

Scripture Reading:

Luke 13:18-30 “18 Then [Jesus] said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches." 20 And again He said, "To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? 21 It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." 22 And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.

23 Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' 26 then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' 27 But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' 28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. 29 They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. 30 And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.'”

'How Big is the Kingdom?'

The Gospel of Luke has traditionally, and I believe rightly, been divided into three major sections: The birth of Jesus and His ministry in Galilee in the first nine chapters; His final journey to Jerusalem at the appointed time from chapter nine until chapter nineteen; And the last nine chapters cover His final ministry in Jerusalem.

His final journey began at 9:51: “Now it came to pass, when the time had come for [Jesus] to be received up that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.” It ends before Palm Sunday in 19:28: “When He had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”

Here in chapters 13 & 14 we are just about in the middle of this journey and Luke reminds us of this in verse 22 “And Jesus went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.”

There is an outline of some of what Jesus taught included in the order of worship showing a pattern that we should see from last week’s message, the message this morning and the messages over the next two weeks

I will not review all of this in detail each week, but the outline can be a tool for you to do further study and discuss how this applies to all of life!

What I want to do this morning is focus on the simple question that is addressed in the title of the sermon: How big is God's Kingdom?

I often ask our children questions during the sermons to help us focus on simple answers, but I want to ask them one this morning to demonstrate why context is often SO be important in the Bible: Listen carefully to how Jesus talks about this narrow gate in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 7:13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Jesus is this narrow gate, the only way of salvation, so based on what Jesus just said, how many people are going to be in the Kingdom?

- **Few would seem to be the right answer from these verses!**

We see similar verses in our account from Luke, BUT does this answer fit with what we learned about the Kingdom last week where it was pictured as a mustard seed growing into a mighty tree? I think not!

So we must reconcile what Jesus says about a few being saved with His images of a great Kingdom

- **Getting this answer right is especially important because it will greatly impact how we live our Christian lives and apply the important lessons that Jesus is teaching on this journey to Jerusalem!**

I want to use as a sad example a man who has been VERY helpful in our study of Luke in many ways: I have used quotes from J.C. Ryle's commentary on Luke in many of my sermons, but in this section he gets it very wrong and since he wrote his commentary in 1858 we can see how far back this problem stretches in the modern church...

- **Mr. Ryle addresses the question about how many will be saved, but he gives quite a different answer than I will give this morning:**

"He that desires to know the number of the saved, in the present dispensation, need only turn to the Bible, and his curiosity will be satisfied. He will read in the sermon on the mount these solemn words, "strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." – He has only to look around him, and compare the ways of the many with the word of God, and he will soon come to the conclusion, if he is an honest man, that the saved are few. It is an awful conclusion. Our souls naturally turn away from it. But Scripture and facts alike combine to shut us up to it. Salvation to the uttermost is offered to men. All things

are ready on God's part. Christ is willing to receive sinners. But sinners are not willing to come to Christ. And hence few are saved."

If we apply the "facts" that Mr. Ryle seems to see to the Scripture from last week we would have to conclude that the mustard seed did not receive enough water & hence the mighty tree has withered and the yeast placed in that dough must have died!

- I trust you can see where the seeds of the pessimism that I denounced last week were planted many years ago
- Gone is the focus on the Great Commission where we are to disciple the nations trusting God's Spirit to bring in all those who are being saved!
- We are left with hoping we can save a few souls as they respond here and there while the world goes to hell in a hand basket!

BUT some might say in Mr. Ryle's defense, he DID quote the very passage from the sermon on the mount that we read and he comes to the same conclusion that seemed obvious to the children... So lets be good Bereans and take what Mr. Ryle says to the Scripture and see if it is true!

We will look at where Jesus makes this comment here in Luke, see how it fits with what the Bible has declared about the Kingdom and then see if we can understand the context of where we see the same teaching in Matthew's Gospel.

The lessons that I have outlined in the order of worship follow the clear call from Jesus for real repentance that we saw in the end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13.

- It is important to remember that Jesus is directly addressing the Nation of Israel, God's chosen people both here and in the sermon on the mount!

Jesus then reminded them, with His illustrations, of how big God's Kingdom was going to be... Something they should have known from the Scriptures!

- First & foremost we know from the Book of beginnings that God had a plan for man and the earth even before the fall of Adam.

After the creation of man we read in Genesis 1:28 "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Now we don't often think about this, but had there not been a fall, Adam and Eve would have gone on to bear children and over a certain number of generations the earth would have been filled: We don't know exactly how many people that is, but suffice it to say it would NOT be something we could call "a few."

After the fall, the world is filled with sin and wickedness leading up to the time of Noah where we read in Genesis 6 that "GOD saw that the wickedness of man was

great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” How great was man’s wickedness without God’s grace? It was so bad that we seldom read the verses that describe God’s reaction because we are not quite sure what to think of them!

Genesis 6:6 “And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

That could have been the end of the story if we did not immediately see this in verse 8: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.”

- So was Noah the one good guy living among all those bad people?

Hardly: Noah & his family received the gift of faith: God’s gracious gift He gives to all His elect! God did so because He had made a promise to Adam and Eve right after their rebellion: The seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent...

- This promise was made because they were STILL to carry out God’s original plan to fill the earth with righteous people, to subdue it, and take dominion!

Noah is saved and then a few generations later Abraham is called to be the father of nations... Again that does not sound like “a few.” In fact God uses stunning examples to tell Abraham about how many faithful descendants he would have:

- God told him to look at the stars of heaven...
More than a few of them!
- God told him to consider counting the sands of the seas ...
I think we can agree that there are more than “a few” of them!

We could spend most of the day reviewing how many times these promises are repeated and explained in the Psalms and by the Prophets, but let’s consider just one other example from Daniel where he interprets King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about a giant statue:

Daniel 2:34 “You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

“Filled the whole earth”... Does that sound familiar?

- Does it sound like a kingdom with a “few” people in it?

This is very clear when Daniel goes on to interpret the dream:

44 “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

- **You should begin to see that the Great Commission was not just an afterthought or plan B**

Jesus tells His disciples to go and do exactly what God had planned to do from the very beginning: Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

- **And when is the end of the age?**

Your homework can be to review Romans chapter 11 in the context of what we are discussing here this morning: There you will find that God’s plan is complete when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in!

- **How many people will there be in the Kingdom? Enough to fill the earth... and that is NOT a “few!”**

So why does Jesus talk about there being only a few that enter the gate of salvation? How has the Church gotten this so wrong for many years now? The answer comes with the lesson I said we wanted to teach the children: Sometimes context is VERY important! It is much easier to see the proper context here in Luke... But the proper context is there in Matthew’s account as well IF we are not just proof texting a position that we have already decided is true!

- **Looking at the context here in Luke, Jesus has just called the Jews to REAL repentance and then explained how his Kingdom will grow using the examples of the mustard tree and leaven.**

This brought the question from someone in the crowd who asked, “are there few who are saved?”

Jesus explains the narrow gate to remind them of the importance of repentance and looking ONLY to Jesus for their salvation. He tells those who have been given the gift of faith: His disciples; many in the crowds; as well as a few of the religious leaders to struggle or strive to enter by that narrow gate

- **Jesus is that stone in Daniel’s dream, but the Bible also talks about Christ being the stumbling stone for Israel...**

Jesus says that soon a door will be closed and then many will seek to enter...

- **Notice the difference: God gives us new hearts that strive to enter the gate, but those without true faith can only seek and then only when it is too late!**

It is obvious that Jesus is referring to the Jews when we hear the defense of those who are only ‘seeking’, “We ate and drank in Your presence, and you taught in our streets.” But they hear those sobering words from Jesus, “I do not know you.”

We see the agony of hell with Jesus strongly referring to THE weeping and THE gnashing of teeth, but we should not miss the image that they see which causes these rebels the most pain: This image provides the answer to our question...

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... the patriarchs who were to be a blessing to all the nations, and the prophets like Daniel are seen in the Kingdom

➤ **BUT not in a Kingdom with just a few people...**

NO Jesus says they will be with those who will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south... The fullness of the Gentiles!

Jesus is giving away the end of the story that is Luke’s orderly account, because this is exactly where we will end in the Book of Acts: Paul arrives in Rome and reaches out to the Jews as he always did: A few of them respond, but the Kingdom is then proclaimed to the Gentiles:

Acts 28:24 “And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. 25 So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, 26 saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; 27 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them." ' 28 "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"

➤ **Do we believe that the Gentiles WILL hear the Gospel and that the Spirit of God will bring in the fullness of the Gentiles?**

➤ **The answer to that question greatly impacts how we go about the work of the Kingdom!**

Let me quickly conclude with the lesson for the children: They gave the “right” answer to the narrow question that I asked earlier.

To properly and fully understand what Jesus meant there in the Sermon on the Mount requires a little more maturity because those verses by themselves or even in the immediate context would seem to teach that “few” are saved.

BUT we must remember that Jesus was doing the same as Paul, teaching the people of Israel, the Jews, that they must repent and look to Jesus to be saved and it is true that relatively few of them did respond...

- **There were only 120 in the upper room just before Pentecost**
- **Even the thousands we see saved in Acts can seem like a few when we know that there may have been over a million lost in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 which we will cover next week.**

And to remove all doubt about what “the few” refers to, immediately after the Sermon on the Mount Matthew tells us the account of the Roman Centurion...

- **A faithful Gentile who comes to Jesus asking that his servant be healed**

Jesus turns to the Jews and says, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”

Our great salvation does come only by passing through the narrow gate: We must come to Jesus in repentance and trusting Him alone for our salvation.

- **While there were few Jews in the days of Jesus who would respond, we know from Scripture that the fullness of the Gentiles will come in joining the faithful Saints who lived from the time of Adam until John the Baptist**

While we don’t know the exact number, we do know that God has elected them from before the foundation of the world to fulfill His great plan to fill the earth!

Our hymn of response is the words of a familiar Christmas carol sung to one of our favorite tunes: Let us hear and believe the words of Isaac Watts as we heartily sing, believing that God’s Kingdom WILL fill the earth...

AND bring Joy to the World!

Communion Meditation:

Nehemiah 9:13 [from his prayer]

“You came down also on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven, And gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. 14 You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, By the hand of Moses Your servant. 15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, And told them to go in to possess the land Which You had sworn to give them.”