cannot see the kingdom of God. Well, the rebirth does not take place out there and then enter into him. Rebirth takes place inside the depth of our soul.

And then it affects the whole person outwardly from that. And that's what our people need. That's what our society needs. That's what our community needs.

God to get into their lives. God to get into their hearts. God to change them from within. So that their whole being is taken over.

[29 : 52] In love and in obedience to God. That's what will transform our society. And that's so far superior to human wisdom and to human logic and to human methods and to political measures and to economic measures.

All the things that were mentioned in prayer. They're important. We're not saying people shouldn't be thinking about that. We're not saying our leaders shouldn't have their minds set on that. They're all hugely important things that affect our lives from day to day.

But what a difference it would make as we heard for our leaders to say, look, this is really so huge. It's beyond our capacity. Pray to God for it.

That's really what we need to hear. And that's what we pray. Our leaders will come to actually say from their own experience of Christ.

So like the woman, so also the seed and also the measure of leaven. The initiative is with God himself.

[30 : 55] He is the one who begins the work, who brings it on, who advances it. Who blesses to that end. Therefore, the kingdom of God is like.

May the Lord bless these thoughts on his word to us. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we do.