

1

Welcome to the Radically Christian Bible Study Podcast.
I'm Travis

Pauley, and here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus.
This episode is

the third part of a series of discussions on kingdom
parables. I hope you

enjoy this study.

TRAVIS: All right, Wes. We're back.

WES: Yeah.

TRAVIS: Third episode in the Bible study podcast
return.

WES: Yeah, talking about kingdom parables.

TRAVIS: That's right.

WES: Yeah, we've covered several of them already, and
we're going to

cover some more.

TRAVIS: Which ones are we going to hit today?

WES: I think we're going to look at the -- these two
are kind of grouped

together -- the mustard seed and the leaven. So we
kind of talked last

time about -- I think it was last time we were just
discussing -- trying to

review, what did we talk about a week ago? But we
talked about David's

kingdom and Saul's kingdom and how they overlapped for

a time and

how David was the anointed king, but so was Saul, and so David

patiently waited for Saul's kingdom to come to an end, and that's sort of

the way that we're living right now. We're living in an era where Jesus is

king, but the kingdoms of men continue to exist and, you know, Paul

says in Romans 13 that these kingdoms are anointed by God. These

rulers that live in the world and exist, they are anointed by God to do a

certain task, a certain role, and so we don't fight against them, but we

2

patiently wait for the kingdoms of the world and the cosmic rulers that

are behind the scenes, like sin and death and Satan, for them to be

brought down and judged, and we're waiting for that day when the

kingdom of God will become what the prophets have said that it will be.

And so that's that tension that theologians have talked about in

terms of "already and not yet." And I think that's the best way to

understand the kingdom, and I think that's what all of these parables lay

kingdom is not out for us is that the kingdom is already, but the yet. And

kingdom? Yes. And are so the question is, like, are we waiting for the

you know, the we in the kingdom right now? Yes. And the epistles --

apostles, in their letters, in the epistles, talk about the kingdom in that

kind of way, as it's something that we will inherit, but yet it's also

we've been something in which we've been transferred -- into which

transferred and in which we're living now, and so it's already and it's

talk about not yet, and salvation is the same way. Paul will even

salvation in those terms, that --

TRAVIS: Right.

Yes. Will we be WES: -- that have we been saved? Yes. Are we saved?

And so there's saved? Yes. It's past, it's present, and it's future. a past,

I think that's present, and future sense to the kingdom, as well, and

the kingdom of exactly what I want to talk about today, is the idea of

heaven.

you and I have I'm afraid that when we read that phrase -- and

the redemption talked a lot about new heavens and new earth and about

of creation and how heaven -- the way that scripture speaks about it;

Paul, in Ephesians 1:10 especially, but passages like Revelation 20:21,

that the mission of Jesus is to unite all things in heaven and on earth, is

the bringing heaven and earth together rather than escaping from earth

and going to heaven. And so I'm afraid that when we read chapters like

Matthew 13, which we've been talking about -- I'm afraid that when we

read "kingdom of heaven," we think a place we're going to go.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: And so I think that we tend to read these parables with the idea

that heaven is -- or the kingdom of heaven is a place we're going to go,

and that's not at all what Paul is saying. The kingdom of heaven isn't a

place that Jesus is going to take us to; it's a reality that Jesus is bringing.

And I think that that word "reality," to me, is really helpful. I like

the word "reality." I think that when I read Jesus talking about truth,

that's the word I like to use as a synonym, is "reality." When Jesus talks

about the truth and how, you know, the kingdom -- and John -- the

gospel of John really uses that word "truth" a lot, and that's what he's

talking about, is this other reality, this reality that is real as opposed to

the truth that the world would proclaim, which is not. It's a facade; it's

not reality. What Jesus is bringing is reality. The kingdom of God is

reality, but it's a reality that isn't evident.

That's what's interesting about the kingdom of God, is that it's not

an evident reality; it's almost a hidden reality. It's a reality that you have

to be looking for, that you have to be ready for, and that's what we

talked about with the parable of the soils and that some people aren't

able to receive the word of the kingdom because -- not because there's a

4

problem with the seed, but there's a problem with their heart; there's a

problem with their listening, with their -- with their hearing the word.

So in Matthew 13:31 it says this: "He put another parable before

them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that

a man took and sowed in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds, but when

it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so

that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' He told

them another parable. 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a

woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all

leavened.'"

So, I think, two things there that I want to point out, and one is

back to what we were saying a minute ago, that the kingdom of heaven

isn't a place to which Jesus is going to take his disciples. He's describing

the kingdom of heaven as something that's being planted or something

that's being hidden. So in the first parable here, he says the kingdom of

heaven is like a seed that's being planted. It's like a mustard seed that's

being planted. Or the kingdom of heaven is like leaven; it's being

"hidden," and I love that word. We'll talk about that in a second. It's

being hidden in the dough and then it works its way through.

So that's something that we have to realize, is that the kingdom of

heaven is something that Jesus is planting. It's something that Jesus is

establishing. It's something that Jesus is sowing. It's something that

Jesus is hiding in the world; and it is, it's hidden.
And here the emphasis

is on the smallness -- is that the right way to say it?
-- the smallness of

the kingdom. That the kingdom of heaven is something
small, which, of

5

course, confounds their expectations because that's not
how you think of

a kingdom. Like when a kingdom comes, it comes in
power and might

and strength. It comes with an army. It comes with a
leader. It comes

with power and majesty, and death and destruction so
many times. But

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is going to come like
a sower planting

one tiny mustard seed, and he says it's the tiniest of
all seeds.

But then that's not the only truth about the
kingdom that Jesus is

revealing with these two parables. It isn't just that
it's small and it isn't

just that it's hidden. It's that it grows, and it
grows disproportionately

large, and I think that's the emphasis here, is that he
says this tiny seed

becomes a big -- bigger than the garden plants, and
then he even says --

and I think we have to recognize that sometimes Jesus

exaggerates the

reality of the story in order to illustrate the reality of the kingdom. So

the mustard seed doesn't -- I mean, it becomes a big plant. I mean,

there's some pretty big mustard plants. But to describe it as a large tree,

that's kind of an exaggeration. It doesn't really become this huge tree

which tons of birds can come and nest in its branches.

But he wants you to see that that -- that may not be true of the

average mustard seed, but it is true of the kingdom. It's like this tiny

mustard seed that becomes not only disproportionately large compared

to the size of the seed, but disproportionately large compared to

anything. That it's this tiny, tiny, tiny little seed that you look at and you

say, "That's insignificant; that won't change anything. That can't -- that

can't be what God has been preparing us for. That can't be what God is

bringing. That can't be the new reality. It's tiny." And Jesus says, "Yes,

6

but it will grow disproportionately large and then it becomes this huge

thing." And you think, "How in the world could this

huge thing come

from that tiny, tiny little seed?" And he says, "All of the birds come and

nest in its branches."

So I think another mistake we tend to make is talking about the

kingdom not just as -- that the kingdom of heaven is someplace we're

going to go, but we also sort of switch it out with the church, and we say,

"Well, the kingdom is the church," and I've heard that all my life. And I

think that there's definitely a lot of relation between kingdom and

church, but that's a little bit different. The kingdom of heaven is

heaven's and, really, God's rule and reign, God ruling and reigning and

that God is going to -- his rule and reign is going to be established or

planted as a tiny seed and then his rule and reign is going to grow

disproportionately large compared to how it began.

And then he says the birds of the air are going to come and nest in

its branches, and I think that's where the church comes in. I think the

church is the birds of the air. We are -- the people of God are the birds of

all the nations, like these are the people that are coming and making

their home in the branches of God's rule and reign, and that God's rule

and reign -- Isaiah 11 talks about the kingdom as if the knowledge and

the glory of God will so fill the earth. He says that the knowledge of the

Lord will cover the earth the way that the waters cover the seas. It

doesn't say the waters cover the earth, because, obviously, the waters

don't cover the earth, but the waters cover the seas. How much so?

Completely. And that's the idea of the kingdom, that the kingdom will be

7

so large that there will be room in the kingdom for the birds of all of the

nations to come and make their home in its branches.

So there's so much truth packed into this one tiny little parable,

and, again, that's the way that parables work, and that's what he's

describing, is that it's going to start so small; that he's bringing a new

reality of God's rule and reign that's going to begin very small but will

grow very large. And, you know, we talk about -- like we talked about

the idea of the prophets saying, you know, God's kingdom is coming, and

when God's kingdom comes, then all of the rulers of the world will be

brought to an end and God's rule and reign will last forever. And then

Jesus saying, "Okay. The kingdom of heaven is at hand," and then

everybody's anticipation is growing big. And then he says, "It's going to

come in this generation," and they're like, "Yes, it's going to come in this

generation." And he says, "It's going to come with power." And they say,

"Yes, it's going to come with power," and then he dies and then he's

buried and then he's raised, but then he ascends and then the church is,

like, wondering what's going to happen. And then Pentecost happens

and the Holy Spirit comes, but even all of that -- I mean, it happens in

and around Jerusalem, like, I mean, a fairly relatively insignificant place

on the world's scene.

And then you think, "But what really changed," right? I mean,

what really changed after the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and

the day of Pentecost, and then even like a few decades later Jerusalem

falls, and then, like, here we are in 2020. I mean, there's still sin and

death and destruction and chaos and bleh. You know, there's still all this

stuff. Like what has changed? I think that's exactly what he's saying, is

that it's going to be planted small, but when Jesus came forth from the

tomb, new creation came with him. The kingdom came with him, and

this new reality is spreading out into the world, and our job is not just to

wait around for everything to be made right. Our job is to embrace this

reality that is here right now and to live in the right now with the

mentality and expectation of what will be.

TRAVIS: Yeah. You know, as you were saying that, I think about, you

know, the days of the early church and how they were looking for --

"Okay. He's coming back. He's going to come back in my lifetime." You

know, "Okay. He's going to be gone for a little while. We don't know

what that's about, but he said he's coming back," and they're expecting

him around the corner. And we even read the letters that Paul and Peter

wrote and it sounds even like they have -- there's a sense of urgency

with which they talk about the second coming.

And, in some ways, I think, like, living now, 2,000 years after that,

where we have this -- you know, just because time has passed and we're

Christians in this new -- in this modern era, we have an idea of, well, God

doesn't -- you know, like Peter said, God's "soon" is going to be different

than our "soon."

WES: Yeah. A day is as a thousand years.

TRAVIS: But in a way, I think it -- I appreciate the fact that it's a

different kind of faith that we have -- that we have to have than I think --

in some ways, I don't envy them, maybe those that even saw Jesus, that

got to hear him speak -- you know, preach, and then are Christians in the

9

early church and they're expecting him to come back. And as things got

harder and harder for the early church, they're thinking, "When's he

coming? When is that kingdom coming?"

And I think one of the things that I -- I think about when, you

know, we look at these parables about -- it's small; it's not going to be

obvious until it's too late kind of thing. Like it's not going to be obvious

until God has truly taken -- you know, his kingdom has come in full, and I

think about like -- you know, we've talked about it before, when he tells

the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the point he makes about,

you know, Abraham saying to the rich man who's suffering, "No, I'm not

going to send back your -- I'm not going to send Lazarus back to tell your

brothers to get their act together" because they had the law and the

prophets.

And, you know, the comparison I'm drawing is, I think, you know,

we want to see the big -- I think even today we have a mind-set that we

want to see the kingdom like a kingdom. We want to see and we're

dying for the day that God comes in and we are truly under his reign

without sin and death in the picture at all, without the earthly rulers that

we struggle against at all. But I think in there is -- as we're talking about

that, there's a lesson there that, you know, we want to see that, but the

power of the kingdom and how it affects each of us individually, I think,

definitely lies in, "Can you do the small thing? Can you do the small

things that usher in the kingdom? Can you be a kingdom person by

having faith like a mustard seed," as he talks about elsewhere?

Jesus is -- you know, a point that's made over
and over in scripture

10

is he's not always asking you to do some great thing
and he's not always

going to show you some great thing, but when we look at
-- you know,

evil is big. Evil is bombastic. Evil is in our face.
Sometimes I think the

kingdom is much more subtle than that.

WES: That's a good word, "subtle," yeah.

TRAVIS: And that's what he's calling out in us in
these parables, about --

it's small. It starts small and it spreads.

WES: I love that. I love that, and I think that's
exactly right, and we do --

there is that tension, and I think that tension, that
paradox, is really good

to live with, to live in that tension of anticipating
and waiting, but also

embracing the reality that exists now. Because you
think about -- you

mentioned the early church, and they did -- they lived
with this

anticipation of the return of Jesus, but they also,
from day one -- in the

book of Acts, in Acts chapter 4, it says, "There was
not a needy person

among them." They eliminated poverty within the

church. I mean, think

about that. They eliminated poverty within the church,
and as the

church spread from Jerusalem out to Samaria and Judea
and -- or Galilee

and throughout the known world, even all the way to
Rome and beyond

-- as the gospel spread and as the church spread, they
continued -- Paul, I

mean, so much of his ministry was encouraging churches
in Asia and in

Greece to support the Christians back in Jerusalem and
to take care of

one another. The goal was to eliminate poverty within
the church

because they found the kingdom.

And this goes back to -- well, we'll talk about
this in the next one,

but this idea that the kingdom is here right now so
we're going to live

11

like that now, but also anticipate when the struggle is
gone, when the

pain is gone, when the curse is gone. We're going to
embrace it now.

And you're so right that it's these little things. How
do we live as

kingdom people? Well, we're filled with love and joy
and peace and

patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and

gentleness

and self-control. We make sacrifices for one another.
We take care of

one another. And this is why there is such parallel
and overlap between

the kingdom and the church is because the church is
supposed to reflect

the fact that we are an alternative kingdom. We are an
alternative

reality. This is the truth.

And so we're constantly -- we're constantly
seeing the kingdoms

of the world and the ideology of the world clash with
the church, and

we're constantly, you know, having to be reminded this
is reality. Like

what's reality? Is reality that the strong win? Is
reality the world's

golden rule, that he who has the gold makes the rules?
Is that the golden

rule or is the golden rule love your neighbor as
yourself or do unto

others what you would have them do unto you? Like
what's the real

golden rule? Who really wins in the end? He who dies
with the most

toys wins? Like is that reality, or do the meek
inherit the earth? Like

what's reality? And Jesus introduces this different
reality and we are

this new-reality people.

And, of course, the people from the kingdoms of
the world will

look and say, "That's bizarre. Why would you live that way?" And even

we ourselves are constantly having to struggle with that and say, "Well,

how can I live like this right now while all of this is still going on? Can I

12

really embrace this alternative kingdom, this alternative way of thinking

and living and being and seeing and hearing and doing?" And Jesus says,

"Yes." And you say, "Well, what if I die? What if this -- embracing this

new reality, what if it kills me," because it might, and it has, many, many

people. And Jesus says, "Don't fear those who kill the body," you know,

"because even though you die, yet shall you live." Jesus is going to raise

us from the dead so we can't lose.

The kingdom of God has come and is coming and will come and we

are right now making our home in its branches, and it should be a reality

that we embrace, that's making a difference in the here and now. And

that's a reality and a truth that sometimes I don't think that we embrace,

is that it makes a difference not just in what we hope for -- because the

kingdom is not just about hope. It is about hope, for sure, and if there

was no hope we would be miserable people. There would be no point in

doing what we're doing if there was no hope. Paul says as much in I

Corinthians 15. But it's also about current, present victory and it's about

living in that victory. It's about proclaiming that good news, that in spite

of appearances, in spite of what it looks like, Jesus is king and his

kingdom has come.

TRAVIS: And I think, like, as we're talking about that, I think -- like I

know a practical application of that I've noticed in just, again, a small

way, but something -- you know, I think, in the context, something to

really appreciate, something I know I've appreciated, that in like the

early days of COVID when lockdown started and any interaction you had

quickly switched to Zoom or phone or text, you know, and no in-person

13

stuff, and one of the things that quickly happened because of that was -- I

had multiple friends that I hadn't spoken to or just kept up with in a

while. You know, life goes on and it gets harder
sometimes, but because

every -- because if you wanted to see your friend down
the street you

were doing a Zoom call anyway, it sort of made you --
it sort of took

away the weirdness of like reaching out to an old
friend that you haven't

talked to.

And so I got to talk to these friends and
reconnected and, in some

ways, started meaningful relationships again with
people, and that was

one of those things -- because, on the one hand, we're
getting this dose

of fear every day and we're getting conflicting
information; we're getting

-- every aspect of what's going on gets turned into an
argument, and it's

like that can -- I think, in some ways, that just
happens all the time with

everything. I mean, we're now in the fall here in
2020, and I think, like,

that's -- it's so easy to be consumed by the world's
problems. And then

to just like have moments where you can stop and
appreciate something

relatively small -- certainly in comparison to these
big problems and

these big arguments that we're having, stopping and
appreciating those

little things, I think -- you know, I think, as I get
older, I notice those are

the kind of things that keep the darkness at bay. It's just stopping to

appreciate, like, man, there's a lot of bad things going on right now; I'm

stressed out about this and this and this. All that's true, but, man, I really

needed that. Man, that felt really good. I was glad I got to be a part of

that for them.

And it's like that -- I think, you know, again, on the subject of, like,

14

appreciating the smallness and how that -- you know, how many times

can we look back in our own individual lives and look back at something

small that started something -- you know, started an avalanche of good

things and improvement. And I think, as we talk about these parables

focusing on the small -- you know, it's small; it's going to spread. It's like

-- I think maybe part of that is just recognizing that in our own lives and

the opportunities we have to participate in that.

WES: Yeah, because there's this cynicism that we all can be consumed

by that says, "That's not going to work." "What difference is that going

to make?" "That doesn't make any difference." I love the story about the

kid and the starfish. I'm sure you've probably heard that story, you

know, where the starfish all wash up on the beach and he's walking

along and tossing one at a time, and there's thousands of them

everywhere. And he's tossing one at a time back into the ocean. And

some guy walks up and says, "What are you doing? There's thousands.

You're never going to make a real difference." And he picks up another

starfish and he tosses it into the water and he said, "It made a difference

to that one." And it's this idea that these tiny little things empowered by

the Spirit, that it really is making a monumental difference and that

Jesus is changing the world one life at a time, one act of kindness at a

time, one act of selflessness at a time.

But at the same time -- and I think you touched on this -- that the

world often offers like an optimism that says, "Well, bad things aren't

really that bad," and it also offers a pessimism that says, "Well, things

are actually much worse than they seem," and I think the gospel offers a

reality, a realism, that can say, "No, actually, things really are really bad.

The darkness is really dark, but it loses and we win," and that's why we

can be realistic about the pain and the death and the reality, but at the

same time not be despondent, not be overwhelmed with grief and

sorrow. To say, "You know what? Yes, the darkness is really that dark,

but guess what? It is no match for the light. It is no match for the reality

not only that will be, but that is," and we can look at the little things --

and, you know, sometimes we look at the big -- like you said, the

darkness, the evil is so in your face and it's so big. I often picture -- and I

love movies like Lord of the Rings, and you picture like all the orcs

coming and there's all these monsters that are coming through the walls

and you think, "How in the world? We can never win. We can never

win." And Jesus says, "No, you can never lose. When you're with me,

you can't lose." It really is that bad.

You know, sometimes -- I especially think about this when I'm

doing a funeral for somebody, and sometimes we try to convince ourselves,

"Well, it's not really that bad. They're in a better place, and maybe I'm

being selfish by grieving." And I want to say, "No, death really is bad,

like it's a bad thing. It's an enemy of God, but it's not going to win. It's

going to be destroyed." And we live right now not only with the

anticipation of death's final destruction, but we live right now in the new

reality that we're not even a slave of sin and death even right now,

because death someday is going to take me, and I don't want that day

and I don't long for that day, but it can't keep me and it has no hold on

me, and so that changes not only what I'm hoping for, but it changes how

16

I'm living, and that's what I hope that we can encourage through all of

this.

And, again, we didn't talk much about the leaven, but he says that

the woman hides it, so it's kind of subversive. It's this subversive

kingdom that's hidden right there in the midst of it. It's like being

behind enemy lines, and here we are and that's who the church is. The

church is the people who have been -- "church" is one of those funny

words because it's singular but yet it's talking about a plural reality, so

sometimes I don't know which verb to put with it, but... So the church is

the people of God who are under God's rule and reign and we have

subversively been hidden in and amongst the enemy, not to kill and

destroy, but to take them captive -- rather, to set them free from their

captivity as we've been set free from our captivity, and so it's spreading

like leaven in a lump of dough. It's spreading throughout and it's

causing the whole thing to rise disproportionate to its size when it

began.

And that's what's just so amazing. 11 men -- 11 men -- you know,

because one of them ended his own life -- and then spread and spread

and spread until here we are 2,000 years later and it's making a

difference. This way of the kingdom, this new reality, this new way of

living is making a difference, and so we have to be very careful that we

don't -- as you so well pointed out, we don't allow that discouragement

and cynicism that the world would have us to take in and have that be

our reality. That's not our reality. Our reality is,
no matter what
happens in 2020, no matter what happens in 2021, no
matter what

17

happens in the future, no matter who's in the White
House, no matter
what, we win, Jesus wins. And not only does Jesus win
in the end, but
Jesus has already claimed victory and this new reality
has already been
planted and has already been hidden in the world, and
it's growing and
it's making a difference even right now.

I really hope you enjoyed this Bible study and
I hope you'll
subscribe to hear future episodes of the podcast. A
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