

Intro

In our world today we experience things that trouble us. We wonder why a precious saint has cancer while a crook is getting off on a technicality. If God's good, and he rules over his creation, what is going on today? We see COVID, riots, and a divided nation. We ask ourselves, where's God's plan in that?

Where is history going? Is there a destination? Is there a big story that makes sense of the chaos?

This morning we look to Matthew and we see there is an overarching story unfolding in our world. As we look to Matthew, we ask this question:

BIG QUESTION: How should we understand the kingdom of heaven?

READ PASSAGE Matthew 13:24-43, 47-50

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

- Descriptions of the kingdom of heaven
- Jesus is breaking down misconceptions of the kingdom of heaven

FCF: rebellion against God = gospel rejection and kingdom opposition

Grace given: Hope of kingdom advance and kingdom perfection

Gospel connection: God's saving rule in the present and the future

Parables

Parable nature: stories that call for a response

Parable purpose: to reveal mysteries...mystery = truth hidden but now revealed...elements of God's eternal plan were previously concealed (e.g., a spiritual kingdom that gradually expands over an extended period of time)

Context

Jesus is using parables to correct mistaken understandings of the kingdom. The Jews hoped for a Messiah that would come and overthrow Rome and immediately re-establish Israel's kingdom and usher in the new heavens and new earth (Isa 66:22-24). They didn't envision a spiritual kingdom that would begin small and gradually expand while existing alongside earthly powers.

Kingdom of heaven

The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same thing. They are not distinct.

Matthew 19:23-24 And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

Kingdom observations

- Classic formulation is **already – not yet** = the kingdom is already in the sense that it arrived with Jesus and presently manifests itself in God's saving reign among his people...the kingdom is not yet in that God's rule isn't total yet...one day it will be!
- The kingdom is active today in Jesus building his church ("*a man who sowed good seed in his field*" – 13:24)
- The kingdom is something that grows = it's growing presently (13:31-33)
- The kingdom is something believers presently belong to...today we are "sons of the kingdom" (13:38)
- Unbelievers aren't sons of the kingdom (13:38), but in some sense they exist in God's kingdom (13:41)
- The kingdom will look differently in the future (13:43)
- In the future, the kingdom will act as a separator of men (13:47)

Kingdom summary

- Already – not yet
- Present form will give way to a different form when Christ returns
- Simple definition: God's rule and reign
- Today kingdom speaks of God's redemptive rule in the hearts of his people
- Believers are uniquely sons of the kingdom (13:38) = we belong to God's redemptive reign

Colossians 1:13-14 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Redemption = Jesus paid the price, or ransom, necessary to purchase the release of sinners from their slavery to sin...the price paid to release sinners from their guilt was Jesus' death on the cross (slaves were redeemed when someone paid the price for their ransom)

- Future kingdom speaks of a time when all opposition will be abolished

Today we wait for Jesus to return and establish his eternal kingdom, and at the same time we seek to place our lives under God's redemptive rule = being transformed by the Spirit.

Point 1: The kingdom of heaven grows alongside Satan's kingdom (13:24-30, 36-42)

Explanation

Each parable uses comparisons to describe the kingdom of heaven. "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field (13:24).*" From 13:37-38 we know that the sower is Jesus, the good seed is believers, and his field is the world. So the kingdom of heaven is described as Jesus raising up a crop of believers in his fallen creation. This is kingdom advance through the redemption of sinners. As Jesus proclaimed the gospel, some responded in repentance and faith.

However, at the same time, Satan is also at work: *“but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away (13:25).”* 13:38-39 tells us the enemy is the devil, and the weeds are Satan’s children. While the kingdom is advancing, Satan is sowing unbelief, resulting in weeds.

How is Satan doing this? Satan deceived Eve leading to a chain of events where Adam ate from the forbidden tree. This brought sin into God’s very good creation. This left humanity with a sinful nature where our natural inclination is rebellion against God. As *“the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4).”* So Satan sowed unbelief at the beginning, he brought all humanity into a state of unbelief, and he continues to sow deception today (e.g., false teachers).

In this age, both fruitful plants and weeds spring up (13:26). Jesus is the explanation for the good seed (13:27). Satan is the explanation for the weeds (13:28). They both grow up together (13:29), which would perplex Israel. Shouldn’t kingdom arrival result in the wicked destroyed (see Isa 66:22-24; Dan 12:1-3)? Jesus is explaining something hidden (13:35): there will be an inter-advent age where the kingdom grows alongside Satan’s reign. Advent means “coming.” Inter-advent age speaks of the time between Jesus’ 1st and 2nd comings. The kingdom comes but the wicked remain. The wicked and the righteous will grow together until the harvest time:

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” – 13:30

Application

Let’s consider two more comparisons before considering implications.

Point 2: The kingdom of heaven starts out very small and ends up very large (13:31-32)

Explanation

The kingdom of heaven is compared to a mustard seed. The mustard seed is said to be *“the smallest of all seeds (13:32).”* The mustard seed isn’t literally the smallest seed in existence, but the Jewish people considered it the smallest of all seeds. Jesus’ purpose isn’t a botany lesson. Jesus simply uses something understood by his hearers to be very small to make a point about the kingdom of heaven. A mustard seed *“is 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 13:32.”* The point is **the kingdom starts out very small and ends up very large**. There’s a radical contrast between the kingdom’s beginning and its end.

Again, this conflicts with Jewish expectations. The kingdom was supposed to come all at once, eliminating Gentile rule and ushering in the eternal state. The kingdom wasn’t supposed to begin with humble origins and gradually develop into a worldwide movement.

This kingdom is one that grows. For example, growth during the apostolic era. The spread of Christianity during the Reformation. And today in places like China and Korea. As new people are redeemed, the kingdom expands.

Point 3: The kingdom of heaven starts out small but yields remarkable effects (13:33)

Explanation

"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." – 13:33

Leaven was made by keeping a little dough from the previous weeks' batch and fermenting it in storage. The leaven would then be added to a new batch of dough. Leaven is a substance that enables the dough to rise. Three measures of flour = about 50 lbs., and enough to feed 100-150 people. The picture is a small substance that permeates a larger substance with remarkable effects.

The leaven itself doesn't grow. It affects other substances, causing them to grow. It's a small part with large effects.

Like leaven, the kingdom's effects are out of proportion with its humble beginnings. The kingdom permeates the whole world. Local churches exist throughout the world. Christian values have shaped cultures at times. We might think of William Wilberforce (1759-1833) who labored to make the African slave trade and slavery itself illegal in the British empire. For 46 years Wilberforce labored, and he didn't achieve decisive victory until three days before his death. On July 26, 1833 slavery was outlawed in the British colonies. Yes that's after America gained its freedom from Britain.

I mention this simply to note that God's redemptive reign in the small little group of Jewish disciples would remarkably affect the world at large. Incredibly unlikely, but what Jesus said has happened.

Application

What does this say to us today?

Live with **optimistic realism**. We see both pessimism and optimism in today's passage.

Pessimism because Satan is the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). Mankind has fallen, the human race is corrupted, and the world stands in rebellion against God. We should be pessimistic because of what the Bible says about humanity's slavery to sin (see Rom 6:17-18; Eph 2:1-3). Weeds will persist until Christ returns. The presence of sin will affect us at a personal level. The presence of sin will affect us at a national level. Satan's influence is here to stay until Christ returns.

Optimism because Jesus is sowing sons of the kingdom. Optimism because the kingdom has grown and will continue to grow until Christ returns. More sinners will repent! Some will heed the gospel! Optimism because the kingdom is permeating our world. God's redemptive reign, through the church, converts individuals and even influences cultures. Optimism because our hope isn't exclusively future. The kingdom is advancing today despite opposition!

The kingdom of heaven exists side by side with Satan's kingdom. Both grow together until the harvest (13:30). Satan has blinded the world, yet the kingdom advances. The kingdom grows within a domain of darkness. Invading the darkness, the kingdom rescues weeds from the dark domain (Col 1:13-14). This is the storyline of Scripture...

Creation

Into the biblical storyline of creation – fall – redemption – consummation (= point of completion = completion of God's eternal plan), the kingdom of heaven comes in the person of Jesus (Mark 1:15). When

God finished his creating work, his creation was very good (Gen 1:31), and Adam and Eve were commanded to populate the earth (Gen 1:28) and given one restriction:

"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." – Gen 2:16-17

Fall

Eve was deceived by Satan (Gen 3:1-6; 1 Tim 2:14), and Adam followed along (Gen 3:6; Rom 5:12-21). With the one man's trespass, sin and death spread to all men (Rom 5:12). Mankind became sinners by nature from birth. We all became weeds, sons of Satan. This is spiritual death. With spiritual death came physical death. We became susceptible to disease and decay. Death was inevitable.

Redemption

After the fall, redemption came through faith. People trusted what God had revealed up to their point in history, and they followed him. They were reconciled to God in light of what Jesus would do in the future.

Jesus came to die for our sins and establish his church. His church, under his rule and empowerment (Matt 28:19-20), would have massive impact throughout the world. The gospel would be proclaimed to all nations (Matt 24:14), and people from every tribe and language and people and nation would be redeemed (Rev 5:9-10). Sinners continue to be redeemed until Jesus returns.

Redemption comes through faith and repentance. We trust what God's revealed to us. Particularly that God is holy, we've sinned against God by breaking his law = rebellion, that Jesus died as a substitute for every sin we'll ever commit, for our forgiveness. Believing God is holy, sin is rebellion and detrimental to us, and that Jesus is good, we turn from sin and follow Jesus' teachings.

Now to the consummation...

Point 4: The kingdom of heaven will separate humanity at the final judgment (13:30, 38-43, 47-50)

Explanation

The parables of the weeds and the net describe the same event. There will be a great separation at the harvest when Jesus returns:

"The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." – Matt 13:41-42

13:47-50 agrees. Both parables mention the end of the age, angels separating the evil from the righteous, a fiery furnace, and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Fiery furnace = unknown whether it's literal or symbolic...pictures suffering that doesn't end (see Rev 14:11)

Weeping = like sorrow at a funeral where there's loud wailing

Gnashing of teeth = fright or suffering leads to grinding the teeth

The message is hell is a place to be avoided at all costs. Escape from the domain of darkness. Turn from your sins and turn to Christ. Why?

“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” – Matt 13:43

Jesus says listen to what I’m saying. Heed my warnings. Embrace me.

Eschatology

Jesus pictures a very simple end-times scheme here:

The present age → Jesus returns → the wicked separated from the righteous (assumes the resurrection of all people – see John 5:28-29) → wicked sentenced to hell (Rev 20:11-15) → believers dwelling in the kingdom (Rev 21-22)

Application

Christianity is optimistic about the future. Satan will be destroyed in hell. Physical suffering and death will cease. Sin will cease. No more being sinned against. No more shame or despair about sin in our own hearts. God wins. We dwell in a world under Satan’s sway (1 John 5:19), a domain of darkness (Col 1:13), but not forever. Suffering will cease. We will dwell with the God who redeemed us forever.

Conclusion

Christianity is a religion of hope. Not wishful thinking like I hope the weather will be good tomorrow. No our hope is an expectancy that what God has promised is certain. God keeps his promises because he’s all-powerful and he’s truthful.

We have hope today. We’re forgiven despite our sins. Once rebels, we have peace with God. Once slaves to sin, we have God’s Spirit working in us. We’ve been rescued from the domain of darkness. Destructive patterns can be overcome. We don’t have to live in defeat. God’s kingdom is advancing, which means that as we share the gospel some will believe. We have hope for the future. Jesus will return and establish a kingdom where suffering is gone forever. The pains in this fallen world are temporary. God’s redemptive rule is a good thing! Today and tomorrow! I’m saying we should be a hopeful people. The fight for faith is a fight for hope.