

July 28, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2019 David J. Whitcomb

SEED, LEAVEN, AND THE DOOR Luke 13:18-30

Luke speaks about the kingdom of God far more often than any of the other writers of the “Good News” (Matthew, Mark, or John). He mentioned the concept 31 times compared to Matthew’s 5 references, Mark’s 14, and John’s 2 references. However, Matthew uses the synonymous term *kingdom of heaven* 31 times while it appears in none of the other Gospels.

Obviously, the term is important. It was the theme of John’s preaching. He thundered to the religious people who came to satisfy their curiosity, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus began His ministry with the same sermon. *From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matthew 4:17). Early in His work of ministry Jesus told the disciples, “*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose*” (Luke 4:43).

What is the *kingdom of God* that John and Jesus preached about? Obviously, it has to do with repentance of sin. It was evidenced by the miraculous work of Christ. Jesus sent out His preachers with the instruction: “*Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’*” (Luke 10:9). Obvious, too, is that it is something people want to enter. One time a ruler asked him, “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Luke 18:18). The man was wealthy and when Jesus told him to liquidate his wealth, give it to the poor and follow him, the guy changed his mind. Then Jesus described eternal life by saying, “*How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*” (Luke 18:24).

Therefore, we conclude that the kingdom of God is far more than a literal kingdom on earth, a kingdom in which Jesus rules, the restored kingdom of Israel that most of the people in Jesus’ day desired. The kingdom of God has to be a spiritual kingdom first. That is why Jesus explained the kingdom of God in cryptic terms or described it in parables. Jesus told His closest followers, “*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand’*” (Luke 8:10). He taught that people who recognize their spiritual poverty become citizens of this spiritual kingdom. “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (Luke 6:20). Jesus taught Nicodemus, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3).

The kingdom of God is where Jesus Christ the King rules supreme in the hearts of His subjects. His subjects are the people who have confessed their sins, repented, and expressed full dependance on Christ alone to pay the penalty for their sins. The kingdom is made up of people whose sins are forgiven and who enjoy fellowship with God their Creator through Jesus’ work of atonement. Another term that aptly describes the kingdom of God in our day is the Church. Christ the King promised to build His Church which is His kingdom in this age.

That is what the text before is about. Jesus taught Jewish people that the kingdom of God is way bigger than the nation of God’s special people. He taught the sad reality that the literal kingdom of the Jews as a whole rejected the kingdom of God. They didn’t want a spiritual kingdom. They wanted an actual kingdom, but not one in which Jesus was their king. Those poor spiritually blind people illustrate the typical response to the kingdom of God still. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed and leaven in its influence. But the kingdom must be entered through only one door. That door is Jesus Christ. If you reject Him, you can forget about ever entering the kingdom of God. You have destroyed any hope of eternal life when you do not accept Christ as King.

The Influence of God's Kingdom (vv.18-22).

Jesus explained that God's kingdom grows like a mustard seed (vv.18-19). He asked, "*What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?*" (v.18). Another way of stating that question would be to ask, "What does Christ's rule look like?" We know from Scripture teaching that it is divine, God-like in character. Therefore, it is perfectly righteous. But it is not a physical kingdom yet. At this time it is a spiritual kingdom. Taking them all together, we realize that those are all concepts that reside outside the bounds of finite human reasoning.

Therefore, Jesus will explain His kingdom, His rule in people's hearts by comparing it to physical, mundane, ordinary things we see and experience almost daily. These cryptic comparisons must of necessity carry limitations. First, at some point the pictures will break down as we try to draw the comparisons deeper and deeper to the actual work of God. Also, parables about the kingdom are clearly identified as metaphors and similes. They are illustrations and pictures which come with limitations.

Second, the very reason Christ the King explained the nature of His rule in people's hearts with stories is so that unbelievers who reject Him CANNOT grasp the true explanation. In the context of Jesus teaching the parables about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew thirteen, *The disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'* But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see

what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:10-17).

This means that if you know Christ as Savior, if you are taught by the Holy Spirit, you are enjoying a most important privilege of understanding the nature of Christ's kingdom.

In that vein of parables or pictures, Jesus explained that the kingdom of God is like a lodging place for birds. "*It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches" (v.19).* Consider the picture. Luke did not mention that Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds that farmers would plant (though Mark did). Jesus was talking to people who were well aware of the smallness of the mustard seed so it was an unnecessary comment from Luke. Jesus explained that the farmer puts the seed in the ground and waits while life is taking place out of sight in the ground. Eventually the plant breaks through the ground and then, rather quickly, grows into a large plant.

What does all that mean? Jesus taught that the kingdom of God began with the one seed, Jesus of Nazareth, dying and being planted in the ground. In fact, the first seed of the kingdom was one virtually unknown man named Abraham. From Abraham's seed God built a nation. Through that nation, God brought forth the long-promised "Seed of the woman," who would defeat Satan. The "Seed," Jesus Christ, broke out of the ground when He rose from the tomb. The Good News about the salvation He promises, the means for entering the kingdom of God, has grown and grown. From the act of one Man, Jesus, being planted and growing, the truth of the gospel has spread across the entire world. By the end of the 3rd century, the entire civilized Roman empire had witnessed the "Mustard Tree." The Church is that tree that has grown to sweep the world.

We do well to consider a couple of anomalies that sit on the surface of this story. Typically, the farmer sowed the seed in the field not the garden (Matthew 13:31). The idea of planting the seed in the garden, as it is here, might indicate a more controlled environment for the seed.

At any rate, the seed normally grows into a bush, typically about eight feet at the highest, not a tree. Does this promise grow into something unexpected? Did Jesus give us a picture of the "kingdom"

the “church” becoming somewhat of a mutation? Could this be a reference to the corrupted church, that universal organization represented by 4,000 different belief systems worldwide and over 1,000 religious organizations in America that give credence to Christ but deny His divinity and His work of atonement? These might well be possible interpretations in light of the following picture of the one and only “door.”

Another anomaly that fits with the previous question about growth into something unexpected focuses on the birds. What are the birds? In the parable of the sower and seed, the birds represent Satan or evil ones that snatch away the good seed of the gospel (Matthew 13:4,19). So are birds sitting in the branches of an unexpectedly large mustard “tree” a picture of the visible kingdom becoming a lodging place for unrighteous, ungodly teachers and their teaching?

The second picture Jesus gave to explain the kingdom reveals how God’s kingdom permeates like leaven (vv.20-22). Jesus taught that all is leavened. *And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened”* (vv.20-21).

Everyone who heard the story originally and everyone who hears it now is familiar with the properties of leaven. This is yeast. The baker places it in a lump of dough and within time, the entire lump manifests the influence of the leaven as it rises into a nice loaf of bread.

Again we are faced with an apparent conflict. Sometimes leaven is a picture of evil or unrighteousness. The Jews were to remove all leaven from their homes during Passover as a symbol of purification. Also, in a New Testament letters Paul wrote to Gentiles, leaven pictures the influence of sin in a church (1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). In that sense, it is possible that the visible Church will contain a certain amount of evil. That is the same picture we might have had of the birds lodging in the mustard “tree.” While this might be a true characteristic of the church visible, it is not the characteristic of the true Body of Christ.

More accurately, Jesus used this picture to teach about the righteous influence of the kingdom of God. The first bit of leaven was Jesus Christ alone. He influenced a dozen apostles and numerous followers. They took the Good News of the kingdom to Jerusalem,

Judea, Samaria and the far reaches of the civilized world. That righteous leaven influenced thousands of people from the outset of Christ establishing the Church. Today the gospel has circled the globe. With today’s technology, there are few places in the world that have not be influenced by the leaven of the kingdom of God.

Jesus explained how the kingdom of God was like leaven, and then, according to Luke’s account, continued that ministry of “leaven.” Jesus continued to fulfill His promise of teaching everywhere. *He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching* (v.22a). To teach the Good News of the Kingdom was Jesus’ purpose for coming from heaven. He told the critics, *“I speak of what I have seen with my Father”* (John 8:38). *“But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God”* (John 8:40). *“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me”* (John 8:42).

He came to give life. He promised the disciples that is what He would do. The people in Capernaum begged Jesus to stay. But He said, *“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose”* (Luke 4:43).

Jesus continued to press toward fulfillment of the great promise that would open the way into the kingdom of God. While He went on His way teaching the kingdom, He was *journeying toward Jerusalem* (v.22b). At Jerusalem, He would be handed over to wicked rulers. At Jerusalem, He would be tortured and crucified. At Jerusalem, He would be buried. At Jerusalem, He would rise from the dead. At Jerusalem, Jesus would finish the work of providing the payment for our sin.

These pictures that illustrate the unstoppable growth of the kingdom, of the Church Jesus is building, might seem inaccurate to us. Stop and consider the reality that churches all over Europe have dissolved at an alarming rate. Now in America thousands of churches are either without pastors or are filled with old and dying people. Buildings that once housed thriving churches sit empty or are being put to other uses like antique stores and bars.

Someone will argue that the good news is that churches that have been willing to change are actually growing and thriving. It does appear that churches that offer the Hollywood, Broadway type of

entertainment are expanding rapidly. Indeed, but are the people becoming more like Christ or more like their world? The answer is painfully obvious. Too often those churches that draw thousands of people through entertainment preach a very soft and purposely altered gospel of “Jesus takes you just the way you are and He doesn’t expect you to change.” Commonsense concludes where that kind of teaching will end up. Religious organizations that pander the flesh and exalt individuals do not manifest the unstoppable growth of the Church.

Plus there are the undeniable statistics from George Barna and the Pew Research group that reveals that young people under the age of 30 have been abandoning organized religion altogether for the past 10 years at a rate of 75%.

So how do we reply to this dilemma? On the one hand, it is possible to interpret these two stories as pictures of how the true Church grew large and influenced the entire world. At the same time, it is fair to acknowledge that the visible church has grown to be an anomaly, something that God did not desire, but something Satan has twisted and messed up like He does with every other part of God’s creation.

And also, we cannot ignore the fact that the true Church is continuing to grow. Yes, people do leave religious organizations by the thousands. But God continues to open the spiritual eyes of people to see the truth of the gospel and embrace Christ by faith. This continues to happen in America but at a slower pace than in the past. And in some parts of the world, Christ is building His Church at a faster pace than those places had experienced.

In all these cases, the picture Jesus gave stands fast. The kingdom does continue to grow like the mustard seed and influences like the leaven. But again, the caveat that not everyone who shows up at religious services has been changed by the Good News of the Kingdom.

Entrance Into God’s Kingdom (vv.23-30).

In response to someone’s question, Jesus made a shocking statement that many will not enter the kingdom (vv.23-28). He gave a critical challenge that flows from a random question. *And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” (v.23a).* Along

the way to Jerusalem, while Jesus was proclaiming the Kingdom of God, someone from the crowd voiced a question. Remember that probably almost everyone in the crowd was Jewish. Therefore, this particular question was couched in Jewish belief and prejudice.

The Jews believed that only they would be saved (and possibly a few proselyte Gentiles who chose to be baptized into Judaism). In fact, they presumed that all Jews, except for a few especially evil people, would enter the eternal Kingdom of God. So essentially, the question was whether it was true that the comparatively few Jews in the world would be saved.

Jesus challenged this question by responding, *“Strive to enter through the narrow door” (v.24a).* Notice that Jesus never answered the question. Rather, Jesus used the question as a springboard to challenge every person who heard Him. It is still a challenge to every person who hears His Word today. Jesus tells us to *agonize* to enter through the narrow door. The Greek word behind *strive* gives us the English word agony. Did Jesus mean to teach that getting saved is hard work? Absolutely. It is. On one hand, it is absolutely true that no one can gain eternal life by doing righteous works. Salvation is by God’s grace alone through the faith that He grants us to believe the Good News of the kingdom. On the other hand, there is all-out warfare as God draws the sinner along to the point of belief.

On a previous occasion, Jesus described salvation in cryptic terms like this, *“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12).* Taking sinners out of Satan’s realm, cleansing us from sin, and putting us into the family of God is outright spiritual warfare. If you have ever tried to die to self, to crucify the desires of the flesh you know what this war is like.

On the heels of that challenge, Jesus declared the shocking reality, *“For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (vv.23b-24).* *“When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from’” (v.25).* Many will try to enter the kingdom of God (i.e. be saved) but will not be able. Why not? They will try to win God’s favor by good works. They will rely on visions, dreams,

good feelings, human ideas. They refuse to confess their sins, repent of their sins, ask God to forgive their sins through Christ's blood.

Those people will learn too late that the door has been shut eternally. That Jesus will deny the reality of any relationship is the same kind of thing Jesus taught in Matthew 7:21-23. Those people will no doubt be shocked and *will begin to say, "We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets"* (v.26). This is a response from specific people who were alive and interacted with Jesus—the very people He was addressing at the moment. The same idea can be applied to religious people who are very familiar with Bible teaching but never asked Christ to forgive them.

Because the sinners will not enter through the narrow door, the result is an eternal catastrophe. *"But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out"* (vv.27-28). Jesus rightly assesses the religious people as workers of evil. Even their righteous works are like filthy rags in the Lord's sight.

Adding insult to injury, Jesus continued to answer the presumptuous person's question by telling the people that unexpected people will actually enter the kingdom (vv.29-30). Gentiles will recline at the table. *"And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God"* (v.29). This is a reference to Gentiles who will be born again. This is a reference to me and to you if you have confessed your sins to Christ. *Reclining at table* is a perfect picture of fellowship with God.

There will also be some surprises in the kingdom. *"And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last"* (v.30). The Jews were sure that at the very least they would be first in the kingdom. In reality there will be some Gentiles who will be more important in the kingdom of God than some of the Jews.

Every one of us who have entered the kingdom of God, salvation, have come in the same way. We have come through confession of sin, turning from sin, being forgiven of sin against our Creator. We have come through the narrow door, which required intense spiritual warfare as we die to self. The door is most obvious

when it requires saying the same thing about ourselves that God says, and turning away from our beloved selves to live for Christ.

Alistair Begg tells the story of being in Cambridge, Mass. where he was to speak at a convocation of pastors. He rose early to make final preparations for speaking, found a restaurant near Harvard and sitting down observed the people of Cambridge. Some had slept on the street and were just waking, while others were busily on their way to white collar jobs. All in all, he was in a university setting that made him feel insignificant and out of touch.

He happened to spy a young Asian lady reading a book nearby. As he looked closer, he realized she was reading the Bible. So he asked, "I see you are reading the Bible. Are you a Christian?" She replied, "Oh yes. I've found the narrow way." (Quoted by Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word*, "Luke," Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015, 527.)

What a great description of her entrance into the kingdom. Here was a young lady 10,000 miles from home, immersed in a culture that denied Christ or at best tipped their intellectual hat to Him. She was from a Buddhist home in Korea. But in His grace, God drew her away from her false gods, opened her eyes to the truth of His gospel, and brought her into the kingdom. She understood that the door was narrow, the way difficult, and that she was certainly in the minority. All of us who have come into the kingdom of God are just as much the minority. But God knows us and cares for us.