

Trusting God's Kingdom Way, Not Ours

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- [0 : 00] Well, let's turn to our reading this morning, and we're in Matthew's Gospel, continuing our series, and Matthew chapter 13, so please do turn to that.
- We're reading chapter 13, verses 10 to 17, and then 31 to 35. So Matthew chapter 13, and beginning there in verse 10.
- Then the disciples came and said to Jesus, Why do you speak to them in parables?
- And he answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance.
- But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables. Because seeing, they do not see.
- [1 : 06] And hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, You will indeed hear, but never understand.
- And you will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull. And with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed.
- Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn. And I will heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.
- For truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous people long to see what you see, and did not see. And hear what you hear, and did not hear.
- Looking on to verse 31. He told them another parable.
- [2 : 28] The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.
- Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet. I will open my mouth in parables.
- I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world. Amen. May the Lord bless to us his word this morning.
- Well, do you turn, if you would, to the passage we read there in Matthew chapter 13.
- And we're looking at verses 31 to 33, very particularly this morning. And it's all about trusting in God's kingdom way, and not in our way.
- [3 : 29] My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord. Neither are your ways my ways. And given that we're called to devote our lives to the cause of a kingdom that will conquer the whole cosmos, that can sometimes be rather confusing and difficult for us, can't it?
- The very language of kingdom, of empire, speaks of power. It speaks of dominion. And it certainly did to Jesus' first disciples.
- And yet, what he was saying and doing didn't seem to match up with that, sometimes not at all. It didn't then, and very often it doesn't now.

When we think about power, when we think about influence, opinion shaping, it's all about what we can see. It's all about what's conspicuous, what's impressive, what's glamorous.

That's everything, isn't it, in our digital age today. Unless a leader has a TV presence, unless they have a photogenic charisma, well, they're just not going to get anywhere in public life.

[4 : 46] And our entire world thinks in terms of thinking that what looks impressive, what sounds impressive, is impressive.

And so naturally, in the Christian church, we have a tendency to think that way too. We think that big events, we think that things that get noticed, things that feel exciting, these are the things that show real power and will have real spiritual impact.

Impressive power, might. And that's certainly, of course, what many in first century Palestine longed for, including Jesus' disciples.

And not without some reason, because the prophetic hope of God's kingdom was for glory and abundance. And Jesus had proclaimed everywhere, hadn't he?

The kingdom of heaven is at hand. So where was that power? Where was that impact? The response to Jesus that they saw was actually very varied.

[5 : 52] And often it was very hostile. And where it was the glory of the kingdom of heaven, it seemed so very feeble. And you see, when kingdom expectations seem to disappoint, whether it's in the first century or indeed in the 21st century, there can be a great urge to try and meet those expectations our way.

But God's ways are not our ways. And though very often we think, perhaps, that we know better than him, we have to learn to trust that God's ways are high above our ways, as high as the heavens indeed are above the earth.

And we need to trust his ways of establishing his kingdom in this world. Otherwise, we will become very disillusioned. We'll be despairing.

We may even give up altogether on our part in that great purpose. And that's what Jesus has been teaching in this chapter.

His kingdom has begun. It shall be consummated in glory. And in the light of that future certainty, we've got to be realistic about the present, neither with false optimism nor either with false pessimism.

[7 : 16] There's no room for triumphalism in the Christian church. The parable of the sower clearly teaches, doesn't it, that there is going to be a mixed reaction to the gospel.

There are going to be many heartbreaks for God's people. The wheat and the weeds parable is plain, that battles and opposition are going to persist right till the very end.

And nevertheless, we mustn't be pessimistic. At times, the cause of the kingdom will seem to be the very antithesis of our ideas of success and of power.

But God's ways are not our ways. And so we mustn't lose heart. The truth is, his kingdom is alive. His kingdom is growing.

However hidden it might be from the eyes of this world at times. And even hidden to our own faltering faith. In the end, what every one of these parables so clearly affirms is that the whole of creation will see with absolute clarity what they cannot see now.

[8 : 29] And that is the immeasurable glory and power of a kingdom that is so magnificent, it will stagger the world. It will stagger even the church. In fact, the New Testament tells us it will stagger even the whole host of heaven.

God's ways are not our ways, but his ways are the most wonderful of ways. And they will be shown to be that to this whole world one day.

And we as his people, we need to trust his ways. We need to rejoice in his ways. And we need to follow his ways as we share in the kingdom mission of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's what the Lord's teaching here in this chapter is all about. And the message of these two little parables we're focusing on this morning is both wonderfully reassuring, but also vitally necessary for us.

We need to know that the kingdom of heaven is begun here on earth, that it is alive and growing now. And it will surely overcome the whole of this world.

[9 : 37] The growth of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is inevitable and it is irrepressible. So don't lose heart as workmen of God and workwomen of God for such a thing.

Learn what God is like, as that hymn says. Be patient. Have faith in his ways. And be persistent. Show faithfulness in his ways, not in our ways.

Because God's ways never fail. God always accomplishes what he purposes. Look at verses 31 and 32 in the mustard seed first, where the focus is on the propagating power.

The propagating power of the kingdom of God. And the message is clear. Growth is inevitable because God is sovereign and because God is working out his purpose in this world.

The parable of the mustard seed tells us that Christ's kingdom might seem insignificant to the world and even at times to us. But it is powerful and it is growing.

[10 : 50] And in the end, it will encompass the whole world. The growth of the kingdom is inevitable. And the picture here is from the herb garden. And obviously, it's emphasizing the huge contrast between what's planted and what's seen at the end of the growing process.

Mustard seed is a tiny grain. It's proverbial for the tiny insignificant thing. And yet, within that tiny seed is the power to produce something which is vast by comparison.

Not just a garden plant, as verse 32 says, literally a herb or a vegetable, but a tree several meters tall, big enough actually for birds to come and nest in.

Last year, some of the staff to amuse themselves in lockdown had a sunflower growing contest. Now, a sunflower is a bit bigger than a mustard seed, but still, it's quite extraordinary that you get such a huge flowering plant from such a tiny seed.

This year, I think the competition is growing marrows and the idea is the same, isn't it? A tiny seed and they hope to get enormous great marrows. And it's really very surprising that something so enormous can come from something so tiny.

[12 : 04] Unless, of course, you are a gardener because you see it year after year, don't you? And you enjoy the produce. And what else says Jesus? Exactly, but my kingdom is just like that too.

And what seems like nothing now has extraordinary, invisible, propagating power. So that growth just like that, on that scale, is inevitable.

Not just possible, inevitable. because it is God's sovereign purpose. And the picture that Jesus is using of the tree isn't a novel thing.

He's taking it out of the Old Testament in several places. It speaks about the growth of a great empire. In Daniel chapter 4, for example, in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he dreamt about a tree extending and filling the whole earth.

Similarly, in Ezekiel chapter 17 or Ezekiel chapter 31. It was familiar to his hearers. And he's saying, yes, I am talking about a world-conquering empire.

[13 : 13] Just like that. But all of that is coming from something that seems now to be absolutely tiny. Something totally insignificant to the world.

And it will seem like that to the world right until the very end to those who are blind to the truth about Jesus Christ. But you believers, he says, your eyes are being opened.

And you must see. I'm revealing to you things that have been hidden from the foundation of the world. That's what he says in verse 35 about the ways of God that are a mystery to man.

We mentioned verses 34 and 35 before. That's the significant. You see, the parables are a revelation from God. God is showing the fulfillment of his plan.

Things that the prophets longed to see as verse 17 said but didn't see. But now his followers are seeing. But only remember those who will see because their heart hearts are open to Jesus not hardened to Jesus.

[14 : 22] And he says back in verse 11 doesn't he? To them it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. But to others who won't see who will not see well the whole thing the whole gospel message about Jesus and his kingdom well it just seems like nothing.

Insignificant. Just a mustard seed. You see our world the media the opinion formers the power brokers they just see the gospel story as utterly feeble pathetic meaningless absurd insignificant and they look at the church and they see something that's just weak that's declining that's finished as far as they're concerned.

And with that atmosphere all around us today as Christians it's easy isn't it for us to be tempted to despair? No says Jesus it's always been this way right from the start think of his own ministry no one in the world would guess would they that the king of glory would be born in a cow shed that he would live as a peasant no possessions that he would die on a Roman cross but that is the power and the wisdom of God at work in this world at its very zenith or think of the church's mission which began with no funds with no great strategy with no great learning just a bunch of unlettered fishermen tax collectors a cynic like Thomas and yet they turned the whole world upside down because God's ways are not our ways and what the world derides

God himself has chosen to confound the mighty it's not how any earthly power in this world would establish an empire we use armies we use missiles we use trade wars and currency wars and vaccine wars and military wars to assert visible power tangible power earthly power but God's ways are not our ways the word of the cross says Paul is folly to our world but he goes on doesn't he that the foolishness of God is wiser than man the weakness of God is stronger than man and to those who are being saved it is the power of God at work building his everlasting empire and that's God's way Jesus won the world for himself through the shame of the cross and he wins people for himself through the word of the gospel of the cross which is as nothing something so small and feeble and weak just like a tiny seed scattered and planted in gospel proclamation and so often just seems to disappear fruitlessly like in the parable of the sower or to be so easily sabotaged and damaged like in the parable of the weeds but no it contains within it the power to propagate the very kingdom of heaven and to continue doing so until this whole world is changed and filled with the glory of

God as the waters cover the sea the growth of the kingdom of God is inevitable because God is sovereign and he is working out his purpose his way and no matter how small and insignificant it may seem to the world and even to us friends the gospel of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ has mighty power power within it and the Lord Jesus wants us to know that and to trust his way of building his kingdom that's a real challenge for us isn't it it's a challenge to faith and to patience it's a challenge to trust that the Lord is at work not to despise his seed when it seems so small and insignificant but to trust it to do his work his way because the gospel word is God's power for propagating his kingdom so however insignificant the patient ministry of sowing that word can seem don't lose heart don't give up don't succumb to the ways of this world and abandon

[19 : 23] God's sure way to real kingdom growth don't do that in favor of something that seems to you now to be much more visibly effective and impressive no keep on sowing the seed even when it seems that there's just nothing but hard ground and rocky soil and endless thorns even it seems that there's so much opposition from so many weeds and so much mess even when there still seems so few visible signs of anything let alone that great spreading tree the revival that you long for the great awakening that we crave the flourishing churches all over the place that we would love to see the growth of the kingdom is inevitable because God is sovereign and he is working his purpose out for this world but this way which seems so invisible so powerless to us this way is his way and we need to ask ourselves if we if we really do believe the Lord

Jesus about that when the world around us just scoffs at us as it does and our own hearts so often are full of fear full of doubts Jesus is saying to us remember the mustard seed and remember that great tree that it will grow into and have faith and have patience and trust my word my seed trust the propagating power of that seed of the gospel word at work have faith and have patience have faith and have patience if you're a parent in bringing up your children trust that tiny seed to be doing its work in them see the world's thinking can so easily infect our hearts we think we need something really impressive something really entertaining we need some super exciting youth work or else we're going to lose our children to the church we don't just need that boring old powerless teaching of the bible some parents live in frantic worry desperate desperate for their child to make a decision for

Jesus so they're not lost well read the parable of the sower there's not very much assurance is there for those who make decisions for Jesus those as Jesus have faith have patience trust the power of my word and keep sowing the word of my kingdom is powerful it will grow trust me trust me and keep planting it in them plant it in them from infancy grasp the wonderful gift that God has given to believing parents trust the God to whom you first entrusted your little ones as they as they receive those gospel promises in the word of baptism nurture that seed in faith and in obedience as you share with them the blessings of the family of faith of the covenant household teach them the word at home not like a domineering exam syllabus that's not the way but show them it in their life and in your life as a liberating way of life treasure that word for them commit them to that ministry of the word for them in the church it's more important for them let me say this it's more important for them than their football team it's more important for them than their hockey team it's more important for them than their music lessons and their friendship groups and their friends parties on

Friday nights it contains the power of God to propagate the life of his kingdom in them you need to let your children see and experience where you see the real power of God resides and you need to trust that propagating power of the seed of the kingdom and faith and impatience have faith and patience as you witness to your friends and to your family and you pray for them and for their salvation trust the tiny seed of the planted word to do its work of power again so easily this world's conception of power infects us and we think we need all sorts of clever arguments we need all sorts of impressive achievements we need all sorts of famous people to make the gospel seem important to people no no no that's not my way just keep sowing the tiny unimpressive to the world seed of my gospel and trust and pray and you might think to yourself how can a committed atheist how can how can somebody far smarter than me how can somebody far better than me far nicer than me how can they ever be changed by something so as unimpressive as just as just hearing the bible being proclaimed and taught the apostle

Paul tells us faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ and no other way so have patience and have faith and seek to give people a hearing of the word of Christ for all of us in the church we need faith and patience as we think of our task here in this city to keep on sowing the seed of the gospel and trusting that that is what will build up the kingdom of heaven here we feel everything so feeble don't we in the face of so much disinterest often in the face of real disdain and it's so tempting to think that we need something better something bigger something that will really grab people's attention now it says Jesus trust in my way keep planting those tiny seeds because growth is inevitable where true seed is being planted and nurtured and as these parables tell us the heartaches the disappointments even the opposition that we will see that is the evidence that growth is at work that's what's causing a reaction the enemies of the kingdom are being drawn out precisely because the kingdom is threatening them not because the kingdom is useless and dead that was what the parable of the wheat and the weeds made so clear so friends it's so so important that we learn to trust the real propagating power of the word of the gospel of Christ the patient ministry of the word of God not the false worldly idea of power that we're so tempted by because we're so conditioned aren't we to the values all around us to think what is visibly impressive what is visibly attractive what is grand what is sensory is what we need you just need to look at what what

[27 : 04] Christians and actually often what especially wealthy Christians will give their money to support so often it will be the big extravaganza event it will be the latest youth culture must have it will be the great high impact program that attracts their interest to give large amounts of money to very rarely will it be something as dull something as invisible something as insignificant as just training ordinary people to teach the biblical gospel so that they will scatter the seed of the kingdom which is the word of God but that is God's way of propagating his kingdom and from that seed growth is inevitable this word of truth which came to use as Paul to the Colossians is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world so friends have faith in the power of

God's word and have patience in sowing God's word God is sovereign and the gospel is his way his power is at work to achieve his purposes for the world that's the message of the parable of the mustard seed the propagating power of the kingdom of God and similarly see in verse 33 the message of the leaven is about the penetrating power of the kingdom of God its growth is irrepressible because the gospel is powerful and it's at work in and through Christ's people in the world the parable of the leaven of the yeast that tells us that Christ's kingdom might be inconspicuous to the world and even sometimes it might seem dead but no it is alive it is infectious and it is penetrating deep into the world wherever wherever the gospel is at work in human beings and in their lives just like the mustard seed it's a parable of contrast and the point is the extent of the effect of this yeast which is out of all proportion to its size a tiny bit of leaven is hidden in three measures that's 40 litres of flour

I reckon that's about enough bread for 100 hungry teenagers at least that's a lot but there's more here than just this contrast of the size and the effect do you notice it says the yeast is hidden inconspicuous Jesus kingdom is not at all like a conquering earthly empire it doesn't seem like that because it doesn't seek to bring the world into submission with armies with tanks with missiles as the great world powers do or indeed with suicide bombs or beheading of infidels like islamists today do now Jesus kingdom is at work within his people like yeast hidden in dough and yet from within ordinary men and women boys and girls it has a penetrating power to influence many to influence a whole neighborhood a whole city a whole nation indeed the whole earth you see what these parallels are saying if the tiny insignificant seed of the gospel is the power for kingdom propagation then ordinary inconspicuous people of the gospel are

God's method for kingdom penetration into this world Jesus uses contagious gospel people to spread his kingdom people who have got Christ's word the gospel work deep into their lives like leaven to change the whole of their being and these lives working through the community of the church they will influence and change numerous areas of society numerous areas of culture even that's the nature of yeast yeast is an infection yeast is contagious it's active it's unstoppable it's irrepressible it spreads it penetrates that's how it works so when you grasp that you see it's a great challenge isn't it to Christ's people to faithfulness to perseverance as penetrating leaven here in this world also it's a great encouragement I think because

God is at work through his people and he's saying that there is nothing nothing so powerful in this world as contagious Christian people spreads like yeast when ordinary believers take God's word deep into their hearts hearts from tiny beginnings it will penetrate deep into the heart of their whole being and it will work in them conformity to Christ and that influences the world see to the world of course that's hidden it doesn't look like anything it's just to be scorned oh well they've changed their lifestyle so what oh he's changed his priorities so what in fact often it's mocked isn't it laughed at when somebody becomes a Christian and they change the way they behave and the things that are important to them but the results of those changes can bring about hidden revolutions and those results will last for eternity think about the revolution to the world that began with just 12 ordinary disciples followers of

[33 : 08] Jesus that they spread right throughout the whole of the ancient world and their lives multiplied and they shone didn't they with real light to the world they made all kinds of persecution and their lives shone even as the words spoke and within a few decades such was the influence such was the penetration of the whole known world that eventually the whole Roman empire was Christianized the whole of Europe the whole of the western world was changed forever right to this day I've been reading Sharon James his excellent little book how Christianity transformed the world if you're not quite yet up to Tom Holland's great tome dominion the making of the western mind it would be a good starter for you Sharon James how Christianity transformed the world and it outlines how many honest historians like Tom Holland like Rodney Stark and others how they've acknowledged that

Christianity has been the most powerful agent in transforming society across 2000 years Rodney Stark puts it this way the success of the west including the rise of science rested entirely on religious foundations and the people who brought it were devout Christians in the realms of freedom religious liberty justice protecting life the dignity of women philanthropy health care education and the value of human work in all its forms contrary quite contrary to the myths so often promulgated around us today it was the leaven of wholesome truth loving God honoring Christianity that enriched the world and which underpins so many of the blessings that have enriched the human race to take just one example one topical example today that of human slavery

Rodney Stark says of all the world religions including the three great monotheisms only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished slavery was once nearly universal to all societies able to afford it only in the West did significant moral opposition ever arise and lead to abolition and a great part of that of course was in the revolution in British society that came about as a result of the leaven of the gospel penetrating society through men like William Wilberforce the Clapham sect Seventh-thel of Shaftesbury and others and they were cheered on and indeed they were fomented in that by the preaching and the evangelism of people like John Wesley and George Whitefield in the great evangelical awakening that is historical fact it's acknowledged by all of these secular historians gospel changed lives penetrating and changing this world and of course it's true few of us are going to be leading lights in parliament like

Wilberforce and others but some may be and some Christians are today still and if they are then their calling is the same isn't it it's to use that position above all to be servants of Christ not servants of themselves not servants of their party and we must pray that they will do that even though the opposition is great even though the vitriol will be great as it was for William Wilberforce but whoever we are you see when the gospel penetrates our life we will be infectious and that will spread change among others in our family circle in our work and other circles where we are wherever we are God is at work leavening others with the aroma of Christ having its effect if that's truly penetrating our lives but just ordinary inconspicuous Christians who treasure

Christ who treasure his gospel who embody Christ and his gospel in their lives they will be as the leaven of the kingdom in this world I still remember years ago reading the obituary of David Short who was a former professor of cardiology in Aberdeen he was a wonderful Christian doctor former physician to the queen and a great influence on generations of medical students training in Aberdeen including my own and the obituary spoke about his life which was just so evidently to all a life of the way of the kingdom of Christ it penetrated his life wherever he went and I remember reading in the obituary that it mentioned that sitting on his desk so that it was in his view at work every single day was a card and written on it with the words from Psalm 145 verse 2 every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever and you see a life that exudes truly genuinely that attitude cannot but be contagious with penetrating power for the gospel of

[38 : 52] Christ think think about the scrubbing the washing of Israelite homes that had to take place for days before the Passover to get out every vestige of leaven from the house for that unleavened bread festival because leaven is just so contagious it's so penetrating it's so hard to expunge and Jesus says that's the way it is for believers who are truly contagious for Christ they cannot have their witness repressed and that's our calling friends as his people here in this city we look at this large city and we think that the task is impossible don't we we think there's so few of us we think we're so feeble and that's true but Jesus says be faithful be patient be persistent in living out the life of my kingdom in sharing the seed of the gospel of my kingdom every day wherever you live wherever you work with those that you know because that's my way it's inconspicuous it's nothing to the world won't be in the news it won't be fettered but that leaven will be at work irrepressibly spreading its effect that of course is is if the leaven is put to use yeast does need warmth doesn't it it needs moisture to get the ferment going it's no good just having a packet of yeast at the back of the cupboard

I think if it's been like that for too long it can become useless can't it I remember once trying to make a loaf of bread and our bread maker with some yeast from the back of the cupboard and it came out like a brick because that yeast was dead and the gospel in heaven must be alive it must be mixing in with our lives so that it does penetrate our lives in every part Jesus calls for faith and trust in his gospel not to despise his seed not to despise the word of life that is his power of salvation and transformation it's not just that he calls for faithfulness and persistence in ourselves because we are his method of transformation and sometimes we're too afraid of the ferment of really allowing that gospel to mix in with our lives to effect change in our lives we're too afraid of mixing that gospel through our lives into the world because that brings even more ferment and it brings the opposition it brings the disappointment of these other parables we begin by sowing don't we and it leads to pain it leads to disappointment it leads to sorrow like the parable of the sower or we begin to see response and it brings opposition and enemies like the parable of the wheat and the weeds but Jesus says no no no don't be afraid like that we needn't be afraid like that because we have eyes to see we have ears to hear and we know that the growth of the kingdom of our Lord

Jesus Christ is inevitable the gospel is itself that penetrating and propagating power don't be fooled don't be discouraged by apparent insignificance have faith and patience go on sowing the seed that's God's way his growth is inevitable and the growth is irrepressible Christ's people just living day by day for Jesus we have penetrating power our Lord is at work through his people in this world don't be discouraged by apparently inconspicuous effects in your own life it's not so go on being faithful go on persevering and you will be infectious God's heaven will be at work through you however unseen however small it seems that's God's way and he has caught up every one of his children in sharing it so rejoice in the promise of God trust him to be at work his way not our way for as high as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth making it bring forth and sprout giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which

I purpose and it shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it God is building his everlasting kingdom his way and friends he's given us the privilege of being part of that glorious future so trust him don't lose heart join in doing it his way let's pray Lord our God as we come now to this table we're reminded again so vividly that the foolishness of God is wiser than men that the weakness of God is stronger than men and that ours is a gospel that none of the rulers of this world who are doomed to pass away none of them have understood for if they had as the apostle Paul says they would not have crucified the

Lord of glory but this word of the cross which is just folly to those who are perishing it is to all who are being saved the very power of God so Lord turn our eyes again we pray to the power of your kingdom made perfect in weakness that we may be again truly humbled before you and so we will receive and go on receiving all the days of our lives in this gospel word the power that keeps us in everlasting life and we ask it in Jesus name Amen amen That means but we can help us the power they look at