

The King's Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] Well, just over a week ago, the US President Donald Trump ordered a drone strike that killed Iran's most powerful military commander, General Soleimani. And it was the most provocative move that either country has taken in a decades-long standoff. And as we've seen this week, it's caused tensions between the two countries to soar, rising in fears, raising fears really of an all-out war. And so retaliation and threats lead to this escalating cycle of action and reaction. Essentially, it's a power struggle, isn't it? Where two different powers, two different kingdoms are really looking for control to see who has the most power. And each is showing through their power, whether missiles or drone strikes, how they are powerful, how they are better, how they are stronger. And now, throughout history, as we know, different kingdoms and different powers have always conquered through war and through force. And yet, unlike the kingdoms of this earth, Jesus here teaches what the kingdom of God is like. But it's different from the kingdoms of this world because it doesn't operate through war or force, and it doesn't advance through weapons or attacks. It is a power that is altogether different. Because the kingdom of God turns this world's values on their head. It's counterintuitive to the wisdom of this world.

And yet, it's far more powerful than any kingdom this world has ever known. So, Jesus is teaching us here how the kingdom of God operates in a surprising and also in a subversive way.

So, if you come with us as people looking at Mark's gospel, at the very beginning, the very first words that Mark records, Jesus is saying in Mark chapter 1, verse 15, Jesus says that the kingdom of God has come near. The kingdom of God has come near. And yet, Jesus doesn't give any explanation as to what this kingdom is like until he starts speaking in parables in chapter 4, which we're looking at today. Now, parables are living stories, analogies, drawn from everyday life. And so, Jesus is using them here to reveal what the kingdom of God is like. So, look then at verse 30. We read again, he said, What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? Or what parable shall we use to describe it?

And it's fascinating because Jesus never defines the kingdom of God in a nutshell. Rather, he explains it through a series of parables, through stories, through metaphors, through word pictures.

So, he says the kingdom of God is like, or it's like this. And so, this string of parables we've got here in chapter 4 show us what the kingdom of God is like. And so, it'd like us to look at three things as we look at each of these three parables. The first is the importance of the kingdom. We see that in the parable of this lamp on a stand. The second is the mystery of the kingdom. And we see that in the parable of the growing seed. And the third is the power of the kingdom. And we see that in the parable of the mustard seed. So, there's the importance of the kingdom. There's the mystery of the kingdom. And there's the power of the kingdom.

[3 : 30] And then we'll get the end about where we stand in relation to the kingdom that Jesus is speaking about. So, first of all, the importance of the kingdom. Jesus asks a question about a lamp. Look at verse 21. He said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. Anyone that's used to hear, let them hear. So, what he's saying is nobody, if you've got a lamp or a light, sticks it under their bed. Any kind of light is meant to shine out. Something meant to be hidden away where nobody is able to see. And so, Jesus is speaking about how the kingdom of God is being revealed. So, the lamp is like a metaphor for Jesus. Jesus is the light that shines out brightly, giving light to the world. But, not everybody wants to see this light. So, despite God's revelation in Jesus, many people are still in darkness and can't see. And they will remain in darkness, this parable saying, until the end, when everything is revealed. And so, while the kingdom may remain hidden from some, they don't see it in Jesus or his ministry, one day it will be brought fully into light. And so, the kingdom of God has already come near in Jesus Christ. And its coming will be in the future in all its fullness.

So, it's already here, but it's not yet. It's here in part, then it will be in full. And that's why Jesus is supposed to hear the importance of how we hear in verse 23. Because if we've got ears, I think everybody's got ears in here, some bigger than others, but we've not here, we've got ears. Jesus is saying, if you've got ears, then you need to hear, you need to understand about the kingdom. What he's saying is, you don't need to be confused or in the dark as regards me or what I came to do. Because the light has been switched on, as it were.

And yet, many will close their ears, close their eyes, and refuse to hear or see when it comes to Jesus Christ. And so, we'll remain in darkness. Because there are many people, and you may be one of those, many people in our world today who struggle with Christianity, who have doubts, who are skeptical, who are wrestling with the claims of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. And many people might even refer to themselves as being an agnostic, believing that it's impossible to know about God. Well, what does Jesus have to say to that? Well, exactly what he says here. Because if we read this parable, then there can't really be any honest agnostics. Why? Well, there can only really be dishonest unbelievers who refuse to see the light that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Because if we're prepared to hear Jesus' saying, then we will. We can hear, we can see, we can know, we can understand, we don't need to search anymore. Because this lamp is meant to reveal the light of Jesus Christ.

So, we can never be excused for saying that God hasn't made things clear enough for me. He needs to be better at his job. Because Jesus' words here are a warning. Verse 24 and 25. Consider carefully what you hear, he continued with. The measure you use, it will be measured to you. And even more, whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have, even what they have, will be taken from them. So, Jesus is saying, we've got to pay attention to what we hear. So, he's referring to the ways that people respond to the light. And so, this word picture has got a warning, but it's also got a promise. Because we are responsible for doing something with what we hear. Because we've got ears and we can hear, we're responsible for what we hear and what we do. So, he's saying the measure we use will be measured to us.

So, the way that we assess God, the way that we assess God's Son, Jesus Christ, the way that we assess God's Kingdom and respond to it will be the way that God assesses us. And so, the warning is that if we don't want to hear and we don't want to respond to Jesus Christ, then tragically, we'll be left with nothing. That's the measure we've used and it will be measured back to us.

[8 : 13] That's the warning. But the promise is, if we want to hear and we are receptive and trying to understand what Jesus is saying as he teaches about his Kingdom, then we will be able to receive it and we'll become part of God's Kingdom. We'll be able to hear. And it makes sense, doesn't it? Our response to the King, and he is the King, and his Kingdom will either bring us blessing or curse. That's the importance of the Kingdom. If the King has come and he's announcing his Kingdom and he's welcoming people into his Kingdom, it's the responsibility of those who hear him to enter in and not reject.

So, that's the importance of the Kingdom. If Jesus came to disclose the Kingdom to us, we might hear and respond, or if we don't, we'll miss out altogether. So, secondly, there's the mystery of the Kingdom.

And that's there in this parable of the growing seed. So, let's look at it, verse 26. He also said, This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground, night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself, the soil produces corn, first the stalk, then the ear, then the fulgur in the ear. As soon as the corn is ripe, he moves the sickle to it because the harvest has come. So, he's describing here where the Kingdom of God is like. He's explaining the mystery of how the Kingdom of God grows and advances in this world.

It grows in a way, you'll notice, that we can't predict and we can't understand. But growth is a characteristic of God's Kingdom. So, Jesus says it's like a seed that grows night and day and doesn't depend on human power. As I was preparing this talk today, I was reminded of some carrot seeds that my son Matthew and I planted a few years ago in our garden. Matthew was optimistic about having carrots, me, not so much. But one day, I thought I'll go and check how these carrot seeds are doing. Went out, looked in the garden, trying to find, amidst the weeds, where these carrots may be growing. I could see them.

So, I went inside and got Matthew out and said, Matthew, I can't see the carrots that we planted. Did you see them? And he said, look, there they are. And there they were, tiny green leaves shooting out of the earth, which in a few months' time did actually produce carrots. I could hardly find any of the signs, but the work was going on underneath in the soil. And isn't that what Jesus is saying here? He's saying, after the farmer scatters his seed, he leaves it. He just leaves it. And when he's awake or asleep, the seed in the soil will grow. And that growth can be forced by the farmer. It can be coerced, because there's another work, more significant work going on that nobody can see. And it's a mystery.

[11 : 16] It's a mystery, but it's God who gives the growth. And so, Jesus is saying, this is how the kingdom of God grows. If the word is like seed, as it was in Jesus's earlier parable, the parable of the sower, Mark chapter 4, because the word is got its own generative power. But it's God who makes it grow.

So, it happens steadily, and it happens surely in God's time and in God's way. And so, what the parable of the sower emphasizes is how we respond to God's word. The word can be snatched by Satan. It can be snatched by trouble. It can be snatched by distractions, or it can be amazingly fruitful.

So, Jesus here, the parable of the growing seed is emphasizing God's word and the growth of his kingdom. And it's a mystery how God does it. But God does it. That's what Jesus is saying in verse 28.

All by itself, soil produces corn. So, when it comes to the seed of God's word, doing its work, that means that we can't convert anyone to Christianity. We can't change somebody's life.

God is the one who does that as he works in their hearts. He does it in his time and he does it in his way. And so, it might look like nothing is happening in somebody's life. Or it may seem sometimes that scattering the seed or talking about Jesus Christ is fruitless or a useless exercise. And yet, we just don't know what God is doing. We don't know how God is drawing his kingdom. And so, that's why we should never lose confidence as people who follow Jesus, as Christians. Never lose confidence in the word of God to do God's work. So, preaching on Sundays or community group Bible study or the word one-to-one or personal Bible reading is never a waste of time. Because what might seem insignificant is how God achieves his purposes. And his seed will bear fruit and produce a harvest. And so, we must wait patiently for God to give the growth. And it's counterintuitive in a culture where we expect to get everything instantly. Instant food delivered to our door. Instant information from the internet. Instant credit to buy what we can't afford.

[13 : 56] Instant gratification for our desires. But Jesus is saying that's not how the kingdom of God operates. The work of the kingdom of God is gradual and much of it can be unseen for long periods of time.

So, just before we move on, do remember that to your parents. Because there can be a long time between sowing and then reaping. That's why we must keep sowing the seed of the word of God to our children and into their lives. And never give up. Just because we don't see instant results, the mystery of the kingdom is that God is always growing it. Okay, that's the second part, the mystery of the kingdom. So, first, the importance of the kingdom.

Second, the mystery of the kingdom. And third, the power of the kingdom, which we see in this parable of the mustard seed. The parable of the mustard seed tells us that we can't underestimate the power of the kingdom. So, Luke 9, verse 30.

And then he said, What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? Or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet, when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perish in its shade.

So, the mustard seed. So, the mustard seed, tiny seed, the smallest seed that farmers of the day would use. And so, this is a parable, not just emphasizing growth, but it's emphasizing contrast. The contrast between the smallness of the mustard seed with the large plant into which it grows.

[15 : 30] So, this is a seed that's tiny enough for birds to swallow, but it grows into a plant that's big enough for the birds to shelter in its branches. So, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God, like a mustard seed, might seem small and insignificant, but it's going to expand to be so powerful that it takes over the whole earth.

And so, Jesus is telling this parable to show how the kingdom of God has come near in heaven, but also how it will come in fullness in the future. So, there's a sense in which Jesus is the parable of the mustard seed in action.

Because Jesus came into this world, bringing God's kingdom through his life, his death and his resurrection. And one day, Jesus will return in power and glory to complete God's great plan and bring in his perfected kingdom.

And so, these birds perching in the branches gave a picture of the multitudes of people who find the place of safety in God's kingdom. And so, right now, the kingdom of God is advancing across the globe, just as Jesus said it would.

And you can read the story of the advance of God's kingdom in books like Operation World, which is really a prayer resource guide of what is going on in different countries in the world.

[16 : 51] And it gives us statistics for how Christianity is growing in these places. And it always is needing to be updated because the kingdom of God is growing.

And so, this parable should be an encouragement to us, as well as being a massive boost to the church worldwide, especially in the West, where the church is in decline, or in the Middle East, where the church faces fierce persecution.

Because as Jesus spoke in parables, and as he explained everything to his disciples, as we see in verse 33 and 34, they could hardly have imagined that they'd be part of this unstoppable global enterprise.

And if we follow Jesus, we're part of this powerful kingdom too. Okay, so we've got the importance of the kingdom, the mystery of the kingdom, the power of the kingdom.

So, as we bring it all together, we've got to ask, well, where do you stand, where do I stand in relation to the kingdom of God? Because the kingdom of God is powerful, and yet it operates in this counterintuitive way.

[18 : 00] That's why the kingdom of God will never grab the headlines. You'll never see it on the news or read about it in the newspapers. Because the kingdom of God turns this world's idea of power on its head.

It turns it upside down. The kingdom of God contradicts this world's notion of success. And the kingdom of God challenges everything that this world values as important.

So, the kingdom of God is always going to seem weak. It's always going to seem insignificant to those in this world, to those who have ears but don't hear.

Because those on the outside can't see how the kingdom operates, can't see how the kingdom grows, or understand what the kingdom will become in the future.

And it's hidden from those who choose not to see. And that's why Jesus says in verse 23, if anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.

[19 : 03] So, where do you stand in relation to the kingdom? Because Jesus' parables force us to examine ourselves, and whether we are investing our life in the kingdom of God, or whether we are investing our lives in ourselves, and what we hope to achieve and gain.

I guess if you've got a whole load of money, if you've got money you want to give them a, please see me afterwards, but if you've got a whole load of money, and you want to invest that money, then you want to check out which banks, and which building societies are worth investing in.

What are the best companies that I can buy shares in, so that my money will grow? You want to know the potential growth and security of your investment. And so when it comes to our lives, there's no better or more secure investment than the kingdom of God.

Even if living for it in this world makes no sense to those around us. Because living for the kingdom, and belonging to the kingdom, will involve a radical way of life.

In fact, it's the only kind of radical living that is probably left in our world today. Because when you think about it, there is really very little radical living in our culture these days.

[20 : 23] There is a lot of gaping the world's values, a lot of virtue signaling, just to show how woke you are, and what you do. But in reality, the goal of most people's lives is self-realization.

So being part of something bigger than yourself, like the kingdom of God, or letting anything get in the way of your desires and happiness, is seen as restrictive, and is seen as bad.

Because the story of our culture is, we should be free to do what you want to do, and to be who you want to be. So you live for yourself, and you live for your values, which you make up, and you live for the here and now.

Which is the opposite of what Jesus is saying about the kingdom of God. And yet, the kind of life our culture tells us is radical isn't really that radical at all, because everybody's doing it.

It's becoming so passé. But what is truly radical is following the king, King Jesus, and living out the values of his kingdom. Because ultimately, they are the only values, and the only kingdom that will last.

[21 : 35] And that's what I think we stand out today, from the right on political correctness of our society. We'll be living for God's kingdom. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Near Christianity*, sums this up really well on the very last page of his book.

Listen to what he says. He says, Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life, and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions, and favorite wishes every day, and death of your whole body in the end.

Submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep nothing back, nothing that you have, that given away, will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead.

Look for yourself, and you will find, in the long run, only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find him, and with him, everything else, throw an egg.

What he says is so true, isn't it? If you live for this world, and this world's values, we will ultimately lose out. Maybe not in this life, but in eternity we will.

[22 : 46] And you're living for the kingdom of God, and the values that Jesus teaches here, is the only way to sure, an everlasting life, and joy and peace, in this life too.

So how do we live this kind of kingdom life, in our world today? How do we do it? Well it's only by looking to the king, who is the one who has gone before us.

Just see how these parables apply to Jesus, because Jesus is, the light of the world. What do they do to Jesus? Well they try to conceal him, by killing him, and putting him in a tomb.

What happened? He broke out. And Jesus, second parable, in speaking of his death, compared himself to a seed. A seed that goes into the ground, and dies, to produce many seeds.

And in this third parable, Jesus became the smallest seed of all. What do you mean? Well the Lord of the universe, became a man.

[23 : 48] But just think about what that means. Because before he was a man, he was a baby. And before that, he was a human embryo.

And before that, he was literally a single cell. A tiny seed. And Jesus became that for us.

He took human life, so he could give up his life for you, and for me. And that's the only way that you and I, can enter into this kingdom. Because when we turn from our sin, and we trust in Jesus' death for us, then we're accepted by God.

So, in the kingdom of God, the throne is a cross, and the king reigns through self-giving love. And yet, it's the greatest power ever, isn't it?

It changes your life, my life, it changes communities, it changes cities like Glasgow, and it's what can change the world, and will change the world. Because Jesus, as he gave up his life on the cross, Jesus conquered through suffering, Jesus triumphed through defeat, Jesus won through losing.

[25 : 00] And so, Jesus makes us rich, through his poverty. And so, the one, Jesus, who made himself nothing, but of every knee bow, and every tongue, confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And so, it's only as we recognize, what Jesus Christ has done for us, and how he did it, that we are able to live life, in his kingdom, today.

In his kingdom, the way up is thine. Thank you to the world around us, and how everybody thinks, and lives, and acts, and behaves.

The way up is first of all, the way down. It was that way for Jesus the King, so it should be that way for all, who follow him too.

We pray. Thank you, our beloved God, for sending your son, Jesus, for revealing him to us, and revealing him, helping us understand your truth, and what your kingdom is like.

[26 : 04] We thank you that Jesus brought this kingdom here, in his coming, his life, his death, and his resurrection. We thank you for this future kingdom, that will come, that will be perfect, that will sort out of a mess, of this world.

We thank you for how he can, bring us into that kingdom, through what Jesus Christ has done. And we thank you that the way of, that kingdom, in this world, subverts our culture, and yet has a power, that this world may not see, yet is more powerful, than anything this world knows.

And so help us not to live, for just what we can see, but to live for Jesus Christ, because when we do, everything else is true in Israel. So we thank you for that, in Jesus name.

Amen. Thank you.