

The Kingdom of God: The Growth of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

We're in a series on the kingdom of God. What is it? What does it mean for our lives? So we've been looking at different passages from the gospel of Matthew to see what Jesus himself has to teach us about this. And here's the definition we've been working with. *The kingdom is the rule of God invading and restoring this world.* Now, we've spent the last couple of weeks looking at the "this world" part of the definition. God is restoring this world. But tonight we're going to focus in a little bit. Because guess what? You and me are part of this world. And one of the most lovely and encouraging things about the kingdom is that it's concerned not just with the whole world. It's also concerned with individuals. The kingdom restores the broken systems and structures of the world. But it also restores broken people.

When you think of your biggest problems, what do you think of? Of course, it's easy to look at the newspaper or turn on the tv and see that the world is filled with all kinds of problems: unemployment, ISIS, racism, Ebola. But when you think about your life and your biggest problems, chances are your focus is on something a little narrower than that. And that's not necessarily wrong. If we're going to be a part of the solution for the world's problems, we need to have some remedy for our own problems as well. What are yours? It's probably not hard to come up with a list. You don't even have to think about it. "My biggest problem? That's easy! It's my job, or my boss." Or "If only I could do something about my husband, or my wife." Or you might say it's your kids. Of course, your kids are probably saying the same thing about you. Or it might be your health, or your financial situation, or your lack of romantic prospects.

Now, I don't want to diminish the importance of these things. This is the stuff of life. Work, home, family, love, health. Those things are incredibly important. But one of the main messages of this passage, one of the main things Jesus is telling us here, is that, as important as all of those things are, none of them is your biggest problem. And if you want to find restoration for your life, I mean real, life-changing restoration, then you have to understand and embrace what Jesus is telling us here about how the kingdom of God comes into our life and changes us. And it all comes down to this image he gives us about the seed and the soils. In **verse 19**, Jesus says that the seed is the word of the kingdom. That's the gospel. So let's see three things about this gospel word of the kingdom, and how it changes our life. It's organic, it has to go in deep, and it has to go in weak. First,

It's organic – One of the most amazing things Jesus shows us here is that our biggest problems aren't what we think they are. Think of all the different kinds of problems we just mentioned. Work, home, family, money, health, romance. But notice something. They're all different, but the one thing they all have in common is that they're all out there. They're all outside of ourselves. Which means that our normal approach to solving those problems will be to try to change those things. We've got outside problems. What do we do? We gather up our inner power, and we apply pressure. We apply force. We apply discipline. We try to make it happen. Let me ask you a question. How's that working for you?

But notice that the power of the kingdom is not something that changes our outside problems. Think of all the different images Jesus could have used to describe the power of the kingdom. An earthquake. A fire. Or when we think about getting power to fix our problems, a lot of times we think about a tool. Why didn't Jesus call it a hammer? The kingdom of God is like a hammer that God puts in our hands. "Here, try this." When we think of power, this is what we normally think of. Force, coercion, strength. It's external. I've got to change my boss, my spouse, my kids, my financial situation. I've got to get control over it. Give me a hammer.

But this is a whole different kind of power. It's not power that God exerts on the things outside of you. It's power that God plants inside of you. And if you think about this for a moment, you realize that this is telling us something pretty profound about our biggest problem. If God's solution to our problems is not to force external change on the things outside of us, but to implant internal change inside of us, that means that *your biggest problem is not out there, it's in here*. Our greatest need is not for God to change our circumstances, but to change us.

And this shows us the difference between the gospel and every other approach to life, whether religious or secular. Western religious approaches will tell you to get your act together. You have to live a good life. You have to obey the rules. Totally external, and totally focused on what you do. Or, for instance, Eastern religion says that the key is to get really disciplined. You have to meditate, you have to focus, you have to practice really hard, and ascend upward through the levels of spiritual attainment. Buddha's last words were, "Strive ceaselessly." Again, totally focused on what you do. Secularism isn't really all that different either. The secular approach to life says that there is no God, and therefore your best shot at having a good life means exerting power. We can achieve the world of our dreams through better education, better technology, better politics. But notice that in all of these approaches to life, it's all about what you do on the outside. As one of my favorite teachers says, it's mechanical change. Only the gospel says it's all about what God does on the inside of you. It's not external, mechanical change. It's internal, organic change. It's not a hammer that shapes you from the outside. It's a seed that grows from the inside.

The thing you need more than anything else in the world is not to find a way to change your job, your boss, your family, your stock portfolio, your relationship status on Facebook, or anything else external to you. The thing you need most of all is for God to change you. Listen, I'm not saying that God doesn't care about all these other things. He does. But he cares so much more about you that he knows that even if he changed these things in your life, without changing you, you would be even more miserable. Because none of these things has the power to give you what you're really looking for. We're all looking for things like significance, love, and security. I mean ultimate significance, love, and security. But none of those things have the power to fulfill those needs. And when we take those needs and expect any of these things to fulfill them, our expectations will absolutely crush them, and their failure to live up to our expectations will crush us. Your biggest problem is not out there, it's in here. And the gospel is not a hammer that brings mechanical change outside of you. It's a seed that gets planted and creates organic change inside of you. But how does that happen?

It has to go in deep – One of the main purposes of this whole parable is to explain why some people are transformed by the gospel, and other people aren't. So you see Jesus talking about four different kinds of soils, but only one of them bears fruit. What's the difference? In the first three soils, the seed didn't go in deep enough. In the first one, it's right on the surface. In the second one, it goes in a little, but has no root. In the third one, it's choked by thorns. Only in the last soil does the seed go in deep enough to take root and bear fruit. What does that mean?

Fortunately, Jesus tells us. It all comes down to how you hear. In **verse 9**, what's the big application? "He who has ears, let him hear." Now obviously, this is more than just physical hearing, because everyone who was standing there at that moment heard Jesus say, "Let him hear." No. Jesus is telling them that this is a specific kind of hearing. It's the kind of hearing that takes something in deep. So notice when he explains the parable to his disciples, he says that the different depth levels of the soils are different levels of hearing. **Verse 19**: the problem is hearing but not understanding. **Verse 20**: this one hears but has no root. **Verse 22**: this one hears, but the cares and riches of the world choke the word so it doesn't bear fruit. In each of these soils, the problem is not that they fail to hear the word. The problem is that they don't hear the word in a way that lets it in. Something else is preventing it from going deep.

Look at each of these soils. The first one is hard. It won't let the seed in at all. It's possible to hear the gospel, understand it intellectually, but never really let it in personally. You may go to church. You may acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher, or a wonderful moral example. But you won't let him be your savior. Needing a savior is incredibly threatening to you. You want to be your own savior. You still see your biggest problems as being out there. And the answer is to rev up your own inner resources to address the problem. So maybe it's really important to you to be a really good person, or a really accomplished person. Not a person who needs a savior. You appreciate Jesus intellectually, but you won't let him in personally. Your heart is hard.

But look at the second soil. This one is shallow. It lets the seed in, and there's even some emotional excitement about it. This would be someone who becomes a Christian, but they don't grow in the faith, because they haven't really understood the gospel to begin with. And then when the heat gets turned up, they leave. Notice Jesus says in **verse 6** that when the sun rose, they were scorched. In **verse 21** he tells us that this means tribulation or persecution. These are people who get excited about Jesus, but then they can't take the heat.

So, for instance, Kenneth Clark was a British art historian, director of the National Gallery, and produced a show for BBC called *Civilization*. He was also a deeply secular man. But he was working on a book in Florence, and had an encounter with God. Listen to how he described it: I had a religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes my whole being was inundated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before. This state of mind lasted for several months, and, wonderful though it was, posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless: I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a

delusion for I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But that I had “felt the finger of God” I am quite sure.

Now, do you see what he’s saying? Notice first of all that he was aware that God had come to him by grace. Completely apart from anything he had done. In fact, he acknowledged that he was totally unworthy of it. Now that’s right. That’s the gospel. God comes to people who aren’t even looking for him, and have done nothing to be worthy of him. But look at how he responds, or doesn’t respond. He realizes that if he lets God in, he would have to change his life. There would be all kinds of pressure. The heat would get turned up. There would be pressure on his reputation. What would people think? There would be pressure on his lifestyle. He couldn’t just live any way he wanted to. All kinds of pressure. He couldn’t take the heat, so he rejected it. Why? Because there were other things that were more important to him than God: his reputation, his personal freedom.

Now, look at this last soil. It wasn’t hard, and it wasn’t shallow. It was thorny. That means that there were all kinds of other things competing for God’s love. In **verse 22**, Jesus tells us it’s “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.” In this last soil, the word doesn’t go in deep not because you’re giving your love to something else, but because you’re sharing your love with something else. There’s a throne in your heart, and sometimes God is on it, and sometimes something else is on it. You follow God, but you’re not bearing fruit because there are things you’re worried about. You’re worried about money. You’re worried about the approval of your parents. You’re worried about romance. And all of this worry is choking God’s kingdom in your heart.

The only way the kingdom of God can change your life is if you let it go in deep. Because that’s where all these other things live in your heart. Your desire to be your own savior is deep. Your desire to live your life the way you want is deep. Your desire to get all the things you’re worried about is deep. And God’s kingdom will never touch you in those places unless you let him go in deep to where they are. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to let his word probe you like that? Are you willing to let it expose your idols? Are you willing to let it change you? It will be scary and painful, but incredibly healing if you let it in deep.

One of my favorite stories from *The Chronicles Of Narnia* is about a little boy named Eustace. And through his greed and selfishness and pride, he turns into a dragon. But one night Aslan the lion, who represents Christ, comes to him and leads him to a well in the middle of a garden. And Eustace can’t wait to get in the water and ease the aches and pains of his dragonish body, but Aslan says you have to undress yourself first. So Eustace scratches and peels off the dragon skin, but just as he’s about to get in the water, he sees there’s another, deeper dragon skin still on him. So he scratches and peels that one off, only to find yet another, deeper one still underneath. He can’t dig deep enough. And he’s about to give up hope when Aslan says to him, “You’ll have to let me undress you.” And so he does, and Eustace says, “The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear

it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.” Are you willing to let Christ and his word go in deep like that, to probe you and expose you and change you? The only way is if we see this last point.

It has to go in weak – Remember what we’ve seen so far. Your biggest problem is not out there, it’s in here. It’s not people, places, and things. It’s your own heart. It’s your own sin of giving the deepest loves of your heart to something other than God. And that means that in order for God to change you, he has to get inside of you without destroying you. How’s he going to do that? Again, the image of the seed helps us. Jesus didn’t come as an earthquake, or a fire, or a hammer. All those things bring change, but they do it violently, by imposing force from the outside. Mechanical change. That’s religion. A lot of times we think of God as a hammer pounding us into submission. “Obey or die.” We need organic change. And a hammer can never bring that kind of change. But a seed can. A seed has tremendous power to unleash life into the world. One acorn contains enough power for a whole forest of trees. That’s power. That’s change. But the only way it happens is if it falls into the ground and dies. Its power is in its ability to go in deep, but even more than that, to go in weak.

And Jesus is the ultimate seed. In the gospel of John, some people wanted to see Jesus. And Jesus said, “You want to see who I am? Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” And that’s exactly what Jesus did on the cross. The cross is the place of ultimate weakness, but through that weakness, it’s the place of ultimate change. Earthquakes, fires, and hammers can change things. But it’s not organic change, because none of those things are alive. But Jesus is the very source and fountain of life. He’s the creator of the universe, the God of heaven and earth, come to earth, in order to implant his life by giving it. He didn’t just go down among the thorns. He wore a crown of thorns. He took the heat, all the pressures and demands and obligations of being the savior we could never be, living the life we could never live, and paying the price we should pay for giving the deepest loves of our hearts to false gods. We think our biggest problems are out there, so we spend our whole lives trying to get power and control over those things. But Jesus is the one who had ultimate power and control. And yet in the garden of Gethsemane, he called out to the Father, “Father, is there any other way for them to be saved? Must I really drink this cup. Must I really give up control and lose my life? Yet not my will, but thine be done.” On the cross, the hammer of judgment came down on Jesus, so that the seed of renewal could come up in us.

Think about that. Meditate on it. And as you do, what do you do? What’s the application? One word: Yield. A seed can’t go into hard soil, rocky soil, or thorny soil. It can only go in to soft soil that yields to it. Let the beauty and the softness and the love of the cross soften your heart so that you can yield to the life-changing power of the kingdom. Let it go in deep. Let it go in weak. Say to him, “Lord, come inside of me. Come in deep. Take away the hardness of my heart, the control of my heart, the anxiety of my heart. Help me to see the depth, the love, and the beauty of who you are and what you did for me.” If you do that, then his word, his gospel, his kingdom, will come inside of you. It will act on you, not as a hammer to beat you into submission, but a seed to transform you from the inside out. The claw may hurt when it first

goes in, but it's simply the pain of letting go of all your control, anxiety, and idolatry. Let this power, by its very weakness, come into your heart and change you. Only the power of a seed can do it. Let's pray.