

The Hidden Power of God's Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-35

Introduction

Influence: Let's talk a little about influence. Social media has created a new class of person called an "influencer" and spawned the much worst offspring of wannabe-influencers ("a lot of you have asked about my skincare routine," *no one has asked about your skincare routine). These folks use their social media clout to move the marketing needle on various products and experiences. The more followers and the more your followers will buy what you recommend, the more influential your status (If you're an Instagram Influencer who doesn't have a picture of yourself in a sea of wildflowers, can I even trust your dry shampoo recommendations?). The problems with this are legion. Social media is fake. Everything is marketed, airbrushed, and managed (e.g., divorce announcements, etc.). The content is for influence not from principle. One's power comes from one's reach which is primarily measured in "clicks." Therefore, the influencer continues to do more and crazier stunts to get attention. Self-worth will be determined by how much approval they can gain from other people (i.e., the number of followers and their subscriber count). This is not only a recipe for a lifetime of unhappiness, but it's also a surefire way to lead a life of meaninglessness. If a person's ambition in life is to gain value from public adoration, then they're setting their life up to be on display for anyone's amusement and entertainment. All of this is precipitated on the common views of power.

Power: We have been taught that "bigger is better." Despite our protestations otherwise, we still live by the idea that "might is right." As a culture we value celebrity, wealth, popularity, and power more than justice, kindness, love, and gentleness. As a result we have been taught to measure something's value by its size and influence.

We can faithfully trust that God is establishing his kingdom despite its apparent weakness.

³¹ 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. ³² It 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." ³³ He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." ³⁴ All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵ 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."¹

¹ ³¹ Ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων, Ὅμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃν λαβὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔσπειρεν ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ. ³² ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων, ὅταν δὲ αὐξηθῇ μεῖζον τῶν λαχάνων ἐστὶν καὶ γίνεται δένδρον, ὥστε ἐλθεῖν τὰ πτερινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ κατασκηνοῦν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ. ³³ Ἄλλην παραβολὴν ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς. Ὅμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ζύμη, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἐνέκρυπεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον. ³⁴ Ταῦτα πάντα ἐλάλησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν παραβολαῖς τοῖς ὄχλοις καὶ χωρὶς παραβολῆς οὐδὲν ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς, ³⁵ ὅπως

1. The Kingdom Grows (vv. 31-32)

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Kingdom of Heaven: These parables, we’ve seen, are meant to explain **the Kingdom of heaven** to those who have the spiritual perception to understand it. The Kingdom of heaven is that place where God is king. These similes illuminate the nature of the **reign** or **rule** of **King Jesus**.

Small Seed: Jesus compares the KoG to a mustard seed which was proverbially known as the smallest seed commonly planted in a Palestinian fields (*don’t analyze this like a biologist or worry too much about the botanical details, just like an apple a day doesn’t actually keep the doctor away or a watched pot never boils). These tiny mustard seeds grow into large bushes or small trees that can be 10 or 12 feet tall.

- A “seed” is such a great picture of the KoG because all that you need is already in the thing. It is kind of amazing that a tree comes out of a seed! Something so tiny leads to something so strong (same with children, their present weakness is no determiner of their future potential).
- For those that have “eyes” to see, Jesus is saying something about the current reality of the KoG and the nature of its growth.
- Jesus has come announcing his Kingdom reign but, if you’re being honest, it seems that it has a rather unimpressive beginning. A backwater prophet, son of a tradesman, with no political power, religious prestige, or (apparent) distinguished heritage. He’s gathered a hodge-podge of disciples ranging from political zealots and tax collectors to fishermen. They had no *real* power. **How could this be the long awaited Kingdom of God?**

Historical Reality: But we see in the spread of the gospel that the kingdom does grow dramatically. The kingdom has inauspicious beginnings but grows impressively.

- This is how God has chosen to work. He uses the foolish. He used Moses (a stuttering murderer), David (an adulterous warrior). He was born to a teen mom.
- The church grew from the soil of persecution. Uneducated fishermen were some of the earliest missionaries. Plenty of religious leaders have come and gone, yet here we are, 2,000 years later, thousands of miles away, and the truth of Jesus and the power of the gospel have transformed our lives.

πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος, Ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου, ἐρεῦξομαι κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς [κόσμου].

Extent: And we need to know and trust and believe that the KoG is growing and will extend to all corners of the earth. Jesus is king of all people in all places. The kingdom will extend throughout the earth. That's why it says that 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.

- The strong kingdoms of the earth (e.g., Babylon) are described as trees that house all the birds under heaven (cf. Dan 4). But God has always promised his rule would outpace all the others. Every empire, nation, and earthly power will pale in comparison to him. The climax of John's Revelation at the end of the Bible shows God on his throne, sovereign over every person from every nation.
- We underestimate the true power of the KoG when we judge it by its modest start. Everyone who despises Jesus as King will eat their words: "For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice" (Zec 4:10a). That's gonna be such an awkward moment standing before the throne of God. Oops, my bad, I guess you were right (e.g., eating your words in an argument).

Contra Rome: But you can't blame Jesus' audience for their misunderstanding. They currently lived under the greatest empire yet known to man. The Roman empire was the largest, most economically successful, bureaucratically efficient, and far-flung empire on the earth. When you start comparing the KoG to the Roman empire, the contrast can't be more stark. Matthew's audience should have a solid image in mind of what God's kingdom (empire) looks like from the preceding twelve chapters.

- Jesus is King (not Caesar).
- It is a gracious gift of God.
- Some welcome it, while others (especially religious elite) resist God's claim.
- It disrupts normal rhythms and traditions of life, calling Jesus' followers to a new way of life (often against societal values).

Reversal: A question we might ask ourselves is how to best image God's reign in contrast to our modern day "empire." What language might we use? What are 21st century equivalents of mustard seeds?

- The KoG is an inside-out, upside-down reign of God's love, justice, and life. Power structures are reversed. What is small and hidden is more significant than displays of might and power. And all of this is meant to give us a glimpse of God's goodness to come.

Weakness is the Way: We notice this confusion regarding power and weakness in the culture. Many of us feel the only way "win" is through power. Therefore, we have to win elections to influence the world. If our preferred candidate loses, we are tempted to think all is doom and gloom (hence the phrase, "the most important election of our lifetime, repeated every election of our lifetime"). But, the people of God are not called to positions of power but service. We are not called to be a "moral majority" but a "prophetic minority" (Moore).

- In the economy of Jesus, weakness is strength. Foolishness is wisdom. The last will be first. Salvation is through sacrifice. Leaders are servants. *But that is not the way of the world.*

When we try to outmuscle our opponents, to impose Christianity, to influence through power and worldly strength we are not using the methods of the Kingdom and we are confessing that we don't really believe Jesus is king.

- Sometimes we do this in church. We think "bigger is better." We want to compete with the entertainment of the world. But we can't swag bag people into the KoG. What's compelling about the KoG is **the King**.
- We do not come to our neighbors with any strength on our own. We are not more intelligent or better equipped, we come as "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."
- Rather than pursuing platform, we should pursue service. Rather than fame, humility. Rather than flashy success, longstanding faithfulness.

How Do You Feel About Weakness?: I wonder if you and I don't sometimes hate the fact that the KoG is a mustard seed. I wonder if you and I don't hate the fact that God has called us to weakness, meekness, turning the other cheek, charity, and sacrificial love. Knowing that our kindness will get abused (btw, when you really love from a gospel motive it will confuse people, it's not a scam, I'm not doing this for you just to get you to come to church or whatever). Knowing that we will be persecuted. The disciples seem to have this attitude sometime.

- God, if you really are the author of the Bible, why not prove that to everybody? Why not have a little angel hover over the Bible when people reading it saying, "This stuff is true?"
- Why not every time a professor denies the truth of the Bible God put a Darth Vader strangle-hold on them?
 - Do you ever think things like that?

Danger of Pursuing Power: Power is alluring. It gives the false sense of control. The beauty of our weakness is that **we don't need to be great because God is**. Don't fall for the false promise of earthly power.

- This is what the Psalmist is saying when he says: **Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God (Psalm 20:7)**. For us it might not be "chariots" and "horses" but their are modern equivalents to technological, political, and military power.
- The choice isn't just between power, money, and influence vs. the principle of the KoG as if they are two paths to have a successful life.
 - These false choices rob you of joy, corrupt your soul, and prevent you from following Jesus.
- The contrast between the KoG and the ways of the world is never more clear than in Jesus' explanation of Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-26):
 - **"Blessed** are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. **Blessed** are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. **Blessed** are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. **Blessed** are you when people hate you and when they

exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. But **woe** to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. **Woe** to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. **Woe** to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. **Woe** to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”

In What Do You Place Your Faith?: We have the freedom to admit our weakness, embrace our shortcomings, and be honest about our insufficiencies (don't use this to excuse laziness or sin). That's why Paul tells us that our weakness is actually strength. God is not just working despite our weakness but through our weakness. Our weakness magnifies God. It's very hard for us to wrap our heads around this truth: God chooses to work through our weaknesses. When we are weak as a church, it proves God is our strength.

- This is how God shows off. The Bible describes Abraham as “good as dead” before he became a father of many nations. Israel is a tiny nation who's only claim to fame is being conquered by all the world powers.
- Jesus is calling us to live with hope despite the apparent weakness of our cause. One day, the KoG will triumph.

2. The Kingdom Spreads (v. 33)

³³ He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

Little Leaven: A little yeast added into a large batch of dough causes the whole loaf to rise. The point is the remarkable pervasiveness of this tiny agent.

Spread of the Kingdom: All through the Bible we see the truth that the KoG is spreading. In Genesis we are told to “fill the earth.” In the Great Commission we are told to make disciples of “all people.” In Acts the church goes to “the ends of the earth.” There is no corner of the globe, no people group, no culture, that is exempt from the rule and reign of Christ. He is not a provincial deity. He is not a cultural artifact. He is the creator and sustainer of all things and the rightful king of all people.

It Doesn't Take Much: The point of this passage is how powerful and pervasive the message of the kingdom is. It doesn't take much. There are no partial followers of Jesus.

- What things are part time (e.g., school, job, etc)? What things are full time (life, marriage, etc.)? Some things are hobbies or phases, others part of your identity.
- Is it possible to be partially in a relationship? Is it possible to be partially alive? Is it possible to be partially saved? No.

- “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).
- The famous hymn is “I Surrender All” not “some” (e.g., “some to Jesus, I surrender, some to him I freely give.” But maybe that is more accurate.
- Why do we think we can give Jesus just part of ourselves? Are you a part time Christian? Are you a “Christian” at church, but not at home, or school, or on social media, or in your relationship, finances, media consumption, extracurricular activities, etc.?
 - E.g. clean out the junk drawer, basement, etc. The more light you have, the more darkness it touches. The more the gospel spreads, the more you’re aware of your sin, but the deeper you experience the grace of Jesus.

Is His Reign Spreading in Your Life?: A discipleship question you need to ask. Is the rule and reign of Jesus spreading to every area of my life? Or am I “silo”-ing certain things, closing certain areas to Jesus’ lordship? That’s a question only you can answer. Be honest today.

- Jesus’ kingdom rule must permeate every facet of our lives and every corner of the earth.

Hiddenness: I do like the picture of the woman “hiding” the leaven in the dough. It’s not some grand gesture, but a simple action. When you “hide” the word of God in your heart, it spreads, drawing you to righteousness and keeping you from sin. The picture of the gospel is this seed. You don’t need some big and crazy experience, you need the simple truth of the gospel. Plant it deep and let it grow (it’ll be like kudzu in the South or lantern beetles in Philly).

3. The Kingdom is Revealed (vv. 34-35)

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Kingdom Come: Jesus is revealing the truth about the nature of the KoG and its arrival in him. These parables are further evidence as he references a prophecy (from Psalm 78:2, no less; the Psalter is prophetic pointing to the messianic King).

Eyes to See: The ways of the KoG seem crazy to the world but to those who have eyes of faith, they are life-giving.

- All the power of the mustard tree is in the seed. The question is whether you will see it or not. The tree is growing, leaven is leavening, will you see it? Can you “walk by faith” and see with eyes of hope amid the false claims of the world.

Spread the Word: With Jesus’ arrival, the time has come for the KoG to be inaugurated. The king is inviting his subjects to join him, to dine at his table, to be welcomed into his kingdom.

What was hidden has been revealed. Now's the time to share it (we worry about premature birth in pregnancy, but being pregnant too long is also a problem. 13 months is harmful too. Wait for the right time, but when the right time comes it's time!).

Conclusion

We can faithfully trust that God is establishing his kingdom despite its apparent weakness.

The Character of the Kingdom, The Character of the King: How do we know that the Kingdom works this way? Why is the KoG like this? Because Jesus has proven this. The character of the Kingdom reflects the character of the King (e.g., benevolent monarch).

- Jesus is the best example of strength, power, and authority demonstrating love through service, sacrifice, and humility. He is gentle and lowly of heart. His authority and power are unmatched and uncontested, yet he comes in complete kindness and love to rescue sinners.

Stay Hopeful: So we can stay hopeful. Jesus' teachings here should remind us that, even in our darkest hour, the KoG grows. We shouldn't be surprised at the weeds among the wheat. We shouldn't be surprised that it is taking longer than we think it should. We can hold the line. Don't put our trust in political power, celebrity, wealth, or other forms of earthly power. Rather, put our hope in the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling inside kingdom citizens.

- Don't let small beginnings discourage you from pursuing God's ultimate future.
- Don't let apparent insignificance limit the spread of God's rule and reign in your life.
- God is working and you and I get to joyfully join him in his work in our lives and in our world.