

The Questions of Christmas: Why is it not more obvious?

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Date: 11 January 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, we are at number three and the last in a special series we're doing after Christmas, which we've called the questions of Christmas, looking at some of the questions that nobody really tends to ask at Christmas time, given that Jesus came and all the promises he came with and the promises we heard, for example, earlier in Isaiah about what he was going to achieve.

And we left 2000 years later asking a lot of questions about, well, what's really happened? And so the first week we looked at if Jesus is truly God's king, why are there so many other religions?

Why don't everybody accept him? And then the second week we looked at where's the peace on earth that the angels promised. If Jesus came to bring peace on earth, where is it? And this week we're looking at our third question, which I'll introduce shortly.

But if you've missed the first two in our series, they're available on our website. If you haven't visited our website yet, then shame on you. It's hopefully for you a good visit, lots of resources, sermons and other things available for you to get to know our church and what we're doing a little bit more.

That's stmarksplumstead.org. Memorize it and go to your computer and look it up. Right. I'm going to pray that God would be with us and speak to us as we look at his holy word this morning.

[1 : 17] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can gather freely here this morning and that we can open your holy and active and living word that divides like a sword right to our hearts every time we open it up.

And we do pray that it would do that this morning, that as we look at what you have to say, as we consider it, as we chew over it, you would speak to us, speak to our very souls and help us to be changed and to go out and apply what you say to us.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I don't know how your history is, but in August 1944, I wonder if you knew what happened in Europe.

It was a big event. August 1944, American forces liberated Paris from Nazi occupation. Some pictures will appear behind me just of some of the scenes from that amazing day in Paris.

It was an incredible day for the French city after years and years of German rule. And if you were a Frenchman on that day or a French woman, if you were a Parisian on that day, you would have not been able to ignore the fact that you've been liberated.

[2 : 39] It was everywhere. It was obvious in every part of the city. People were waving flags. They were dancing in the streets. They were kissing complete strangers. The whole city was in absolute ecstasy.

Well, just a few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas. We celebrated the arrival of God's kingdom into our world to liberate us, to liberate humanity from sin.

But as opposed to the liberation of Paris in 1944, this liberation is very easy to ignore. And many people do. Here we are today, and we've got to be asking, well, where's this kingdom that Jesus was going to come bring?

Where's the liberation? If this kingdom has arrived, why is it not more obvious that God's kingdom has come into our world? And that's the question we're looking at this morning. Why is this all not more obvious if it's true?

Well, it's a question that Jesus answers. You see, Jesus in his parables is incredible because he anticipates all our questions and objections and answers them. All we've got to do is dig down deep enough, and we find the answers we're looking for in the Bible.

[3 : 48] And it's in these two parables that Michiel read for us this morning that Jesus, what he does is he corrects our expectations of how he's going to bring his kingdom into our world. It's in a block of teaching that we've been going through, if you've been here the last two weeks, called the Kingdom Parables, where Jesus teaches what his kingdom is like.

And you'll remember that parables, he used parables as a special form of teaching. It's a special way he taught about the spiritual realities in our world, things that we can't see, but the realities nonetheless.

And he uses everyday simple stories of things that we can see to describe the things that we can't. That's what parables are. So it's stories that seem simple on the surface, but they've got these hidden meanings.

And the challenge to the listener, to Jesus' listeners around him as he was standing on the slopes and preaching, to you and I today, the challenge to us is to dig out the meaning underneath these parables.

Whenever we read one of Jesus' parables, we can't just read it and go on. We've got to stop. We've got to stop. If you're reading for your quiet time in the morning and you're reading perhaps through Matthew 13 and Jesus' parables, after each one, you should stop and say, what is this really saying?

[4 : 56] What does it really mean? Because that's what the challenge to us is when it comes to parables. And I wonder if you, this morning, can do that. Maybe give you a little exercise.

Try, I'm going to read the parables again, right? These two that we're looking at this morning. And I want you to try to dig out the deeper meaning. You got it? Dig out the principle. Try to work out what Jesus is saying about his kingdom from these two stories.

So let's look at them again. Verse 31. He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree so that the birds come and perch in its branches.

He told them still another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.

Okay, so what is Jesus trying to teach us about his kingdom here? What's the deeper hidden meaning? What principle? Ask yourself, what principle is common to both of these stories?

[6 : 06] The story of the mustard seed and the yeast. What do they have in common? I wonder if you've spotted it yet. Well, isn't it that both the mustard seed and the yeast share a similar attribute of being much more significant than they look?

That's what's common to both of them. Both have much bigger effect than you expect for their size. That's what's common to both of these. In other words, the principle of these two parables is that you can't make assumptions on the significance of something based on what it looks like now.

All right, that's the principle that Jesus wants us to understand underlying these parables. That's the heart of them. You can't make assumptions on the significance of something based on what it looks like now.

And that is, of course, a concept that's true in everyday life, isn't it? It's a lesson that was learned by Decca Records in 1961 when they auditioned a new startup band.

These handsome chaps that will appear behind me. This was a new startup band. Nobody had heard of them before. And Decca Records weren't that impressed with their music.

[7 : 17] They decided not to sign them on, saying, and I quote, they have no future in show business. Now, if you know who these are, the Beatles went on to sign up with another record label and became the best-selling band in history still to this day.

You see, it's very important that we don't make assumptions about something based on what it looks like now. Jesus says that you can't do that with agriculture.

You can't do it with mustard seeds. You can't do it in baking. You can't do it with yeast. And you definitely can't do it when it comes to his kingdom. You can't base your response to Jesus' kingdom and his words on just what it looks like now.

Why? Well, for two reasons that we see in these stories. Firstly, it will grow beyond what you expect. And secondly, it has power beyond what you can imagine.

And I want us to look at each of those lessons in turn. So firstly, the kingdom will grow beyond what you expect. Look at the parable in verse 31 again.

[8 : 22] The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree so that the birds come and perch in its branches.

All right, now, how small is a mustard seed? Anyone know how small they are? Okay, it's really small. That's the point. It's about, it's tiny. It's about one to two millimeters, big, maximum.

I could have actually scattered mustard seeds in the pews this morning and you would have sat on them without noticing. That's how small they are. But that's really the point of Jesus using it in this parable. Jesus chose the mustard seed to use in his story because of its size.

That's the point. And he was saying to the crowds that are gathered there around him in the first century, he was saying that the kingdom of God right now is tiny. It's tiny. It's insignificant.

It's not noticed. It's not important in anyone's eyes. And he was right, wasn't he? I mean, think about it. When the kingdom first came to it, when Jesus first heralded and broke the kingdom into this world, what was the kingdom of God?

[9 : 32] Its founder was born of a teenage peasant girl. He lived in obscurity for 30 years doing menial labor. And then he roused a rabble of fishermen and tax collectors before dying on a wooden cross and being buried in a borrowed tomb.

It wasn't very impressive. Not much to look at on the surface, was it? But you see, Jesus wanted people to know, as he was teaching here, he wanted people to know that despite what it looks like now on the surface, then in the first century, this kingdom was going to grow beyond all proportion, beyond what you expect.

And look what happened. Today, 2,000 years later, more than 1.9 billion people confess to being Christians, to being followers of Christ.

People from thousands of different cultures. The Bible has been translated into over 4,000 different languages. The kingdom, the influence in the rule of Jesus Christ has grown beyond what anyone would have expected it to.

And unlike any other movement or religion, in that it's not culturally bound, you'll find Christians in every country, even the ones where Christianity is illegal.

[10 : 44] You know, it's often in those countries that Christianity is growing the fastest. The kingdom can't help growing throughout the world, in every country. I want to quote from Jonathan Lehman, who's a Christian author, and he writes this.

He writes, Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little point of light.

It's a gathering of Christians gathered together in the name of their king, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two. Then four.

Then eight. And so it goes. A new nation is growing. A nation set inside the nations. This new nation leaves the boundary lines on the map where they are, but it cannot be contained by the map's lines.

The line makers don't have the authority to stop these unworldly citizens. The points of light cross all boundaries, spreading everywhere like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens.

[11 : 52] These are the churches of Christ and their members. The world has never known anything like them. See, the kingdom and the rule of Jesus Christ continues to grow today in this world, and no one can stop it.

But that's just the beginning. That's just the beginning. The scripture tells us that one day, God's kingdom under Christ will reach every corner of the globe. When Jesus comes back, we're told every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord.

We heard it foreshadowed earlier in Isaiah as John read that for us. And in the book of Revelation, where we look forward, we read of a new heaven and a new earth where the previous world is no more.

A new world with a new society under the perfect rule of Jesus Christ. The world, like God designed it to be, like it's always meant to be. Is that wishful thinking? Does it seem like wishful thinking to you?

A pipe dream that the world will one day reach this perfect society? Is it too good to be true? Well, Jesus said, don't make assumptions about something based on how it looks now.

[13 : 00] The kingdom's going to outperform your expectations just like it did the people of the first century. one day, it's going to be greater than anyone could have imagined. Be sure of that.

So what should you do? If that's what Jesus is anticipating, telling us to anticipate, what should you do about it? Well, I want you to imagine for a second that you were an investor and there was a stock on the stock market that was going to perform like that.

Okay, what would you do? You would invest, wouldn't you? You would invest as much money as you could in the stock in a heartbeat. And Jesus is telling you these things about the kingdom because he wants you to invest in that.

He wants you to invest everything you have and who you are and your life and your resources in that kingdom. You know, he says, do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, but store up for yourself treasures in heaven.

Invest not in just your happiness in this life, but invest in the world to come. In another parable, he says this, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field.

[14 : 07] When a man found it, he hid it again and then in his joy, he went and sold all he had and bought that field. You see, just like that man invested all he had to buy the field because he knew how valuable it was, so we're to invest in the kingdom.

You're to invest in the kingdom if you know how valuable it is. So how do you do that? How do you invest in the kingdom? Well, you take the kingdom seriously in your life.

You don't just put it in a box, a Sunday box, you know. You don't just sideline the concerns of the kingdom for the more important pressing things like career and family and paying the bills.

No, Jesus is saying, and get this straight, we must get this straight this morning. There is nothing more important than his kingdom. You see, Jesus says, when it comes to all these other things that take your attention during the week, your bills and your family and your everything, Jesus says, when it comes to those concerns of life, he says, seek first God's kingdom.

Seek first God's kingdom and all these other things will be given to you. You see what he's saying? He's saying, get your priorities straight. Refocus what you're thinking about and what you're living for and what you're putting your energy into.

[15 : 20] And that's the first step for all of us. It's to get our priorities straight. Especially now, at the beginning of a new year, each of us have to rearrange our priorities in light of what Jesus is teaching here.

What are your priorities right now? I wonder what you would say your priorities are in life. Well, you know how you can tell? Ask yourself, what are you spending most of your money and your time and your energy on?

On a weekly basis, where are your resources going? Because that will show you where your priorities are. And if you call yourself a Christian here this morning, and I'm not assuming everyone here does, but if you call yourself a Christian, but none of your resources are going towards God's kingdom, his church, that he's put here to forward his kingdom on earth, if none of your time or money is going into the church's mission, then I wonder if you can call yourself a follower of Christ.

Because you're ignoring one of his primary teachings about his kingdom, that we must seek first his kingdom. We must prioritize it over other things if we are Christians, if we are truly followers of Christ.

Because that is what a Christian is. That is what a disciple is. Someone who puts the kingdom first before other things. And that's why the Bible says that it's the responsibility of Christians to contribute to their church as they're able, to contribute both time and money, that we would have spent on other things.

[16 : 48] You see, we've got a limited amount of resources that God has given us in our lifetime, money, and we've got to choose where to channel those resources. And we, Christians, are called to channel those resources towards the kingdom.

And if you're not doing that yet, but you've perhaps been coming to church for a while, then you need to start, maybe make it a resolution in 2015, to start re-channeling your resources towards God's kingdom.

And for your own sake, not just for your church's sake, for your own sake, for your own growth as a Christian, for your own walk with God. And to help you to do that, what you'll find in your bulletins is that we've printed a St. Mark's Guide to Giving for you to just understand what the Bible says about Christian giving and to plan your regular financial giving as well.

So please do take that. If you didn't get one, there are some available on your way out. Take one of those, read it through prayerfully, and consider what God is calling us as His people to do.

And next week, if you come back, next week, we're going to be publishing a similar guide to serving because it's not, you know, money isn't the only resource we have. We also have time and gifts that God has given us.

[18 : 03] And so we're going to be publishing a little handout to how to serve, how to channel your gifts into God's kingdom. You see, we must begin to prioritize the kingdom, brothers and sisters.

We must. We can't just sit around and put it on the back burner anymore. We must prioritize the kingdom because not only will the kingdom grow beyond what you expect, but secondly, even now, the kingdom has power beyond what you can imagine.

The kingdom has power beyond what you can imagine. That's the second lesson that Jesus has for us in these parables. Look at the next parable of the yeast from verse 33. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.

Okay, yeast, for those of you who bake, you know what yeast is. It's a raising agent so that bread, when you make bread, it's not just lumpy dough. It raises it. It uses a chemical reaction called ethanol fermentation that produces gas bubbles within the bread to make it rise.

And the thing about yeast, that is why Jesus is using it here, the thing about yeast is when you mix it in, it gets lost in all the other ingredients, but it has powerful effects despite its size.

[19 : 21] Even though you can't see the yeast, it's transforming the whole batch of dough. And Jesus is saying that is what the kingdom is like. It might not be much to look at.

It might get lost in the world around us. It's largely invisible. It's not a human kingdom with an army and a government and flags and stuff. But rather, it works like yeast, changing people's hearts, transforming people from the inside out.

The message of the kingdom has power to transform people like nothing else can transform people. And no wonder throughout history, Christians have been persecuted.

Christianity has been banned and outlawed in countries. You know, there was a time in England, actually in all of Europe, there was a time where you could be burned at the stake just for owning a Bible. Even its enemies know its power.

Even the enemies of the kingdom of God fear it because they know its power. Because the message of the kingdom has power. When people hear and believe it, it causes a fundamental, irreversible change deep down inside.

[20 : 25] And that's how you know you believe it, because of the change it causes in your life. Take Paul, for example. Paul, who hated Christians. His job was to arrest Christians until he realized who Jesus is, and he became the most powerful Christian evangelist the world has ever seen.

Complete, irreversible turnaround in his life. Take John Newton. I wonder if any of you know of John Newton. He was a slave trader in the 18th century. He was a cruel, harsh man until the gospel opened his eyes to see the depth of his sin against a holy God.

And that he stood before the judge of the earth and he was going to face his judge one day. But also when he realized that Christ died to take all that judgment on himself, which is the gospel itself, and he realized that for the first time and when he realized that, that Christ had taken all his sin and his unworthiness and his dirt and his muck on himself so that John Newton could be righteous in God's sight when he realized that his life changed completely.

He became a minister and he helped the movement to abolish the very slave trade that he was once part of because of that fundamental change. I could go on. I could go on and on and on.

These are just some of the more well-known examples of how the gospel changes hearts, how it changes lives from the inside out in a way that nothing else can. You see, when someone comes to the realization that just what Jesus did for them to be in right relationship with God, when someone comes to the realization that Jesus gave everything of himself and went through not only the physical torments of suffering on a Roman cross but the spiritual torments of being separated from the Father so that we don't have to be.

[22 : 15] When someone comes to that realization, everything else in life becomes secondary. You see, when someone realizes that there's a whole world after this life that God has planned for us and he's made available to us through Christ, then everything in this life must by nature become secondary.

Like the yeast in the dough, the gospel transforms people and people's priorities from the inside out. So has the gospel transformed you? Has it worked in your heart yet?

Has it changed your priorities? Has it reoriented your life towards the kingdom so much so that everything else is secondary? I want you to notice an interesting thing in these parables as well.

Notice that in each of these parables something had to happen before the yeast worked or before the seed grew. The yeast had to be put in the dough. The seed had to be sown into the soil.

And that's a reminder to each of us this morning that we have a responsibility if we expect to see the kingdom grow with power in our world in our communities and in our lives we need to put it in.

[23 : 25] We need to mix it in. We need to let the message of the kingdom infiltrate into our situations, into our work life, into our family life, into our interactions with people.

We can't leave it hidden. We've got to publicize the truth of the kingdom. And as you do that, as a Christian, as you do that, in the lives of the people around you, as you make the gospel known of what Jesus did and who he is, know that as you share that message it has great power like yeast in dough.

You see, your sharing of the gospel might not look impressive. You might bumble over some words and you might not quite get your point across and you might be nervous and whatever it is. It might not look impressive but that message, as you tell people about Jesus, has power beyond what you can see or beyond what you can imagine.

And know that. Know that next time you want to share the gospel with someone. That it has power beyond what you know. You might never see the results of that power but it's there.

But first, first you need to let the message of the kingdom transform you from the inside out. You won't be able to share this message unless it's transformed you first.

[24 : 38] So I ask again, has it done that? Has it brought about that fundamental change or do you still need it to do that? Do you know that you haven't yet changed?

You haven't yet taken the gospel on board? It hasn't changed your priorities yet. But if you do, if you realize that up until now you've just been a casual observer, that you haven't taken the kingdom seriously in your life, if you know that, then I encourage you to take a step.

Take a step committing yourself to Christ and his kingdom, to following him wherever he takes you. Because you must not underestimate the kingdom. It's already started to break into our world and one day when Jesus comes back he will establish it forever in the new creation.

And you need to make sure that you're going to be part of it. Which you can. You can. You don't have to do anything. Jesus has already done it all for you. He's washed away your sins if you put your trust in him so that you can right now be part of his kingdom and live for the kingdom in the sure hope of the perfect world to come that God has planned for us that will never end.

And so if you haven't taken that step yet, if you haven't taken that step into the kingdom but you want to, do it this morning. Don't waste another minute of your life investing your time and energy in something that's going to pass away.

[26 : 01] Start now investing your life in something that's going to last forever. And if you want to do that you can do it right now. You can do it this morning. I'm going to pray a prayer and if you want to take that step and you haven't yet then I encourage you to pray this prayer in your heart silently after me.

Let's pray. Almighty God I have not given you the attention you deserve in my life. I have been distracted by worldly concerns and pleasures.

I have ignored your kingdom but I know that Jesus has come to do what I can't do and bring me into your kingdom.

I want to be part of your kingdom. Forgive me and change me through the power of your word and as I sit under it in the coming weeks transform me and cause me to bear fruit.

Amen. Well if you prayed that prayer this morning I don't want you to stand up or put up your hand or do anything like that but I do want you to come to me after the service and take a booklet from me that I have which is called Crossing the Line.

[27 : 18] It's a booklet about how to take that step into God's kingdom every day in your life. And so please do take that book free of charge from me. All you've got to do is take it. No questions asked. That would be great to be able to give you that.

Thank you.