

An Active Kingdom

Luke 13:18-21

On my mother's mother's side of the family we are of Scottish descent, part of clan Munro. Our history dates back to the 4th century when a Roman invasion drove a band of Scots to Ireland. They settled on Lough Foyle by the Roe water and remained there for 600 years when in the 11th century they returned to Scotland known as the men of Roe or simply Munro, led by Donald Munro who was given land after service to Malcolm II of Scotland. His grandson, Hugh Munro, was the first to be granted the title of Baron of Foulis. Robert Munro, 6th Baron of Foulis would lead the clan in support of Robert the Bruce during Scotland's war for independence. Throughout the Munro clan there are a number of castles still in existence today with Foulis castle being the seat of the Munro clan. It's not an active castle other than attracting tourists as a museum. It's not defending a clan or providing protection as one would think of a castle.

If I had the opportunity to visit a period of history I think a visit to the medieval time of kings and kingdoms would be a fascinating journey. But it doesn't matter what period of history you choose, there have always been clans and chiefs and kingdoms of all kinds. Today there are approximately 200 countries ruled by various types of government: some have kings, some have presidents, and some have dictators.

While Scripture speaks of various political kingdoms, there are only two spiritual kingdoms. There is the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light; the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. It is about the latter that Jesus speaks in our passage today where He gives it a comparison.

Turn to Luke 13:18-21.

Let's consider the following points.

The appearance of God's Kingdom

The advancement of God's Kingdom

The activity of God's Kingdom

I. THE APPEARANCE OF GOD'S KINGDOM –
v. 18-19

Last week we looked at an event in Jesus' ministry when He healed a woman of a debilitating condition, a disease of some kind that had left her crippled for 18 years. On one particular Sabbath day in the matter of a few seconds she was completely restored, made whole, healed. Jesus had set her free from her infirmity. Beside herself with excitement she gave glory to God. In the same way Jesus can heal us of the infirmity of sin.

But not everyone in the synagogue was pleased. The synagogue ruler objected to the actions of Jesus based on the violation of the law that no work was to be done on the Sabbath. He, like so many others, even today, bound himself to tradition, to rules and regulations and although Jesus did a good thing it was something the ruler argued could have and should have been done any other day of the week.

Jesus then spoke both in defense of His actions and her healing. What Jesus said brought comfort to the woman but condemnation to the synagogue ruler and to all those that day who opposed Him for what they considered a blatant disregard for the Law. In effect Jesus was condemning a religious system that was more concerned about adherence to a set of traditions and a list of regulations that were man made than they were about the care of a person. He said as such when He cited their own law that gave them permission to untie their animals and lead them to food and water on the Sabbath.

Their spirit and attitude is indicative of anyone who is more concerned about religious appearance than about the heart.

In our passage today Jesus uses two parables to illustrate His point. They would be used to teach against the establishment of a religious institution

for the sake of following traditions in favor of the kingdom they should be considering of greatest importance. He begins by asking a rhetorical question. "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?"

There are two opposing opinions about this passage. Some view this from a negative perspective, while others view it with a positive meaning. But first we need to consider for a few moments what the kingdom of God means because that is the focus of Jesus' teaching here. The emphasis of those who opposed Him there in the synagogue the day He healed the woman was on keeping the traditions of the law as they were handed down from generation to generation. They believed that observance to the law would merit them entrance into the kingdom of God that had been spoken of by the prophets of the Old Testament.

Webster's defines a kingdom in this way.

1. The position, rank, or power of a king. We could say then that this refers to his rule, power or authority. He is the head. In the kingdom there isn't anyone greater than he is.
2. A government or country headed by a king.
3. A realm, domain, or sphere. On one hand it is his position as ruler. On the other hand it is his place of rule.
4. The spiritual realm of God, the hereafter, heaven.

When we read or hear the term Kingdom of God, it is a phrase that is predominantly used by Jesus in His teachings. He told people what it was and how to get there.

Daniel speaks prophetically of the eternal nature of the kingdom of God.

Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14

As we enter into the New Testament there was a class of Israelites who looked forward to the coming kingdom of God. Among these were Nicodemus

and Joseph of Arimathea.

Luke 23:51

Both the Jews and Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, but each emphasized a different phrase. The Jews looked forward to the kingdom, a kingdom that would re-establish the political throne of David, a kingdom that would cast off the political tyranny of Rome and give them world dominion. It was an earthly kingdom only. When Jesus came along and began to perform incredible miracles they rightly considered Him to be the long awaited Messiah, but they wrongly assumed He would establish a political rule that would overthrow Rome. At one point they wanted to forcibly make Jesus king so that they could once and for all throw off the tyranny of a government that sought to suppress them to a life of meager existence. Jesus would right all civil wrongs and avenge His people. His earthly reign would bring lasting peace on earth.

Where they emphasized the kingdom, Jesus emphasized whose kingdom it was. It was God's. He emphasized righteousness, holiness, and peace. He emphasized doing God's will on earth in the same way that it was done in heaven.

While the people generally looked at Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, the religious rulers never held any hopeful expectation about Him. Their growing animosity reached its zenith when they convinced the people that Jesus was a fraud who should be crucified, which they did. Jesus taught about an entirely different kingdom than what the Jews believed would be coming.

The Gospels use two interchangeable terms. The two terms are the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. One does not distinctly speak of an earthly, physical kingdom while the other refers to the spiritual rule of Christ in the heart of the saved. They both mean the same thing and carry a present and future meaning. The gospel writers have a specific reason for using one term over the

other. Matthew predominantly uses the term kingdom of heaven. He preferred this term because of the audience of his gospel. He was a Jew writing to Jews and respected their view of using the name of God as little as possible because they feared using it irreverently. On the other hand, using this term when speaking to Gentiles would suggest to them a polytheistic religion, where the term kingdom of God speaks of monotheism. So Luke used the kingdom of God because his audience was Gentile and needed to differentiate between God's kingdom and rule in contrast to the rule of the plethora of gods they grew up with.

There is a ministry in Ann Arbor called International Students and has ministry on the Eastern and U of M campuses. They work with international students who have come to the States for education, but who also want to experience the culture of America, including its religion. It's an opportunity to introduce them to Christ and the gospel. In a recent prayer letter they shared about a student from India who is Hindu. She was interested in knowing more about Jesus because she wanted to add Him to all the other gods she believed in.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are two terms referring to the same thing, a present and future kingdom. John the Baptist preached about the kingdom of God. It was a call to repentance, a call to be delivered from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. Jesus also preached and proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of God. It was a call to change citizenship to heaven where God ruled the heart. This transfer of citizenship is only possible through faith in Christ. With this transfer of citizenship there is also a transformation of the heart, a change in behavior.

When a football player is transferred to another team, he has to learn a whole new set of plays. He can't be acting on the field as if he was still part of the old team. His allegiance has changed to the new team and the way he plays reflects that change.

Here's how Paul writes about it in his letter to Colossae.

“For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14)

Wycliffe Bible Dictionary describes it this way: “the kingdom [of God] exists at present where Christians are living in subjection to the will of God, where His power is producing changed lives.”

On the other hand, the future aspect of the kingdom is something that is visible when the Messiah will reign over the earth from Jerusalem which was prophesied in the Old Testament. This is what the Jews were looking for.

Before someone can belong to the physical rule of God, he or she must first submit to the spiritual rule of God in the heart. He does that by confessing and forsaking sin and believing by faith that Christ took the penalty of sin and through grace gives eternal life into this kingdom.

The parables that Jesus uses illustrate that the kingdom of God must first develop internally. Just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Luke tells us that Jesus used a parable because the Jews thought that it was at that time the kingdom of God would be established. (Luke 19:11) And just before His ascension even the disciples asked if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom.

Some scholars interpret these parables in a negative way. The first parable is about a mustard seed that was planted in a garden by a man. That seed grew to become a tree. They cite that normally trees were not planted in gardens because the shade they cast over the rest of the smaller plants would block the sun hindering their growth. They look at the tree as synonymous with the outward aspect of Christendom with its many organizations and denominations. They consider that the growth of

the seed is abnormal. It grew too fast and grew into something bigger than it was supposed to be. Consequently it lost its true character as it became big. They view the time when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity as the time of rapid growth after which it gathered people from all walks of life. The birds are looked at as evil and are compared to the birds in the parable of the sower. When the sower threw the seed down the birds came and snatched the seed away so that the seed could not take root and sprout. They claim that the birds are representative of the evil one who comes in like a light, is active in the church in order to deceive many from believing the truth.

They believe that Jesus, who had just spoken against the religious establishment for its blind adherence to the law, is speaking of the deadness of religious traditions and the religious leaders who actually oppose the truth, but how God's kingdom will prevail and grow.

When we look around at the church today, those who claim to be part of the kingdom of God, such a view might be right. Especially when you consider passages that speak of Jesus gathering everyone together and forbidding some to enter His kingdom because He doesn't know them even though they claim to have done all kinds of things in His name. They weren't really part of the kingdom of God, having never truly made God king of their heart by faith in Christ.

It's troubling to read articles and examine data from surveys about many who say they believe the tenets of the Bible yet embrace a liberal, all inclusive, pervasive, progressive theology. I think many who claim to be part of the kingdom of God really don't know which kingdom they belong to.

This last week I read this article by Chelsen Vicari. Listen to what the author had to say about the changing 21st century church. "Peek around the curtain of some "progressive" or "hip" evangelical churches, past the savvy technology and secular

music, and you will find more than just a contemporary worship service. You'll find faith leaders encouraging young evangelicals to trade in their Christian convictions for a gospel filled with compromise. They're slowly attempting to give evangelicalism an "update" – and the change is not for the good."

There were many in Jesus' day who thought they were going to be part of the kingdom of God who were sorely misled and would be sorely mistaken because they assumed the wrong thing about what the kingdom of God was. The same will be true today. And Jesus uses this illustration to tell us what the kingdom of God would be like. It would be like a mustard seed, the smallest herb seed that grew into a tree. In this tree would lodge birds.

The type of mustard seed grown in this region can reach a height of 12 feet, which is considered quite sizeable for an herb plant.

Daniel 4 describes a dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had about a towering tree in which the birds and animals found shelter. Daniel interpreted the dream to mean that the tree was the King's realm and the birds and animals were all the peoples of the nations that had found shelter and protection under his rule.

Trees are sometimes used in Scripture to speak of nations. Here Jesus uses it to symbolize something that had a very insignificant beginning but would grow to great height. That is the kingdom of God. The gardener planted the seed in a place where it could be well taken care of and cultivated. Over time and through great effort, it would grow. It grew from the smallest garden seed to the greatest plant in the garden. It was large enough for birds to come and find a place to nest. This speaks of the safety and security they found in the branches. The kingdom of God is like that as well. Those who come to it will find rest, safety, security, shelter. From the beginning, the kingdom was obscure. It

started out small. There were the 11 disciples who followed Jesus to the end. Then we read that there were at least 500 others who were Christ followers at His ascension. 40 days later on Pentecost when Peter preached the resurrected Christ 3000 were added that day. Then we read in Acts 2:48 that many were added to the kingdom daily. The book of Acts then chronicles the growth of Christianity as the gospel of the kingdom of God spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the utter most part of the earth. The kingdom of God was expanding and continues to grow today. Prophetically we read in Revelation 11:15 that “the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.”

It is a kingdom in which the rule of God in the heart will give them a home in the kingdom where God rules forever.

I believe that through this parable Jesus is contrasting the real kingdom of God with the kingdom the religious leaders thought they were a part of. The real kingdom isn't about keeping religious traditions; it comes when a real transformation takes place in the heart evidenced by a change in character, behavior and attitude.

The appearance of the kingdom of God is visible in the present through those who allow God who rules supreme in the heart. The evidence of this rule is in the changed character as the fruit of the Spirit is produced in the life of the person who is part of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that will also be visible when Christ rules.

The appearance of this kingdom is visible now in the lives of believers and will be visible in the future when Christ rules. As we wait for that day we are to be part of the active advancement of God's kingdom.

II. THE ADVANCEMENT OF GOD'S KINGDOM – v. 20-21

To further illustrate His point, Jesus used a second parable. This illustration is about yeast. He says the kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and worked through all the dough. The passage says it was a large amount of flour – three pecks or measures which is equivalent to about 50 pounds. Flour speaks of the world and the yeast is the kingdom. She worked the yeast into the entire batch of dough. Now it does not mean that everyone will become part of the kingdom of God.

Those of you who are bakers know that yeast has an active property to it. In the fermentation process the yeast converts the carbohydrates into carbon dioxide and alcohol. Carbon dioxide is used in making bread and well, alcohol is used in making alcohol. In baking it converts the fermentable sugars that are present into carbon dioxide. The gas forms pockets or bubbles in the dough causing the dough to expand or raise. When the dough is baked, the yeast dies and sets the air pockets giving the product a soft or spongy texture. Potatoes, water from potato boiling, eggs and sugar help accelerate the growth of the yeast.

The point is that just as yeast permeates the whole batch of dough, so the kingdom of God permeates the world. But the thing with yeast is, it can go bad and even when introduced into the dough will not produce the raising effect it should if it were active.

I hope that the parable is clear to you. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God will have a huge impact with a powerful influence on the world just as yeast does when it's added to flour. The kingdom of God should be influencing culture and not the other way around. What kind of positive influence are you having in your world? When you are asked to cheat on a test to get a better grade in a class are you influencing the world as yeast for the kingdom of God or is the world influencing you?

When you're at work and a co-worker asks you to

falsify some data to make a report look better are you influencing the world as yeast for the kingdom of God or is the world influencing you?

When you are let go from a job and tempted to send antagonistic responses on twitter or Facebook or through email about your former employer are you influencing the world as yeast for the kingdom of God or is the world influencing you?

When you're with friends and the conversation turns to gossip are you more likely to turn and walk away, try to change the subject or join in? In that moment are you influencing the world as yeast for the kingdom of God or is the world influencing you?

Like the first parable, there are those who want to interpret this with a negative spin. They look at it from the viewpoint that when the Bible speaks about yeast it is always speaking about something that is evil or sin. Therefore Jesus must be talking about the negative influences that have permeated the church. Again, we can see plenty of evidence to suggest that this is its meaning. After all, just how influential is the church? Isn't that what Paul warned the church of Ephesus about? Didn't he speak to churches about the influence of false teachers who would come in and lead the church astray? Don't we see that evidenced today? Aren't we witnessing a departure from the authority of Scripture by many churches? Aren't we seeing the church being influenced by the world instead of the other way around?

The late apologist Francis Schaeffer wrote "Here is the great evangelical disaster – the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this – namely, accommodation: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age."

By not standing on the truth of God's Word the kingdom has lost its active influence and become

inert. Chuck Swindoll writes that "the time has come to wake up and renew our passion for what Jesus is building."

Let me again refer to the article I mentioned earlier. "The millennial generation's (20 somethings) susceptibility to 'feel-good' doctrine is playing a big part in America's moral decline. Millennials' religious practices depend largely on how the actions make us and others *feel*, whether the activities are biblical or not. For example, we only attend churches that leave us feeling good about our lifestyle choices, even if those choices conflict with God's clear commandments. We dismiss old hymns that focus on God's transforming salvation, love and mercy and opt for 'Jesus is your boyfriend' songs. Or we contribute to nonprofits that exploit and misuse terms such as *justice*, *oppressed* and *inequality* because tweaking the language makes us feel more neutral, less confrontational."

Sure we can view this passage with a negative spin but I think Jesus is talking about something positive here. Just as birds don't always have to represent something that is evil, neither does yeast have to always represent something that is evil. Jesus speaks of the active influence the kingdom of God can and should have in the world.

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to yeast that is active and envisioned a kingdom that would be a great influence on the culture, an influence that would bring many to rest in the protection and provision of this kingdom. Folks, we need to be yeast that positively influences the culture around us. But when we neglect to stand on the inerrant, authoritative, infallible, illuminating, unchanging Word of God, then we lose the power to transform our lives and influence the world around us for the very kingdom we say we represent.

Taken individually or taken collectively to speak of the church, Philippians 1:6 is important to remember. "Being confident of this, that He who

began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Christ wants us to be an active part of influencing our world. It begins within the heart that is transformed by His saving grace and is evidenced in how we live in the world, a change that stands on conviction and influences those around us so that they too may be added to the kingdom of God. Christ spoke of a growing kingdom, an active kingdom.

So what are some ways we can influence the world around us for the kingdom of God? Let's conclude with the activity of God's Kingdom.

III. THE ACTIVITY OF GOD'S KINGDOM

This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive. They are ways in which we as part of the kingdom of God can have an active, positive influence for the kingdom of God in the world around us.

A. Have Integrity – blameless, honest, sincere
Daniel 6:1-5

I Timothy 3:2 – above reproach/blameless
II Peter 3:14 “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.”

B. Show Love
John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if you have love one for another.”

C. Display the Fruit of the Spirit
Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law.”

D. Demonstrate Kindness and Forgiveness

Ephesians 4:32 “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

E. Speak Graciously
Colossians 4:4-6 “That I may make it manifest as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward those who are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how to answer every man.

Proverbs 15:1 “A soft answer turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.”

F. Obey the Great Commission
Matthew 28:19-20 “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.”

G. Obey the Great Commandment
Matthew 22:37-39 “Jesus said unto him, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’”

H. Obey the Great Commitment
Luke 9:23 “And He said to them all if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me.”

The kingdom of God is growing and it can have an even greater influence in the world. How we live for Christ determines the impact we'll have.

How will you influence your world for the kingdom of God?