

The Kingdom Of God

Luke 13:18-35

Pastor John Miller

The title of my sermon is taken from verse 18 of our text. It says, “Then He...” that is, “Jesus” “...said, ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’” Notice the question mark. “And to what shall I compare it?” The doctrine of the kingdom of God is humongous. There’s no way I can cover every facet of the kingdom of God. But I want to explain what it means when I use the term “kingdom of God.” And I want to break it down to three, simple categories.

But before I do that, let me give you a foundational truth. Very simply, the kingdom of God is God’s rule. God rules in the heavens, and He does whatever He wills. God is sovereign. The Bible is clear that God is sovereign. So God is reigning in heaven; that’s His kingdom.

Now the kingdom of God is broken into three categories. In Jesus’ earthly ministry in His first Advent when He came into the world, He brought the kingdom of God. He said, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Luke 17:21 says, “The kingdom of God is within you.” That’s a bad translation.

New agers like that verse so much, because it says that “The kingdom of God is within you.” But that’s not what the text actually is saying. Jesus brought the kingdom of God among them. He proved it by healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and preaching the Gospel. John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles came preaching the Gospel of the kingdom. So Jesus brought the kingdom at His first coming or Advent.

The second category of the kingdom of God is simply God’s rule in believer’s hearts right now. If you’re a Christian, you’ve been born again; that’s what makes you a Christian. The theological term is “regenerated.” It simply means you’ve been given new life; you were dead in sin, and then you were quickened and given new life. As you repented and believed in Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God gave you new life, and you were born again. So that means you’re living in the kingdom.

Matthew 5, 6 and 7, known as the Sermon on the Mount, records the kingdom-living of the children of God. We, as God’s people, are living in the kingdom of God right now.

The third category—and it’s important we don’t miss this—is the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth when the King, Jesus Christ, returns in His Second Coming. And I believe in a premillennial coming of Christ; Jesus Christ will literally, visibly, bodily, gloriously come back in His Second Coming or second Advent. He will reign on the earth as King for 1,000 years. It’s known as “the millennium.” That period will flow into the eternal state. For that 1,000 years, Satan will be bound and Christ will reign on the earth.

Won’t that be an awesome time! We long for that day. And Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). So we’re praying

for His kingdom to come and His will to be done.

the fact that Christ's first Advent brought the kingdom, God's rule in the hearts of His people, living in the kingdom and Christ's Second Coming.

The kingdom of God is also referred to in Matthew 13:44 as "the kingdom of heaven." So wherever you read of the kingdom of heaven, it's not different; it's synonymous with the kingdom of God. That creates confusion, so people think that the two are different. They're not; they're both God's rule in these three categories.

Now I want to talk about the kingdom of God in the three divisions of our text. The first division is expansion of the kingdom of God, verses 18-21; the second division is the entrance into the kingdom, verses 22-30; and the third division is the rejection of the kingdom, verses 31-35.

In this first division, we see the expansion or the growth of the kingdom. It starts very small and it will expand and grow during what's called "the inner Advent age" or the period we live in now, which is the church age.

Starting with verse 18, it says, "Then He said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.'" Then He gave a second parable. "And again He said, 'To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven...' or "yeast" "...which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."

In verse 18, it says, "Then He said." That is a reference to Jesus Christ. When did Jesus say these things? Last time in Luke we saw that Jesus was in the synagogue with the woman who had the bent-over infirmity and was delivered from her demonic, Satanic sickness. The kingdom of God and the power of God was evident there. But the Jewish, religious leaders were angry and protested, while the people rejoiced and worshipped the Lord for the power of God demonstrated by Jesus.

So all that flows right into this teaching of Christ in our text. Now Jesus will be speaking of the kingdom of God—what it's like and what it resembles, so He'll explain it. Jesus will be teaching us on the topic of the kingdom of God.

In our text, there are two parables: the parable of the mustard seed, in verses 18-19, and the parable of the leaven, in verses 20-21. There are two, other parallel accounts of these parables in the Gospels: Matthew 13, which is known as "the kingdom parables of the mystery of the kingdom"; and Mark 4. These are parallel accounts with Luke 13.

There are two explanations, understandings or interpretations of these parables. So we can't be sure or be dogmatic about which one is the right one. Why? Because in Luke, Jesus does not explain the parables. When Jesus gives a parable and explains it, it's easy; He knows what He's talking about! But when there is no explanation, we have to try to compare Scripture with

Scripture to understand what's going on.

So there are two, prominent views of this parable of the mustard seed, and the problem is that they're both Biblical—at least to some degree—and both are applicable to this text. Let me mention them.

The first view is a picture of the church starting as small as a mustard seed. In the other Gospel records, the emphasis is on how small the mustard seed is. Critics of the Bible say that the Bible is in error or is unscientific, because it says that a mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds. But when the Scripture says that, it is using a word that is to be used in comparison to the size of other seeds that are not herbs. The mustard seed is the smallest herb seed used in their gardens—not to mention the fact that it is the smallest seed they were aware of at this time. So it's not unscientific; it's just understanding in context what Jesus meant by the mustard seed being the smallest herb that they put in their gardens.

the seed is a picture of the Word of God and the kingdom of God being planted in the world, and it grows into a large tree or a large church. The mustard seed would grow into a kind of tree-bush that would be 10 to 15 feet tall, and birds could lodge in its branches.

So they believed it was the kingdom of God—rightfully so—and that this tree would grow and basically become very strong and its braches spread out wide. The birds would represent nations and peoples coming together under the shelter of Christianity as it spread throughout the world. The same with the leaven in the second parable; it was placed as yeast into the bread, and it would grow and multiply until it filled the earth as the church does.

So it is said that this parable is talking about the growth of Christianity or the kingdom of God, which starts very small and grows very large.

You say, "Okay, that's great, but what's the other view?"

This second view is the view that I lean toward, because I think it's more correct. That's because when you study the parallel passages of this parable in Matthew and Mark, Jesus explains some of the elements of the parable, which sheds some light on how to interpret it.

In Matthew's Gospel in the parable of the mustard seed, the birds, I believe, represent evil. The tree represents the church or the kingdom of God growing large, but the false teachers, false systems, false understanding of the Gospel come into the church and pollute the church.

In Matthew 13, there are several parables. There are the parables of the sower and the seed, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven in the meal, the pearl of great price and the treasure sold to buy the field. In the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus said, in Mark 4:13, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

When the sower went out to sow the seed, which is the Word of God, the first soil was hard and trodden down, so the seed lay on top of the soil. Then the birds flying overhead swooped down

and stole the seed. It did not take root in the hearts of those who heard the Word of God. The birds represent evil; they represent Satan.

In the mustard-seed parable, the birds possibly represent evil or sin entering into the church. And that is true, as we study Scripture and church history.

In the parable of the leaven, what is the leaven? Leaven in the Bible is symbolic of evil. You would be hard-pressed to show it represents anything else but evil in the Bible. Everywhere leaven is mentioned in the Bible, it has an evil connotation. Even in a meal offering, it is evil and represents our sin when we offer things to God.

So in leaven it represents evil and in the sower and the seed, the birds represent evil. As you study the Bible, it teaches that in this period between Christ's first Advent and Christ's second Advent, the church will grow and fill the earth, but there will be false teachers and false systems that come into the church. One of the greatest signs of the end of time is last-days apostasy or the turning away from "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

My belief is that the birds represent evil coming into the church, which starts small and grows. We're not Christianizing the world. We're not bringing back a Christian culture or society. Our nation is not becoming a Christian nation in that sense; we're not bringing the kingdom of God to America. It will get darker and darker.

You say, "Well, that's a real pessimistic view!" It's always darkest just before the dawn. And I believe Jesus Christ is coming back. He, and He alone, is our hope. Our hope is not in man or in government or in bombs; our hope is in Jesus Christ.

"My hope is built on nothing less

Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;

I dare not trust the sweetest frame,

But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand: All other ground is sinking sand."

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, we have the evil among the true believers. It is so important. And the leaven, I believe, is the evil entering into the church.

In Acts 20, Paul meets with a group of pastors called elders in Ephesus along the shore in Miletus. In verse 29, he says, "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

We need to be Biblically literate, grounded in the Word and discerning the times. The church

will grow, but we're not going to Christianize the world.

Out of this parable, some try to support a postmillennial view, a view which almost died out after World War II. Today in the news we're talking about World War III. The postmillennial view of the return of Christ is that Jesus comes back at the end of the 1,000 years.

Tell me how you can have the kingdom on earth without the king? The kingdom was promised to David in the Old Testament. It's called the Davidic Covenant. On David's throne, the Messiah would reign. So if the king isn't here, you have no kingdom.

Then others hold an a-millennial view. That means there is no literal Second Coming of Christ to establish His kingdom. It's happening now; we're in the kingdom, and we're going to Christianize the world. Sometimes it's tied into Christian nationalism, and there are different categories of it.

But the idea that we can Christianize and influence the world, push back evil, everyone in the world will turn to Christ and we'll have a wonderful society to live in on earth—I don't think so! The Bible says that in the last days, "Evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13).

So our hope is in Jesus Christ and we look for Him to come. I believe in a premillennial return of Christ. This is not the rapture; this is the Second Coming before the 1,000-year reign. In Revelation 19, we have the Second Coming. In Revelation 20, Satan is bound for 1,000 years, and Christ reigns on the earth.

the kingdom will start small and will grow, but we need to be discerning, because there are false teachers, and evil has entered into the church.

Christ is our blessed hope, and we need to be grounded and growing and "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

The second division of our text, which is very long, is the entrance into the kingdom, in verses 22-30. "And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem." These "cities and villages" are most likely somewhere in the north around Galilee. Luke's writing here is not chronological; it's topical. He takes stories from different chronological settings and places them topically together here in chapter 13.

So Jesus is teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. This is the last travel note since the first one in Luke 9:51. That verse said that Jesus "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem." He knew the time was short, He knew that when He got to Jerusalem, He would soon be crucified and rise from the dead. He says here that He would be "perfected," in verse 32. So He's on His way teaching and preaching the kingdom of God.

Here is the setting, in verse 23. "Then one said to Him, 'Lord, are there few who are saved?'" Notice the question. The last division started with two questions: "What is the kingdom of God

like? And to what shall I compare it?" And now we have another question. Jesus didn't answer them "Yes" or "No"; He gives us a long answer about the need to strive to enter into the kingdom.

In the Jewish mind of Jesus' time, they believed that only Jews would go to heaven. They believed that Abraham stood at the gate of heaven turning Gentiles away and wouldn't let them in. But if you proselytized and became Jewish, you had a chance to go to heaven. And they also believed that Gentiles were only created by God to fuel the fires of hell. That's a nice thought! But we'll see that Gentiles "will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11). And many of us Gentiles are witnesses to that; God saved us by His grace. Paul said that we are like wild olive branches that are grafted in (Romans 11:24). We become partakers of the root and the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ephesians 3:6).

So this man's question basically expected Jesus to answer that only the Jews, only the nation of Israel, would enter into heaven. But Jesus doesn't give him a direct answer to his question. "And He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'" The question was, "Are there few who are saved?" Basically Jesus was saying that wasn't the question; rather they were to strive to enter in.

From the word "strive" we get our word "agonize." It's used of an athlete straining in running a race. So they were to agonize or strive to enter through the narrow gate, because many won't be able to enter in.

Jesus continues, "When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door...." Notice verse 24 says "narrow gate" and here it refers to a "door" that is shut. "...and you begin to stand outside..." you don't get in "...and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' 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, and yourselves thrust out."

In verse 29, He begins to talk about how many will be saved. He's going to explain that a lot of Gentiles from all over the world will be saved, because the Gospel is universal. "They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down..." meaning they're going to be feasting "...in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."

These are challenging verses to know what Jesus is talking about. But basically He says you must strive to enter through the narrow gate.

In the Middle East during this time, wealthy people especially would have a large courtyard at the front of their house with a wide, two-piece gate that would be open during the day for

wagons to bring food and supplies and for animals to enter the courtyard. Then there would be a narrower gate or door individuals would pass through that would be unlocked during the day for them. At night the narrower door would be locked by the Master, and you couldn't get in. So Jesus said you had to strive to enter that narrow gate.

We know that the Bible teaches there is only one way to get to heaven. That one way is through Jesus Christ. In John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." If you want to get to heaven, you can't go around the Cross. You can't be good enough to get to heaven. You can't be religious enough to get to heaven. You must trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. If you reject that, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God. So strive to believe in Jesus, trust in Him, enter the kingdom and be saved.

The Master will rise up and shut the door, verse 25. And you will say, "'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.'"

It's interesting that their defense is their condemnation. Knowledge brings responsibility. Yes; Jesus was in their presence. Yes; they ate and drank with Him. But because of that they should have repented and believed.

It's like saying, "But I went to church!" People will scream on the day of judgment, "I went to Revival Christian Fellowship! Not just any church. I listened to John Miller preach every week. That should get me to heaven!" No, it won't. You must put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ; not in man, not in religion, not in the church.

Verse 27, "But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'" And then verse 28 is one of the sobering verses of the Bible: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth..." that's not good "...when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out." What a sad day!

So the kingdom of God had come with the King, they would not believe, they would not repent and put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Then we see that the Gentiles would be brought into the church. This is the church age. "They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God." This shows the universal aspect of the Gospel. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). And Acts 1:8 says, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." It starts small and then spreads and includes all the Gentiles of the whole world.

Verse 30, "And indeed there are last who will be first..." referring to the Gentiles and wicked sinners "...and there are first who will be last," referring to the religious, self-righteous Jews.

There are going to be a lot of surprises when we get to heaven. People will be shocked to see you there. "What are you doing here?! How did you get here?!" By the grace and mercy of God. All praise and glory be to God!

The same is true today. There are some who think they're first, putting their trust in their religion, in their race, in their own creeds, in their own conduct, in rites and rituals—they're going to be last. And there are those the world looks at as sinners, but they've repented and believe in Jesus Christ—they've entered the kingdom.

By the way, the door shuts when you die. The statistics on death are quite impressive: 10 out of 10 people living will die. But when you die, the door shuts; your opportunity is over. So strive to enter that narrow gate now. Come into the kingdom. Don't be left on the outside. Don't be where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." It's so important.

The third and last division of our text is the rejection of the kingdom, verses 31-35. While Jesus was teaching here on the kingdom, "On that very day some Pharisees came..." probably two or three, but we don't know their names or where it took place; probably somewhere near Galilee "...saying to Him, 'Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You.'" This Herod is known as Herod Antipas. He is the Herod who killed John the Baptist. And now they're saying to Jesus, "You'd better get out of town! Herod's going to get You and kill You!"

Think about that. They're telling Jesus, the Son of God, to run for His life, to freak out, because Herod's trying to kill Him! Do you think Jesus will say, "Oh, no! Where do I go? This is terrible!" No, I don't think so.

I like the way Jesus responds. "And He said to them, 'Go, tell that fox....'" The fox spoke of being crafty and devious. "...Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow..." which is evidence that the kingdom of God was there "...and the third day..." The phrase "the third day" is a figure of speech meaning "quickly" or "soon." He says, "...I shall be perfected." That means He'll go to the Cross, suffer and die, be raised from the dead, ascend back into heaven and the kingdom will spread over the earth.

Verse 33, "Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem." Jerusalem had a monopoly on killing prophets. Basically Jesus was saying, "I'm not going to die; I'm not in Jerusalem now."

It could be that the motive of the Pharisees in telling Jesus this is that they just wanted to get rid of Him from the Galilee area and force Him down to Judea where Jerusalem was, knowing that when He got there, He probably would be arrested by the Jews and brought to trial. And that is what did happen.

But Jesus is on a divine timetable, on a divine mission. He is in the will of God the Father doing what He was sent into the world to do. So He doesn't need to freak out. He didn't panic. No; He said, "I'm going to do this today, then do that tomorrow and the third day I'm going to 'be perfected.' I'm casting out demons, healing the sick and preaching the kingdom." The

paraphrase is, "Everything's cool. I'm in the will of God, fulfilling the plan and purpose of God." So Jesus didn't deviate from that plan. "God called me. I'm heading to Jerusalem. I'm going to be crucified. That's the plan."

I believe we can have that same, settled assurance that if we are God's people, doing God's work, in God's way, in God's will, we are indestructible. We are in His hands. And our times are in His hands. No matter what the doctors say, no matter what the diagnosis is, no matter what is happening around you, if you are a child of God in the will of God doing the work of God for the glory of God, you are indestructible. So you don't need to fear; it's God's time when He decides to take you home. You can rest and trust in that.

Years ago I was actually kidnapped and carjacked with two other pastors in Los Angeles. We were going to fly to Australia. When we went outside the airport to get something to eat, there were two guys with guns who abducted us, got us in the car, threatened to kill us and held us for a couple of hours with guns to our heads. But I can't tell you the peace that filled my heart and soul in that car, because I knew, Lord, we're going to preach the Gospel, we belong to You, we're Your children, You're in control. I just rested in that. So I started preaching to the guy who had a gun to the back of my head.

He said, "My Mom's a Christian! She's been telling me this for years."

I said, "That's why you kidnapped me! It's because your Mom's been praying that you hear the Gospel, so you kidnapped pastors." They went through our bags and were pulling out Bibles.

"What's this? Bibles."

"Yes; we're preachers. Repent and turn to Jesus!" We started preaching to them.

Obviously they didn't kill us. And I had such a sense that I'm His child; I belong to God. I'm doing His will and His work. I thought, If this is the way He wants me to go, so be it. I'm ready to go. But if not, we're indestructible!

When we met with the LAPD that night, they were rolling their eyes. "Oh, I can't believe they didn't kill you guys!" And we were able to share the Gospel with the police. We belong to God; we're the children of God. God watches over us.

I like the fact that Jesus didn't freak out, He didn't change His plans, He didn't run for the hills. Rather He said that He must walk today and tomorrow and the day following. "It cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem."

So rest in the fact that God is in control; our times are in His hands.

The closing lamentation is in verse 34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." What a beautiful picture! Here Jesus

says He is like a mother hen bringing her brood under her wings to protect them from the ravenous hawks. He said, "But you were not willing! See! Your house..." which is the nation of Israel "...is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

This is a direct quote from Psalm 118:26-27. "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" was used at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when Jesus rode in on a donkey. But it is also a reference to His Second Coming when the nation of Israel sees Him, "whom they pierced" (Zechariah 12:10), and they realize they rejected their Messiah and mourn for Him.

In Romans 9, 10 and 11, there is God's election of Israel, God's rejection of Israel and God's future restoration of Israel. With what is going on in the world today, we need to understand Israel's role in prophecy in relation to the church and the world. Check out our website for my six weeks of sermons on God's purpose and plan for Israel.

Jesus said to them, "Your house is left to you desolate." In 70AD, Titus and the Roman armies came into Jerusalem and razed it to the ground. They destroyed Jerusalem and killed several million Jews. That was the beginning of the diaspora. For 2,000 years, the Jews had no homeland. Then on May 14, 1948, they returned to their land, and a nation was born.

I realize they returned in unbelief, they are not all Christians, but God has a purpose and a plan. It is no accident that Israel is in the news today. They are on God's time clock prophetically, and He has a purpose and a plan for Israel, their future restoration, which is clearly seen in Romans 11. Blindness has only happened in part to the nation of Israel; partial and temporary "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25-26), which will be at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. At the end of verse 35 where it says, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" it is a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

This is our blessed hope! The Bible says that we are "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).