

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD LIKE?

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 perched in its branches.”

In today’s passage, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed that grows into a big tree. Let us think about what that means to us. The next question to ask is how to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus says we must make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Finally, Jesus laments over the city of Jerusalem. May God help us to meditate on his words until the morning star rises in our hearts!

I. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED (18-21)

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 perched in its branches.”* The kingdom of God is our eternal home. But it is mysterious and abstract to us. So Jesus used parables to help us understand the character of the kingdom of God.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a tree. What does this mean? We are familiar with the mustard sauce. We put it on our hotdogs. But we haven’t actually seen the mustard seed. From pictures posted online, we know that a mustard seed is small. It is proverbially the smallest seed of all seeds (Mt 13:32). Once planted in the garden however, it grows into a big tree. Birds can perch in its branches. The point is that the mustard seed is small but it has life in it, and it can grow into a huge tree. Likewise, the kingdom of God begins small but grows into vast dimensions, because it has life in it. The best example can be found in Jesus. Jesus was born as a tiny baby in an animal barn. Jesus is King of kings, but he was not born in Caesar’s palace. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger (Lk 2:7). He looked small and helpless. His birth was ignored by the world. There was no room for him in the inn. There was no CNN or FoxNews there to cover the news. But the baby Jesus had the life of God in him. John said of Jesus, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (Jn 1:4). The angel said of Jesus: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2:11). Jesus was a tiny baby. But his birth was a beginning of something big for you and me. His ministry began very small with twelve ordinary men following him. But his life was the life of the Messiah. He served sinners. Finally he died on the cross to take away the sin of the world. And God raised him up from the dead, destroying the power of sin and death. He opened the door to the kingdom of God for mankind, including you and me. The kingdom of God has been growing ever since in the hearts of men and women of faith throughout history.

The kingdom of God begins to grow when a person accepts Jesus in his or her heart. Such a small decision can transform people, communities, and even nations. The Christian church began when a small group of men and women prayed together to obey

the word of Christ. It looked small and insignificant. The church met in a house, not in an impressive building. No one ever imagined that this tiny church would grow into a worldwide community. But the church grew throughout history so that many troubled souls could come and find refuge in it.

This character of the kingdom of God applies not only to church but also to individuals. For example, Peter used to be a fisherman with a big mouth. He was impulsive and emotional. 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 saw his potential. He put great hope in Peter to be the rock foundation for the early church (Jn 1:42; Mt 16:18). Jesus patiently planted the word of eternal life in his heart (Jn 6:68-69). Peter was the first to confess that Jesus is the Christ (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 was patient with him to the end, even to the night he was arrested and tried. After denying Jesus three times, Peter repented with tears and accepted Jesus' death and resurrection personally. And upon the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter was a changed man. The words of God that Jesus had planted in him began to gain power in him. Peter became a good shepherd like Jesus who laid down his life for the sheep. Peter's spiritual influence has been great throughout history and still is today.

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 new life that sprouts in one person's heart with great care. We should not ignore the small beginning. For example, our one-to-one Bible study with a student seems small. But when the word of God is planted in a person's heart, it grows to change that person into a great man or woman of God who can be a source of blessing to many others. God had his one-to-one Bible study with Abraham for a long time until he grew to be a great man of God. Let us remember Jesus' teaching and let us not ignore small spiritual signs that God gives us. Are you moved by the word of God during your Bible study? Does the Holy Spirit move your heart as you listen to a message or while you pray? Don't brush it off! Cherish it and nurture it so that the mustard seed faith may grow in you, until you become an influential servant of God!

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 about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."* This parable seems similar to the first. But the emphasis is different. The parable of the mustard seed explains how the kingdom of God grows from the smallest seed to a huge tree. The parable of the yeast shows how the kingdom of God spreads. Yeast is a living organism that is used in making bread. This single-celled fungi reproduces rapidly in sugar, a process that is called fermentation. 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. Yeast in the New Testament is usually associated with corruption and bad influence. But here Jesus compares the kingdom of God to yeast. Yeast has the power to work from inside. Bad influence spreads rapidly and thoroughly

because it appeals to the sinful nature. Jesus teaches us that good influence is also like yeast that works its way through the whole batch of dough. The spiritual influence of a person can spread until it permeates an entire community.

Before conquering the promise land, Moses sent twelve spies to explore the land. When they returned, ten of them gave a report that began with, “We have some good news and some bad news.” They said that the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey. They brought back a cluster of grapes so big that two of them had to carry it on a pole. However, their advice was negative. They reported that the people of the land were giants; their cities were well-fortified. They said, “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them. It is impossible to take this land.” They planted fear in the hearts of the Israelites. Their assessment of the situation was accurate from a human point of view. The problem was that they did not take God into account. After all, it was God who had promised to give them the land. Then Caleb silenced the people and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” Caleb and Joshua were the minority in giving a good report. They had faith in God. They saw the same situation through the eyes of God’s promise. They were like yeast. Because of their spiritual influence on the community, the Israelites overcame their fear and conquered the Promised Land. May God help us to be men and women of good influence!

II. 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 heavily on his heart as he traveled toward the city. But he taught the word of God as he went through the towns and villages on his way. He was not overwhelmed by his impending suffering and death. He did not become self-absorbed. He taught the Bible by visiting many towns and villages. Jesus taught the word of God even as his heart was heavy. He had the compassionate heart of a true shepherd. We have no excuse not to teach the Bible, even when we are faced with personal problems. I know a person who had one-to-one Bible study with her student on the morning of her wedding. May God help us to have the compassionate heart of a shepherd!

As Jesus was helping people one by one with the word of God, someone came to him to ask the question, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (23) Perhaps this man shared a prevailing opinion that all the Israelites would be saved simply because they were Abraham’s descendants. Why was Jesus wasting his time by preaching to them? What was 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”* (24).

What does it mean to go through the narrow door and why do we have to make every effort? The narrow door is the way of Christ—the way of the cross. It is the road that our Lord Jesus traveled. Jesus is the gate through which we can enter the kingdom

of God. Jesus says in John 10:9, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” Everyone in this world wants to go through a wide open door. It is a road filled with fun and pleasures. It is a popular way of life. Everyone wants to follow this road. But at the end of this road is a cliff. People would fall off the cliff into hell. Jesus says in Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Now we can see why Jesus challenges us to make every effort to enter through the narrow door. Simply speaking, to make every effort means we repent of our sins and follow Jesus with full commitment. Timing is crucial. We must do so before it is too late. Jesus continues in verses 25-26: “*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.’*” During his ministry on earth, many thousands of people rubbed their shoulders with Jesus. However, human fellowship with Jesus is no guarantee of salvation. Just hanging out with Christians or attending church does not make a person true believer. Only those who have a personal commitment and relationship with Jesus Christ will be saved.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a big tree. The door is open to everyone. But those who don’t know Jesus cannot enter it. Jesus will say, “I don’t know you. Away from me.” We must make every effort to enter through the narrow door. We must make every effort to know Jesus and obey his words. Jesus is the only way to heaven. There is no other way. He is the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through Jesus (Jn 14:6). We must make every effort to repent and accept his words in our hearts so that we may truly know him.

The royal prince of a kingdom visited a prison. He was disappointed because all inmates said to him that they were there even though they were innocent of crime. Then he noticed one prisoner crying silently. “What crime did you commit?” the prince asked him. “I committed many sins in my life,” he answered. “What was the most serious one?” the prince asked again. Wiping away his tears, the prisoner replied, “The most serious sin I committed was not to know Christ personally.” The prince was touched by his answer. He knelt down before the prisoner and confessed, “I am a sinner who didn’t know Christ until now.” He repented his sin right there. He also pardoned the prisoner and appointed him as his personal secretary.

III. “O JERUSALEM, 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” (31). We don’t know why the Pharisees gave him the heads-up. Perhaps they wanted to see his reaction, expecting him to be scared. After all, Herod had John the Baptist killed, offering his severed head on a platter. How did Jesus respond to the warning? Look at verses 32-33. *He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I*

will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" Jesus was not afraid of Herod. He was determined to help the suffering people as their shepherd. He resolutely marched toward Jerusalem where his suffering, death and resurrection awaited him.

Now Jesus was very close to Jerusalem. Perhaps he was on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city. Look at verses 34-35. *"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, and 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.'"* Jesus lamented over the holy city. It was an irony that the city of God became most hostile to God. It was there that many prophets of God had been killed. It was there that the Messiah would be rejected and crucified. Still, 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 people in America, in China and in all nations! May God teach us the heart of Christ!

In today's passage, we learned that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows to be a great tree. When one word of God is planted in our hearts and grows, we can become great servants of God. Let us study the word of God with awesome respect until the morning star rises in our hearts. May God help each of us to make every effort to know Jesus personally and follow him!