

Luke 13:18-35

Mustard seed & leaven: lament over Jerusalem

Being part of a new venture can be an uncertain time. There is an excitement about being part of something new, but perhaps some nervousness that things might not work out as planned. In recent months in the UK, two new political parties have been formed, each claiming to be the start of something new, and carrying a certain excitement amongst their followers. Time will tell if these new groupings will form a major part of the British political landscape or will pass out of the thinking of the public in little more than a single political cycle.

As we continue our studies in Luke's gospel today, we find a not dissimilar uncertainty about the nature of the Kingdom of God amongst the crowds following the Lord Jesus. The passage that we'll think about runs from Luke chapter 13 verse 18, through to the end of the chapter. In it we'll see three main issues addressed.

1. What is the kingdom of God like? (verses 18-22)
2. Are many people saved? (verses 23-30)
3. What exactly was Jesus doing? (verses 31-35)

Let's start by reading verses 18-22, in which the Lord Jesus describes the nature of the kingdom of God.

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. And again He said, To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened. And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.

If you've been following this series of messages on Luke's gospel on Truth for Today you'll be aware that the concept of the *kingdom of God* has cropped up frequently so far in the book. If you want to remind yourself about these references, why not check out the Truth for Today website and look up the previous talks. The Lord encouraged His listeners to seek the kingdom of God first, and above anything else. Since His audience would have been almost entirely Jewish people they would have been familiar with a concept of the kingdom of God. It had been spoken of numerous times in the Old Testament, and most devout Jews would eagerly anticipate God setting up His kingdom. But they were looking for a kingdom to be set up in a display of great power and glory. Perhaps they were looking for a great and mighty ruler to set up an awesome kingdom.

Back in Luke 10, verses 9 and 11, the Lord sends out 70 of His followers and tells them to instruct the people that *The kingdom of God has come near to you*. In Luke 11:20, Jesus argues that the fact that He is casting out demons is evidence that *the kingdom of God has come upon you*. So at least in some sense, the Lord Jesus seems to be saying that the kingdom of God has come. But there certainly wasn't any sign of a visible reign of power and glory. Jesus didn't appear to be a great king ruling over the world.

Perhaps this is what prompts the Lord's question at the start of our verses for today's study. *What is the kingdom of God like?* The Lord wanted to teach His hearers that their concept of kingdom wasn't right, or at least, not completely right. So He uses two parables to get this across. The two parables are very short and have similar meanings, and have occurred already in the Lord's ministry as part of seven parables describing the kingdom of heaven recorded in Matthew 13.

The Lord says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, something very small that grows into something very big. And the kingdom of God is like leaven, something small and invisible that, once added to bread mix, spreads through the dough and causes it to rise and expand. Perhaps there's not a lot of difference between the meanings of these parables. Maybe the mustard seed parable might show the visible outward growth of God's kingdom, whilst the leaven shows the invisible inward influence. God's kingdom certainly appeared to be small and insignificant in the days of the Lord Jesus. Twelve close disciples, some women who followed them, and perhaps a small group of others. But this kingdom would grow and grow, and become like a great tree. Something vast! From something so small God would bring something remarkable.

That's certainly how many view the meaning of these parables. And it's a great truth to enjoy that God's kingdom is growing. Despite the sense that many in the UK at least are turning away from the Gospel and have no interest in the Lord Jesus, God's kingdom is growing, and we believers can rejoice in that. How good it is that people are being saved even today and added to God's kingdom. In some parts of the world this growth is fast, whilst in others it's slower. But we praise God that He is building His church in this day!

But although many feel that these parables are simply saying that God's kingdom starts small and grows big, I can't help but think there is something more to them. We don't have time to justify this too concretely today, but large trees in the scriptures can be pictures of great world kingdoms, and birds have already been used in Matthew's recording of the kingdom parables to represent wicked influences distracting the hearers. And leaven is almost always used in the Bible as a picture of bad influences, or evil spreading. The Lord warned to *beware the leaven of the Pharisees* (Matthew 16:6), and Paul warned the Corinthians that *a little leaven leavens the whole lump*" referring to people in the church at Corinth whose behaviour was immoral and wicked and was being a bad influence on the church. So it seems to me that in these two parables, the Lord is teaching His listeners that the kingdom of God wasn't appearing in the way they expected at that point. For now, it was small, and nothing like a reign of power and glory with the King of kings upon His throne. This kingdom would grow from very small beginnings into something large. But just like in the parables of the sower, and of the wheat and the tares, there would be bad influences in this visible representation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom might grow so large and appear as a mighty tree, but it would house all sorts of evil influences who are opposed to God. These people would be a bad influence on the true believers in the kingdom, like the leaven spreading through the kingdom, or the tares choking the wheat. If we look through church history it's evident that this has been the case. As we've already said, we're so thankful to God that His kingdom has grown, and many have been saved, and in our day have been added to the church. But alongside that has been a lot of false profession. People who seem to be quite close to the church, but don't really believe. So we've ended up with any number of sects claiming to be Christian but denying truths in the Bible, or changing them for their own purposes. Certainly there will be a day, and how we long for it, when the Lord will come again, and He will reign in great power and glory, just like the Jews in the Lord's day were expecting. But for now, the kingdom grows, yes with true believers being added, but sadly with many connected to it who have no faith and are bad influences on the believers.

As I've mentioned, not everyone sees this warning in these parables of the Lord. But it seems to me that the question that the Lord is asked in the next section of Luke's gospel about whether only a few are saved seems to confirm that there is some implication in these parables that the

kingdom of God visible on earth contains both true believers and false professors. I know that in reality quite a period of time passes between verses 21 and 22 of Luke 13, but Luke records the events in this order for a purpose. It seems to me that we're supposed to see the connection. If the kingdom of God is large like a tree, a great system, but many in it are bad influences like leaven, does this mean that only a few are saved? This is the question that the Lord is asked, so let's read together Luke 13:23-30.

Then one said to Him, Lord, are there few who are saved? 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. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside 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. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.

Did you notice that the Lord doesn't exactly answer the question? In response to the question *Are there few that are saved?* the Lord says, *Strive to enter through the narrow gate.* It's as if the Lord says, *Don't worry about who else is saved; make every effort to be sure you are saved!* In the rest of the verses we read the Lord Jesus makes it clear that at some point, the opportunity to be saved will end. The door will be shut, and others will not be able to enter. Many who thought they were very religious and close to the kingdom of God will find themselves on the outside. People from all over the world, from the east and the west, and the north and the south, will truly enjoy the kingdom of God (verse 28), as will Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets. But these false professors, who were a part of the visible kingdom, but not really saved, would miss out.

So Jesus says to His questioner, *Strive to enter* – Make sure you are saved. The sad thing in the verses that follow is that the people who miss out seemed so close to the kingdom of God. They claim *Lord, Lord* as if they thought they recognised Jesus but He says *I do not know you.* They claim great closeness, *We ate and drank in Your presence.* They had listened to the Lord's teaching, *You taught in our streets.* They had certainly experienced many blessings and privileges in their closeness to the visible kingdom of God. But they end up on the outside. They waited too long to be saved. It seems sad since there was no need for them to miss out. They had had every opportunity to be saved. So why hadn't they?

First, they thought that their physical closeness to the Lord would be enough for them. Perhaps some feel the same today. Do you think that simply by going to church each week it makes you a Christian?

Secondly, they thought that hearing the Lord's teaching would be sufficient. Maybe some today feel the same. Do you think that knowing lots of things about the Bible will make you a Christian?

The phrase *Lord, Lord* occurs elsewhere in the gospels. In Matthew 7, those who missed out on being saved thought they were okay because they *prophesied* and *did many wonders* for Christ. Still today many people think they are Christians simply because they do lots of religious works, perhaps forgetting that we are not saved *by works so that no man can boast* (Ephesians 2).

In Matthew 25, the foolish virgins simply weren't ready for the bridegroom to arrive and so missed out. Many people today run the risk of this. When I was at school, one of the guys in my class knew I was a Christian and said to me *Why don't you wait until you're older to do all this faith stuff? Why don't you enjoy life for a bit first before you get all religious?* But, although this kind of

attitude is surely common today, it's mistaken. We don't know how much opportunity we will have to trust in the Lord Jesus, and accept His offer of forgiveness of sins. By putting off the decision to trust in Christ, we risk being like the foolish virgins and missing out. Paul says *Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.*

People in the gospel accounts missed out because they were relying on knowledge, or because they were relying on religious activity, or they were relying on their supposed service for God or perhaps they were simply putting off the decision to trust in Jesus. Perhaps some thought that the life of faith was simply too hard and difficult and decided the *narrow gate* was just too much effort. And so they missed out. How terribly sad!

Even more sad is the fact that people keep missing out on God's salvation in similar ways today. Jesus said to Nicodemus *Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God;* (John 3:3). He then went on to say that this being *born again* involves believing in Jesus, and accepting that He was the evidence of God's love to the world. He died so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, that is, not face the judgment our sins deserve and miss out on the entrance into God's kingdom, but instead have everlasting life.

Before we leave this section to consider the last verses of the chapter can I plead with you all to think seriously about the words of the Lord Jesus. A few chapters earlier in Luke's gospel He had said, *Seek first the kingdom of God.* Make that your primary aim in life. Now He says, *Strive to enter by the narrow gate* – Make sure you're saved. Have you recognised that you've sinned against God and stand deserving His judgement? Do you know that Jesus came to die and face judgement for sin, in order to offer to you forgiveness if you'll trust Him. Have you accepted His offer of new life and forgiveness? If not, don't delay and risk missing out. Why not trust Jesus today?

Our final section for today is verses 31-35 of Luke 13. Let's read them together.

On that very day some Pharisees came, saying to Him, Get out and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You. And He said to them, Go, tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must journey today, tomorrow, and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem.

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, but you were not willing! See! Your house 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!

The chapter ends with this discussion of the Lord's purpose. Why was He here? What was He doing? The Pharisees warn Him to get out and run away since Herod was after Him. However, the Lord responds saying that He would continue doing good and performing miracles, and then in three days He would go to Jerusalem to die. That was why He had come. He had come to bring us life. But to do so He needed to die to be judged for our sins.

Then come some more heartbreaking words from the Lord. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings* You can sense the compassion in the Lord's words. He saw danger for the people of Jerusalem. He desperately wanted to rescue them from it. He wanted to shelter them from this danger like a hen shelters her chicks. But they were not willing. There was Jesus, so close to them. And they wanted nothing to do with Him. That would be seen in all its awful fullness only a few days later as the

Lord was led out of Jerusalem to be hung on a cross. In a future day, a repentant Jewish nation will indeed see Jesus and say *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord* – but that will be after the Church has been taken to glory. Those listening to the Lord then had missed their chance to be saved. And there was never any need for them to be in that position. There was the Lord, so close to them, longing to shelter them from judgement. But they were not willing. It's similar for us today. The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Don't miss out on the salvation Jesus offers to you. Trust Him. Accept His rescue, and take your place as a true believer in the growing kingdom of God.

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