

Kingdom Assumptions

Luke 13:18-30 | Feb. 16, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Christianity can never be what people expect it to be. We all naturally expect Christ's kingdom to resemble any other kingdom with which we are familiar. We expect Christ to value what we value and to play by our rules and to dance to our flute.

But he doesn't. He is not of this world, and neither is his kingdom.

To us, it seems as clear as logic that the first are first, and the last are last. If you look like you're winning at life, if you are in first place in the game of our existence, no doubt you are favored by God and can expect the blessings to continue unaltered into eternity. The first here are the first there. This we assume.

But then Jesus says, "No, in my kingdom, the first are last and the last are first." Christianity does not and, by design, cannot make sense to our natural minds.

This is why anyone who tries to understand God by hearsay, filling in the gaps with mere assumptions, will never, ever get it right. If you do not come to understand Christ and his kingdom by careful attention to his words, you will misunderstand. You must; you can do no otherwise.

There are in school some tests given which you can reason your way through, even if you do not have a solid grasp on the subject matter. Common sense will get you at least a C. But then there are other tests which depend entirely upon memorization, or skills which you do not naturally possess. These are tests you must study for, or fail. Common sense helps not at all.

The kingdom of God is like the second of these tests. Common sense is of very little help in understanding it. You have to be taught it by Jesus. You cannot guess and you cannot successfully assume.

Today in our text Jesus attacks our assumptions. If most your notions about Christianity have come from anywhere but the Scriptures than you will find your notions under attack now. Christ's great concern is that your notions mislead you no longer. Here are his very words about the kingdom of God, and they are no rumor or hearsay.

We are at the source now, not miles downstream where the pure water becomes polluted.

May we have the humility this morning to bow before heaven's king, and to let his opinions ruin and displace our own.

What is his kingdom *really* like? He tells us now, beginning in verse 18.

LUKE 13:18-30

I can discern in these words of Jesus three major assumptions, common to mankind, which he wishes to destroy. Here are three things we are all prone to assume about Christianity; they are all wrong, and Jesus loves us enough to say so.

Since he is the highest authorized spokesman of God's kingdom, let's listen closely to his corrections.

Immediate

Our first assumption about God's kingdom is this: "It must be immediate or it is not real."

Though this assumption is not spoken in our text, it is answered twice, in two parables. See again the first of them in verses 18 and 19:

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

The Jews of Jesus' day expected that when the promised king came, he who was to sit in the seat of David, he would immediately vanquish Rome and any other of Israel's enemies. The kingdom would be an immediate, political experience, resulting in earthly peace and prosperity. You can see this expectation almost in the disciples, at the start of Acts when they ask, "Lord, will you *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?"¹

¹ Acts 1:6 (ESV); emphasis mine.

Jesus did not deny that he would restore the kingdom—but he challenged their timeline. “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the father has fixed by his own authority,” he said.²

We all, just like the Jews, assume that if the king has come his kingdom must immediately appear. He has the power to crush his foes, does he not? That is all an earthly king needs—if he has the power, he employs it to conquer. Our whole human history proves this point. He who has power to conquer conquers. And he conquers immediately, without delay. If Jesus is heaven’s king, then where is heaven’s kingdom? It should be an immediate thing.

This assumption takes many forms today. We may think, “If Jesus has all power and truly cares for me, then he will heal me. His kingdom must mean the immediate removal of our physical ailments. How could king Jesus, with all authority on earth to heal, watch me languish and refuse to heal me?”

Or we may think, “If Jesus reigns, how can his kingdom on earth face such setbacks? Why do so many leading figures fall into sin, or turn aside to some unusual error? Surely the kingdom cannot be here if it suffers so many failures.”

You can imagine the many other forms this assumption about the kingdom takes. We summarize it like this: “The kingdom is not true if it is not immediate.” That, we assume, is what the kingdom of God is like.

But Jesus asks the same question, “What is the kingdom of God like?” and answers quite differently. The kingdom is not like a cedar tree that drops from heaven all at once. It is like a tiny mustard seed, which resembles a poppy seed in size. You can only really see it by squinting. That, says Jesus, is the kingdom of God at first. It begins small, overlooked by the world, seemingly insignificant and unimpressive. But give it time. Eventually, it will grow into a tree so large that birds will nest in it.

We assume the kingdom must be immediate, but Jesus challenges this assumption. Why must it be immediate? Why must Christianity have only successes, see only quick growth, and conquer the world with ease? Why should our sicknesses be all relieved in this world, and our troubles all ended? Our only

² Acts 1:7.

answer can be, “Well, that’s what I would do if I were king.” But are you king? No. Christ is king, and we must let him reign. He has his reasons for delay—not least of which is that he waits patiently for more and more to repent and to believe. If he vanquished all his foes this moment, he would uproot the tares with the wheat. He waits long, because he is patient. His kingdom will become a tree, his rule will be absolute in time—but now it progresses slowly for reasons known in their fullness only to his mind, but which are good.

The second parable is like the first: “And again he said, ‘To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.’” By God’s design, leavened dough takes time to rise. It did not have to be this way, and yet it is. Similarly, God’s purposes take time to ripen. The deity who designed dough determined also the way his kingdom would proceed. We may be like the impatient child who wants the dough to rise faster—but our father must calm us down and remind us that these things take time.

Think for a moment on the words that immediately follow these parables, and you will see the same theme. “He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem.” Why Jerusalem? Why does the king of Israel move toward her capital? So that he may sit upon his throne and smash his foes, and claim his earthly victory? No. That he may die. He has not a throne in Jerusalem, but a cross. There is a throne beyond the cross, but Jesus’ kingdom begins with the mustard seed of insignificance and seeming failure.

You see again how desperately we all need God’s revelation if we are to understand his kingdom. Who would have guessed that the best way to conquer the earth was to deliver one’s self to his enemies for torture and death? That looks like failure! But that is success. That is the leaven which, though hidden in the dough, now makes certain that the dough will rise.

Someone must have understood how odd Jesus’ message was, how counter to the Jewish expectation, for he receives the question in verse 23: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

How can the kingdom of God be thought successful if so few are saved? How can it be so small at present, just this rugged band of followers, while the majority reject it?

Our assumption is that the kingdom of God, if it is real, must come now and in force. Jesus rejects our assumption. His kingdom is here and is progressing toward its future fulfillment, but it starts small and moves slowly.

Not urgent

So our first assumption falls. And as we continue in our text, we come to our second.

For while we are tempted to assume the kingdom must come immediately, we are tempted in the other direction when it comes to our own responsibility in the kingdom. We assume that we are under no pressing need to submit ourselves to the kingdom's king.

See how Jesus rebuffs our ignorance, beginning in verse 24:

Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then he will answer you, "I do not know where you come from."³

You remember that these words were given in answer to a question, in verse 23: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Notice that Jesus does not answer the question. This means our desire to know numbers is misguided. We assume the kingdom must see immediate success, so now we are asking about numbers.

Jesus turns our attention from the statistics and fixes our focus upon that one great question: are *you* in the kingdom?

"Just how many will enter the kingdom?" we ask. And Jesus answers, "That doesn't matter—are *you* entering it?"

Odd though it may be, this is our default assumption: "I need to get right with God and get serious about following him, but I have time." Jesus attacks that assumption—you may have time, or you may not. You cannot assume it.

³ Vv. 24-25.

“When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door,” it is too late. When the latch catches, the door cannot be reopened. That is Jesus’ point to you.

If you are investigating the claims of Christ, I commend you. May God guide your search. But I must also be faithful to my charge to preach the words of Christ, and he will not be treated lightly. There comes a point when your searching turns from sincere to a delay tactic. You may come to know that Christ is the king of the kingdom, and that you must enter through the narrow way, difficult as it may prove, in order to be saved. And so, in order to enjoy the comforts and pleasures of this world a bit longer, you say you are still investigating, you are not yet sure.

But Jesus calls your bluff in this text. If you delay one second too long for the sake of your sins, the latch may catch. You may find yourself outside knocking, but receiving only the answer in this text: “I do not know where you come from.” You did not befriend the master of the house when you had the opportunity, you did not submit yourself to the king when there was yet time to submit.

You cannot assume you have years yet left to you, nor months, nor even days. That assumption is a puff of cloud. The fact is that the door this moment stands open before you, and Christ calls upon you now to turn from your sin and to trust in him. If you still hear my voice now, then he calls. And now, still he calls. But will I have the time to appeal to you again? I may not have the opportunity next week. The door is open now, but you cannot assume it will be open any longer than this very moment. This is the moment when you must enter in.

Proximity is enough

So then we have lost two of our assumptions already: we must not imagine the kingdom to be immediate, and we must not imagine ourselves to have plenty of time to enter into it.

But Jesus has his target on one final assumption we hold concerning the kingdom of God. For a final, and perhaps one of the most common, assumptions we hold about God’s kingdom is this: “Being close to the kingdom is as good as being in it.”

See how Jesus’ answers this thought in verses 26 on:

Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' In that place 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 but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.⁴

Jesus has just spoken of those who will come to the door of the kingdom when it is too late. And he puts now upon their lips the reason for their delay: "We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets." In other words, we thought we were already in the kingdom, since we were so close to its king. We did not strive to enter through the narrow way, for we thought that surely if any were in the kingdom, it would be us.

After all, these were God's own chosen people, the Jews. These were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the religious and highly favored of the earth. These are not raging pagans, but observant Jews. Every Sabbath they are in the synagogues; they perform all the rituals required of them.

But Jesus replies, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil!"

To be near the kingdom is not to be in the kingdom. Ah, that God would grant all a clear sense of this fact! How many have perished and sunk into eternity because they were mistaken on this one point. Yes, you eat and drink in Jesus' presence, and he teaches in your streets—you are American and have been born and raised in a country whose culture is permeated with the name of Jesus. You are not a Muslim.

And you may think that qualifies you for the kingdom—but that is only an assumption. If Jesus can look at your actual life and see someone unchanged by his nearness, someone rightly described as a worker of evil, then he will say, "Depart from me."

How shocking it must be for the good Jews in Jesus' audience to hear, "In that place [that is, hell] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob

⁴ Vv. 26-30.

and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.”

You assumed that you would be at that table, since you were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But mere descent is not enough. Proximity is not sufficient. The patriarchs are in the kingdom because they trusted in and followed the king. That’s what counts, nothing else.

And so even Gentiles, those not in the line of these great patriarchs of old, those not included within the original people of God, will enter the kingdom before the unbelieving Jews will. The unreligious go in before the religious and, as Jesus said to the religious leaders, “the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”⁵

To put it simply, geography means nothing when it comes to the kingdom. Do you live in a Christian country? That gives you no ultimate advantage over a Muslim. Do not assume that because culturally you are closer to Christ than others, you are automatically in the kingdom.

Jesus will draw people from all corners of the globe, true worshippers who will truly trust in him.

Conclusion

And so Jesus concludes his attack on our assumptions with this great principle of the kingdom: “behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

There are many who assume themselves safe before God because of their earthly associations with him—their country, their family, their church. They will be last, for these will dissolve before the fires of judgment. And there are others with few earthly advantages that would dispose them toward Christ and his kingdom. These may be flagrant sinners far outside the church, and even far outside Christian countries. But these, who are last, when they believe in Christ from a desperate heart, will be made first in the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, what can we draw from these words of Christ? We who have entered in the narrow way and so have

⁵ Matt. 21:31.

learned to mistrust our natural assumptions, what do we draw from these words of our master?

Just this: Nothing is so bad right now as you assume.

Man looks on the outward appearance of the kingdom, but God looks at its heart. The visible church may suffer one million setbacks every day, may seem to succumb to temptations as easily as any worldly institution—but what are your eyes fixed upon, that which you assume to be the kingdom, or the kingdom itself?

The kingdom progresses, no matter what meets our eyes. The mustard seed has already sprouted, and no plant can grow back down into the ground. The leaven is in the dough and the dough must rise, even if we cannot see the leaven that makes it happen.

Those who are truly God's people and who will soon be sitting with him in paradise, they press forward through trial and turmoil unstoppable. Maybe you expected to see the church succeed more in one place, but God intends for it to succeed instead in another. Either way it succeeds, it must succeed, it cannot fail.

"...I will build my church," said Jesus, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."⁶

Do not fear, and do not lose heart. The seed is in the ground, and the leaven in the flour. Our assumptions about the kingdom may fail us, but the kingdom never will.

⁶ Matt. 16:18.