

Parables of the Kingdom -Mark 4:26-34

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 4:26-34...

I've noticed in Hollywood that there's been a trend of thinking that the more you spend on making a film, the more it'll make at the box office. It even seems that producers don't put as much time into a good script as they are under the impression that the big and loud will draw a crowd. But this hasn't been the case. An example would be "Shazam 2," with a budget of \$110 million and another \$100 million on marketing costs, which opened at \$30.5 million and lost the studio over \$150 million. And then other movies have meager budgets, humble beginnings, and then make a massive profit by dominating the box office. A good example of this would be Jordan Peele's huge hit, "Get Out." This film cost \$4.5 million and grossed \$255.5 million worldwide. That's an insane profit! There's something beautiful about small beginnings, not much is expected due to the budget, and next thing you know, there's a global hit. In our text this morning, Jesus teaches his disciples that this is the way of the kingdom of God. Speaking analogously and allegorically here, it starts with a small budget by an unknown and disrespected studio but ends up being a global hit that none can deny.

Let's start by rereading verse 26. What is the kingdom of God? Unlike our context, this term would have been pregnant with meaning for Christ's Jewish disciples, so I'll take some time to define and explain the kingdom. Now since I've dealt with the subject of the kingdom more comprehensively in 1:14-15, this will be a review. The sermon and transcript can be found on our website for further study.

So what is Jesus referring to when he speaks of "the kingdom of God?" Although the term itself is not found in the Old Testament, the subject of the kingdom pervades the entire storyline. The kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of Jesus over His people. It centers on the kingship of Jesus, meaning his "rule" or "reign." In other words, the kingdom is a *dynamic* or *relational* concept as opposed to a *geographical* one. That's not to say geography is irrelevant to the kingdom; no, not at all. Often God reigns over his people in a specific geographic locale, such as the garden, Caanan, and one day the New Heavens and Earth. However, geography isn't essential to the kingdom, but God's reign and rule are. Therefore, it currently exists wherever knees and

hearts bow to the King and submit to him. Who is the king? The Lord Jesus. The kingdom belongs to Jesus and is ruled by Jesus. In 2 Samuel 7, David was promised his offspring would sit on his throne forever. And Jesus is doing just that.

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son... -Colossians 1:13

And many other passages prove this point. The kingdom was inaugurated at Jesus' first coming. In other words, it is now partially realized, meaning we currently live in an overlap of ages. We're still living in this fallen age where we have to struggle with our sins and others, grieve the Holy Spirit with our sins, and experience pains in our bodies that return us to dust. But we also have a foretaste of the coming consummated kingdom as we experience forgiveness from sins, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and being seated on high with Christ in the heavenly places. So, God's design is for the fullness of the kingdom to take place in two events and not one. In the inauguration, we're resurrected spiritually; we will be resurrected physically in the consummation. In the inauguration, Jesus reigns internally in the lives of his people; at his return, he'll reign and rule on the New Heavens and New Earth, where the unrepentant will be cast out of his gracious presence for eternity. So, this partial realization of the kingdom is meant to serve as a trailer or foretaste of the coming consummated kingdom that will extend over the entire cosmos.

This was one of the points of Jesus' ministry. And now, local churches are little embassies for the consummated kingdom to come. In other words, the kingdom of God is manifested in this present age in local churches, which makes all the more sense when you consider that the local church has been granted the keys of the kingdom. It's all a part of God's plan. This is the kingdom of God.

One more question we should consider before continuing. How does one enter into the kingdom of God? When you consider what's been said thus far concerning the kingdom, the answer will only make sense. One enters into the kingdom by submitting to the king. Israel's kings in the Old Testament would be a representative of God's people and often suffer in their place. And this is precisely what King Jesus does for his people on their behalf. God the Son becomes a human as a way of representing his people. The author of Hebrews tells us he had to become like us in every way in order to represent us. And then he suffers on our behalf, not as a weak victim but as a conquering King, which is why the passion narratives are so laden with kingly imagery. Consider the crown of thorns, the purple robe, and the sign above his head. Typically people think of the office of the priest during Jesus' death, which is correct. But he didn't merely die as priest, but also a king! And he was also resurrected as king! Listen to this kingly language from the resurrected savior.

¹⁸ *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. -Matthew 28:18*

And now, one's response to the king will determine whether or not they are included in the kingdom.

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. -Matthew 5:3*

Now that we've established the biblical idea of the kingdom let's reread this parable. Here's the big idea: the coming of God's consummated kingdom is not dependent upon human activity. That's the message of the parable. So, we're switching gears here from what we studied in the parables of the soils. That message was about the necessity of sowing and, specifically, the receptivity of the soils. Here the emphasis falls on the innate power of the seed apart from any human interaction. And here, the seed and its sprouting refer to the kingdom's consummation, as opposed to the ministry of the preached Word. Consider verse 29.

Notice that the man in this parable is passive and plays an insignificant role in the process. Jesus is intentionally deemphasizing the role of the farmer and even of other natural elements. He doesn't mention the farmer plowing, tilling, fertilizing, weeding, and so forth. Nor does he mention the role of the sun or rain. All the attention is on the seed's innate power to bring about its own growth.

The point of emphasizing the independence of the seed's growth is meant to show that the consummation of the kingdom of God is not dependent on any human action. Now, let's talk about what this doesn't mean before we press into what it does. This doesn't mean that man's decisions are inconsequential and that we should be passive in our evangelism. As a matter of fact, this text doesn't address either of those issues. This text is all about God in his own timing establishing the consummated kingdom apart from our will and strength. In other words, God is in control of human history.

Reread verse 29. One commentator suggested that "And when the grain is ripe" can also be translated as "When the condition of the grain allows it." This may indicate that certain things must occur before the kingdom's consummation, all of which God will sovereignly bring to pass before the second coming of his Son. For example, it's necessary that Elijah must come first, that the Son of man must die and resurrect for his people, that the abomination of desolation must take place, the gospel must be preached to the nations, and so. However, once the time is right, Jesus will consummate his kingdom. Again, the point of this parable is not about the kingdom growing but rather the kingdom coming to its full power and consummation. This will be a time of both great rejoicing and great weeping. This image of a sickle applied to the harvest carries a sense of judgment.

¹² Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. ¹³ Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. -Joel 3:13

¹⁴ Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. ¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. -Revelation 14:14-19

Perhaps you've seen the movie "Unbroken." In said film, the main character Louie qualified for the 1936 Olympics. However, when WWII broke out, he enlisted in the military, and due to his plane crash in the Pacific, he ended up captured by the Japanese navy. After being sent to a POW camp, he was targeted time and time again by a cruel prison commander. At the end of the movie, while the captured Americans looked beat up and defeated, they looked up and saw American planes and rejoiced that the war was over and they had won! While at the same time, the Americans were rejoicing, the Japanese were lamenting.

In the same way, the return of Jesus will be glorious for those who've bent a knee but terror for those who haven't.

⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. -2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

In the face of immense persecution, Mark's audience would've been assured that the harvest day was coming. And he will indeed deliver his people, judge the wicked, and right every wrong. And we, too, are promised the same.

Jesus may have intended for this parable to refute the views of revolutionaries and Zealots who sought to bring the kingdom by force of arms, although we can't be certain. However, we know this would've been an instructive parable for them. And there's at least one ex-zealot on Jesus' squad. They saw it as their duty to overthrow the Roman government to usher in the kingdom of God. Perhaps this idea came from them being tired of being oppressed by pagan nations. So much so that they misunderstood God's kingdom and how it would be consummated.

Just as the kingdom will be fully established when Jesus returns, which we can't stop nor influence, it's equally true that it'll be established by his hand alone. What we find in Acts 1:6 is quite instructive.

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" -Acts 1:6

Notice that the Apostles aren't under any illusion that it's their job to establish the kingdom. Just as it was inaugurated without their help, they recognize that it'll also be consummated without their help. They would've learned this from Jesus himself. He taught them that at his return, he'd send out his angels to gather the elect from the four corners of the earth. Even the Old Testament makes clear that it's God who's making all things new. Therefore, we must ensure our vocabulary matches the New Testament regarding the kingdom. We can easily mistakenly promote a false idea of the kingdom. We often speak of "building the kingdom," "ushering in the kingdom," "establishing the kingdom, or "helping the kingdom to grow." But this doesn't match the verbs associated with the kingdom in the gospels. I like what George Eldon Ladd has to say,

"The Kingdom is the outworking of the divine will; it is the act of God himself. It is related to human beings and can work in and through them, but it never becomes subject to them... The ground of the demand that they receive the kingdom rests in the fact that in Jesus, the kingdom has come into history."

I like one illustration that was given. It's like the sun. When the clouds part on a cloudy day, we don't say, "The sun has grown." We say, "The sun has broken through." So, our view of the sun has changed because obstacles have been removed, but the sun itself hasn't changed. The sun doesn't depend on us. We don't bring the sun or act upon it. It appears; its warmth can be felt or stifled, but the sun doesn't grow. And this is the point of the kingdom. Biblically speaking, we can proclaim the kingdom, enter, reject, inherit, and possess it, but God and God alone establish and usher it in.

So what does this mean for us? Well, for one, it keeps us from believing a false and discouraging optimism about how good we can make this world. The trend as of late has been for churches to have mission statements like "Transform the city and the world" or "Change the city and the

world.” This, of course, is a noble task; this isn’t meant to question anyone’s motives, but rather their understanding of what we should expect before Jesus returns. When cities aren’t changing but only worsening, as poverty and corruption persist, these Christians will find themselves discouraged and possibly even questioning the power of God. This is the danger of having hopes too high on the wrong things.

It seems that a more biblical and realistic way to view this age is to understand, as Matthew 26:11 says, we’ll “always have the poor with us.” In other words, there will always be brokenness, corruption, and even oppression. What I’m not saying is that this should make us complacent. As I stated earlier, the point of this parable isn’t to render humanity’s decisions and works as inconsequential. We should strive to work against evil. As Tim Keller says, generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable, “reflects the character of God.” And as our culture continues to get more extreme and anti-god, we must keep this in mind. Our job as the church is not to restore this country to a place where the values of the Christian bible are the golden standard in our nation. That’s not to say that we shouldn’t pray for Christians in government to fight against the evils that are taking place that impact our entire society. We should pray for this and even do our parts when necessary. However, we should do so knowing that society may get worse, and the only one who will ultimately fix not only the ills in this country but the entire world is the Lord Jesus upon his return. But we work for justice and fight against evil equipped with the knowledge that our job isn’t to make the world perfect; that’s what he’ll do when he consummates the kingdom.

Another reason this parable is important; it helps us to keep our eyes firmly on Jesus. We’re reminded constantly that we need him, and we rely on him and him alone, as opposed to our ability to fix all the brokenness in this world. And ultimately, our desire is for a relationship with the King, not simply what he can bring and do for us. I said this earlier, and I’ll state it again. God is in control of human history. And this is good news. You can take the truth that refers to a global level and apply it to your life. We’re simply not in control. And we don’t have the power to fix the problems in our lives. The false prosperity gospel would tell you that you have the ability in your words to fix your broken circumstance.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Whether it be the death of loved ones, scars from childhood that still haven’t healed, financial crises, or various burdens, there are so many factors in our lives that we don’t control. Preachers today often point to a breakthrough that’s right around the corner. However, the biblical authors take a different approach. They remind their readers that this life is temporal, and so are our sorrows. We often can’t remove the pain ourselves; however, the Lord Jesus is returning and will make everything right! There was a story of two prisoners who were given the same amount of jail time in a distant land. However, one of the prisoners was told how long he had to serve, and the other wasn’t, but it was the same amount of time. The prisoner, unaware of the length of his sentence, passed away. He couldn’t

find the will to live. The one who knew how long his sentence was found the strength to press on because he knew he had a family that awaited him. Although we all live in a fallen world, we're like the second prisoner. We're strangers in a foreign land and deal with all types of adversity. However, we know that our relief comes at the consummation of the kingdom. And this truth is what caused the readers of Mark's gospel in Rome to hold on and desperately await the return of Jesus.

Let's continue with the second parable, which has a similar message. Let's reread verses 30-34.

In verses 33-34, we're reminded that Jesus made this clear distinction between those who are his and those who aren't. Jesus refers to a mustard seed, which would have been the smallest seed sown in the ground in Jesus' day. And the result ends up being the largest tree in the garden. Think of the beginning of the Kingdom of God; by design, Jesus chose 12 men to begin to announce the coming of his kingdom. Talk about humble beginnings. So in a sense, an unimpressive 12 disciples first possessed the kingdom, and this would have been stunning for the Jews who read the Old Testament texts concerning the coming of the kingdom.

Now try to remove the privilege of knowing the New Testament and place yourself in the shoes of a first-century Jew. After reading the Old Testament, it seems bizarre to suggest that the kingdom of God would initially seem so insignificant, so much so that the pagans scoffed at the idea that there was another king other than Caesar.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. -Isaiah 9:6-7

After reading this text, it seems the Messiah would show up and set up shop. No wonder his disciples were so confused; we probably would be too. And no wonder Jesus needs to teach this parable to his disciples. However, we typically want the extravagant from the very beginning. Think about Naaman in the Old Testament, who felt insulted when told to bathe in the Jordan.

¹⁰ And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman was angry and went away, saying, "Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper. -2 Kings 5:10-11

And this is what the Jews and disciples were expecting and wanting. But God devises his plans so that it's no question that he's responsible for the victory. He chooses weak and meager Israel

and gives them victory over greater nations to showcase his glory. He chooses what seems to be an insignificant beginning and then provides the analogy of the large tree to teach his disciples that the kingdom will one day have cosmic significance. There'll be no more scoffing or ignoring, only bowing or weeping.

Some scholars argue that the birds taking shelter in the tree's shade is a picture of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom. Passages in Ezekiel and Daniel seem to support this view. If this is the case, it would make sense, considering Jesus is highlighting the universal nature of the kingdom. Here we see 12 Jewish men. But what will we see at the consummation of the kingdom?

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" -Revelation 7:9-10

But for there to be a cosmic kingdom, there had to be a bloody cross. There's no way we get from here to there without the suffering of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. And the same goes for us saints. Oh, how I wish, as your pastor, I could tell you there's another way, but there isn't. We are a people who mourn in this life, only to rejoice in the next. We carry our crosses in this life only to cast our crowns at the feet of Jesus in the next. We bear the burdens of one another in this life only to worship alongside each other in the next. We shed tears over the fallen state of this world, only to have them wiped away in the next. We're mocked and hated by the world, only to be embraced by the heavenly saints in the next. We're seen as fools in this life, only to see his face in the next. And thankfully, God hasn't placed the weight of ensuring his kingdom is consummated on our shoulders. He will indeed accomplish all that he has decreed.

Let's pray.