

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED

Luke 13:18-35

Key Verse: 13:19

“It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.”

Today we come back to Luke’s Gospel study after seven weeks. The last lesson we studied was, “Jesus Heals A Crippled Woman.” When Jesus was told about the tragic deaths of some men in Galilee he said, “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (13:3,5). All men are destined to die; it is inevitable. But physical death is not so serious. After death, there is God’s judgment (Heb 9:27). This is serious. So Jesus urges us to repent of our sins. Through repentance and faith in Jesus we obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in the kingdom of God. After urging repentance, Jesus healed a woman who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. Jesus revealed God’s concern for one helpless person and God’s power and love to heal and restore people. This woman straightened up and praised God and began a new life as a daughter of God. Therefore, we should never remain in fatalistic speculation about our lives or the lives of others. We must come to Jesus who forgives and heals and gives new life. May God help us to do so.

In today’s passage Jesus teaches what the kingdom of God is like. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed that grows into a tree and to yeast that works through a batch of dough. Through these parables, we can learn the character of the kingdom of God. Jesus also teaches us how to enter the kingdom of God. This is a most important teaching for us to understand and apply. Finally, Jesus laments over the city of Jerusalem. May God help us to know the heart and mind of Jesus.

First, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (18-19).

Look at verses 18-19. “Then Jesus asked, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.’” The kingdom of God is ever marvelous and full of mystery, especially in its way of working in this world. To help mundane men open their eyes and see its beauty and glory, Jesus was ever telling simple and pointed parables to express its reality and power in a way that we could understand. Perhaps, at this time, Jesus wanted to encourage those who had trusted in him after seeing the marvelous healing of the crippled woman. Jesus had clearly revealed the power and love of the kingdom of God. His opponents were humiliated while ordinary people were delighted (17). This manifestation of divine power and God’s victory gave a life-giving influence to all people. But Jesus knew that winning one battle would not end the war. The enemies of God would manufacture lies to try to rob the event of its meaning. The devil would do all his best to obscure the coming of the kingdom of God to keep men in the darkness. So Jesus taught his people how to see the kingdom of God through small signs and small beginnings. Jesus wants his people to live by faith, not by sight (2Co 5:7). Jesus wanted them to see God’s work, such as the healing of the crippled woman, with the eyes of faith. It was like the tip of an iceberg. The visible evidence is real, but it reveals a much deeper and broader spiritual reality that is unseen. Jesus wants his people to have a sense of final victory and to know that the kingdom of God is moving forward, irresistible, to a glorious end, in which God will be all in all (1Co 15:28).

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree. Most of us are not so familiar with mustard seeds. We know about sesame seeds that are found on the buns of Big Macs. Mustard seeds are similar to sesame seeds, except smaller and black in color. They say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed. But it grows into a big tree. The key point here is that it grows from the smallest seed into a big tree. Likewise, the kingdom of God grows from small beginnings to vast dimensions. We can see this most clearly in the baby Jesus in the manger (2:7). He looked small and helpless and totally vulnerable. He was ignored by the world; there was no room for him in the inn. But the baby Jesus had the life of God in him. In Luke 1:32-33 the angel said to Mary, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” He grew from a small baby until he fulfilled the mission of the promised Messiah. Through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, he destroyed the power of sin and death, defeated the enemy Satan, and restored God’s reign in human hearts. Beginning in baby Jesus, the kingdom of God spread all over the world.

Thus, the kingdom of God grows from small beginnings into a mighty movement that transforms people, communities, nations and even the whole world. Jesus' disciples were all men of obvious human weaknesses. But Jesus saw them with great hope and planted in their hearts the word of God. As this word of God grew in them, it transformed them into spiritual giants who changed the course of world history. For example, Peter was a man of human faithfulness and natural leadership. But he was not so intellectual and not spiritual at all. He seemed to be the last person who could be a spiritual leader for the early church. But Jesus, from the beginning, put great hope on him to be a rock for the early church (Jn 1:42; Mt 16:18). Jesus patiently planted the word of God in his heart and revealed spiritual reality to him (Jn 6:68,69). Peter was the first to confess that Jesus is the Christ of God (Lk 9:20). But Peter didn't accept the suffering, death and resurrection of the Christ. He preferred an easygoing life and human glory in the world (Lk 9:33). Jesus patiently struggled with him to the end, even to the night he was arrested and brought to trial. At last, Peter realized that Jesus was God. He repented with tears and accepted Jesus' death and resurrection personally. After Jesus' ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the words of God that Jesus had planted in Peter began to gain power as the source of truth and grace with which he could serve the early church. At last, Peter became a good shepherd like Jesus who laid down his life for the sheep. Now we can see that Peter's spiritual influence has reached many corners of the world. Numerous people in many nations have the name Peter, Pedro or Pierre, and even some women have the name Petra or Petrina.

We must know that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. From a small beginning it grows to be a big tree. We must see the small beginnings of the kingdom of God with great hope and vision. We must nurture the fragile new life that sprouts in one person's heart with great care. When we see Chicago UBF it looks like a big tree. But it has grown from small beginnings, as shepherds invested their time and labor to teach the Bible one-to-one to their sheep. For example, there was a young Filipino student at UIC. His dream was to be a third-class rock musician. He was easy-going and pleasure-seeking. But through one-to-one Bible study he learned the grace of Jesus who died for his sins and rose again to give him eternal life. He wanted to follow Jesus. But he hated the thought of taking up his cross. When his shepherd counseled him to take up his cross and follow Jesus, he prayed for his shepherd to be deported. Then Dr. Samuel Lee helped him to play the cello. He learned how to practice until his fingers began to bleed. As a result, he not only became a wonderful cellist, but he also learned the principle of taking up the cross of mission. Now he is the most fruitful coworker for Dr. Ben Toh. While Dr. Ben was in the Philippines for their Christmas worship service, Shepherd Rhoel fought a good fight for registration and Dr. Ben's fellowship brought many more than last year. These kinds of stories are endless in Chicago UBF.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It seems small in the beginning, but it grows into a big tree. Likewise, one-to-one Bible study seems small at first. But when the word of God is planted in one person's heart, it grows to change that person into a spiritual giant and a source of blessing for others. Therefore, one-to-one Bible teaching is the greatest and most meaningful labor for anyone. May God help each of us to teach the Bible one-to-one to students with faith and hope. The kingdom of God will transform people until America becomes a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Second, the kingdom of God is like yeast (20-21).

Look at verses 20-21. "Again he asked, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.'" This parable seems similar to the first. But the emphasis is slightly different. The parable of the mustard seed explains how the kingdom of God grows from the smallest beginning to a huge size. The parable of the yeast shows how the kingdom of God spreads. It is interesting that in the first parable the catalyst was a man. But in this parable the catalyst is a woman. Perhaps men are supposed to grow from little babies into giant oak trees and women are supposed to influence the whole world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How, then, is the kingdom of God like yeast?

As we know, yeast is the element that is mixed with flour dough to make bread rise. The striking characteristic of yeast is that it spreads rapidly until it completely permeates a large batch of dough. In the same way, the influence of the kingdom of God spreads rapidly to permeate a society or a nation. Here, many of us must repent of our unbelief. Many of us think that only bad influence spreads rapidly and thoroughly because it appeals to the sinful nature. But according to Jesus' teaching, the spiritual influence of the kingdom of God is like yeast that works its way through the whole batch of dough. The influence of the kingdom of God spreads irresistibly until it permeates an entire community or even a nation.

After the Israelites left Egypt, they came to the shore of the Red Sea. Suddenly, they heard a thunderous sound and saw that Pharaoh and all his charioteers were coming after them. They panicked and began to complain bitterly to Moses. Then Moses stood up and said, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Ex 14:13,14). Through these words the power of God moved the hearts of the people of Israel and drove out their fear. They gained the courage to obey God's leading and pass through the Red Sea by faith. One person's spiritual influence of faith turned an atmosphere of defeat into an atmosphere of courage that won the victory.

These days we hear how God is working among high school students. There may be many reasons. But we cannot overlook one person whom God has been using, Shepherd James Kim Jr. During his undergraduate study at the University of Michigan, he enjoyed freedom to do whatever he wanted to do and did some things that he is now ashamed of. But during the last Easter Bible Conference, he repented his sins and accepted Jesus personally. He really put his trust and faith in Jesus. Since then, he has learned to study the Bible from his heart and has been developing a fervent prayer life. Through this one person's change many began to take the kingdom of God seriously. In this way, through several leaders God is working mightily among high school students. We can see the kingdom of God spreading at Whitney Young High School, Lane Tech High School, Lincoln Park High School and Northside High School. This past week more than forty high school students gathered for a New Year's key verse symposium. According to Missionary David Choi, their testimonies were full of sincere repentance and decisions of faith to serve God as one-to-one Bible teachers. May God raise all of them to be better missionaries and shepherds than their parents and change our nation America through them.

Third, make every effort to enter through the narrow door (22-30).

Look at verse 22. "Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem." Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die for the sin of the world. The cross must have weighed heavy on his heart moment by moment. But as he went through the towns and villages on his way, he was not overwhelmed with the burden. He did not become self-absorbed. He was free to use his time for God and others. He taught the Bible to people one by one in all the towns and villages. Here we must admit that we have no excuse not to teach the Bible, even when we are very busy.

Jesus was so intent in helping people one by one that those around him were amazed. They couldn't understand why he took so much time for each person, even those who were seemingly useless, as though they were the only ones in the universe. Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" Perhaps this man shared a prevailing opinion that all the Israelites would be saved simply because they were Abraham's descendants and all the Gentiles would be condemned simply because they were not Abraham's descendants. How did Jesus answer? He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." Jesus never encouraged idle speculation. Instead, he challenged the questioner to make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Simply speaking, to make every effort meant that people must repent of their sins and accept Jesus as their Savior and King with a decision of commitment. Timing was crucial. They must do so when they had the opportunity. Jesus continued, "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers.'" Human fellowship with Jesus and his people is no guarantee of salvation. Only those who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will be saved.

Jesus was very clear that some would spend eternity in complete anguish as they watched the joyful celebration in the kingdom of God. Jesus knew that many who had heard him preach or spent time eating with him would not enter the kingdom of God because they did not repent and believe. At the same time, many Gentiles would come from all directions to take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God. Perhaps Jesus pictured what is written in Revelation 5:9,10. It says, "And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.'" We could see this picture clearly through the Christmas worship service dancing when peoples from many nations accepted Jesus as their Savior King and began to worship and serve him. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a big tree. But it is not easily obtained. We must make every effort to enter through the narrow door. We must make

every effort to write a Bible testimony regularly each week, spending enough time to really digest the Bible passage. We must make every effort until we repent and accept one word of God in our hearts.

Fourth, Jesus laments over Jerusalem (31-35).

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you." There is no reason to doubt the intention of the Pharisees. They seem to be sincere in warning Jesus of imminent danger. The threat to Jesus was real. But Jesus was not afraid. Look at verses 32-33. "He replied, 'Go tell that fox, "I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'" In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!'" Jesus knew that he must die in Jerusalem as the Lamb of God; it was God's will. Jesus would finish this mission and rise again on the third day. There was no deviation in Jesus.

Look at verses 34-35. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" It was a great irony that the holy city Jerusalem became the city most hostile to God. It was there that the prophets had been killed. It was there that the Messiah would be rejected and crucified as a criminal. The consequence would be terrible destruction of the city and severe punishment of its residents. Nevertheless, Jesus had hope that someday they would accept him as the Messiah and be saved. Here we learn that God's heart is full of tears for the lost. How Jesus weeps for the unsaved in America, Japan and all nations! May God teach us the heart of Christ.

In this passage we learn that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows to become a great tree. When one word of God is in our hearts and growing, we can become truly great servants of God. The kingdom of God spreads like yeast to each of our campuses and even throughout America and the world. May God help us to make every effort to have one word of God in our hearts. May God help us to grow to maturity as shepherds like our Lord Jesus Christ.