

## **YOU MAKE A BIG IMPACT SPIRITUALLY**

**MATTHEW 13:31-35**

Jesus loved to tell stories. He told stories about common, everyday things that the people of his day identified with and understood immediately. Jesus didn't tell stories – or parables as we call them now – in order to entertain people. The purpose was to give people insight into and reveal truth about something He called the Kingdom of God. All these different stories share one thing in common: the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom of God? It's not heaven. Heaven is one aspect or part of the Kingdom. It's not the church. But when the church is being and doing what it should, it expresses the Kingdom. It's not a place in the way you and I think of a place. But it is very real nonetheless – much more real, I would argue, than any place that you can touch, taste, smell or see. The Kingdom of God is the realm where Jesus rules and reigns as the King. Yes, it's where you personally connect and relate to Almighty God, but it's not exclusive. It's available to anyone who trusts in Jesus. It's a spiritual "country" where Jesus' Lordship is recognized fully and celebrated eternally. Like a country, this Kingdom has citizens – all those who bow their knee to King Jesus and recognize Him as the Lord.

But that idea of a country or a realm doesn't capture everything about the Kingdom of God either. The Kingdom of God is the expression of God's will, God's heart and God's mission for the entire universe. The Kingdom of God is present and active in our world today, but it's not fully here yet. Yes, you can catch glimpses of it here and there, but it hasn't been manifested or revealed completely. Nevertheless, it's the goal towards which everything is moving. It's why the world was created. It's why Jesus came from heaven. It's why He died and rose again. It's why He's coming back again. It's why the Bible was written. It's why God's people have sacrificed themselves, been persecuted and been martyred for thousands of years now. If you know Jesus today, the Kingdom of God is what your soul longs for, aches over and yearns after even if you can't articulate it. There is coming a day when there will only be the Kingdom of God. And if Jesus is your King, you'll be there... forever.

Now, some of you are saying, "Rick, that's kind of out there!" I agree. But you and I have got to try and get our heads and hearts around this Kingdom of God because it's what mattered most of all to Jesus. He spoke about it from dawn to dusk. And the parables – these Jesus stories – give us glimpses of the Kingdom. They're like quick, snapshots of a full length movie we can't watch or incredible postcards from a place we'd love to visit. They're like windows that open onto a perfect spring day, so that you feel, smell and see something of the Kingdom before the window swings shut. And when you're hearing these stories the right way, they tantalize you, they convict you, they shock you, they disturb you and they increase your yearning for the spiritual reality to which they point.

Let's hear and then think about two of Jesus' stories today. The bottom line is this. When Jesus is King, you make a big impact spiritually. Here's another way

of saying it. When the Kingdom of God is in you and you are in the Kingdom of God, you experience, first of all...

## **GOD-ENABLED EXPANSION**

That, for me, is the single most important truth in Jesus' story about the mustard seed. When the Kingdom of God is in something or someone – a movement, a church, a person – there is an irreversible, miraculous expansion. Now, a mustard seed is a very small seed indeed – just a little black speck of a thing. Because, it's so small, you would reasonably expect the plant that comes from it to be very small, also. But that's not the case. Despite the smallness of the seed, the resulting mustard plant grows into a small tree of 8-10 feet. Birds apparently love to nest in its branches because they love to eat those tiny, little seeds. Jesus isn't comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed per se. He's comparing the growth, influence and expansion of the Kingdom to the remarkable difference in size between this teeny, little seed and this large plant.

Jesus' parable reveals that the Kingdom of God expands in terms of numbers and influence. Jesus made it plain that the Kingdom of God made its appearance in His person and ministry. From there it spread to twelve men – the disciples. After Jesus went back to heaven, some 120 people were gathered in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit showed up. Very quickly, 3,000 people made Jesus their King. Then it became 5,000. By the end of the first century, thousands upon thousands of Jesus followers lived in most of the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. And what's happened over the last 2000 years of human history? The Christian faith has become the most universal religion in history with believers today composing a majority of the population in two-thirds of the world's 238 countries. Now, frankly, current statistics show that the growth of the Christian faith in our country is static or flat. But people in several African countries as well as in India and China are becoming followers of Jesus at such an amazing rate today that it's outstripping the efforts to train sufficient pastors or provide adequate Christian literature and resources. What's the point? From that tiny, barely detectable beginning in Bethlehem – the birth of Jesus – the Kingdom of God has spread and is spreading in miraculous, irreversible ways. The little seed has grown into this amazing plant. The Kingdom of God is all about God-enabled expansion.

It's easy to think you don't matter much or that you have nothing to contribute to this vast spiritual reality called the Kingdom of God. The fact is that everything you do for the Kingdom of God matters no matter how small. In the words of the old Gospel song, little is much when God is in it. It matters when you tutor a child, when you mentor a teenager, when you help a poor person, when you share your faith in Jesus with someone, when you refuse to take the easy way out and tell a lie, when you befriend someone who is lonely, when you remember to pray with or for someone in great need. God loves to use the little, the small, the seemingly insignificant or irrelevant to accomplish His purposes.

A pastor was asked to conduct the funeral for a man who had helped develop the famous Boeing 747 aircraft. After the service, he spoke with the widow and commented on how remarkable it was that her late husband had helped build that marvelous machine. She said, "The truth is, he worked on one little switchbox smaller than a loaf of bread. That's all he worked on for 15 years. But when that 747 lifted off the ground for the first time, it was the happiest day of his life." Imagine working on one small switchbox for 15 years! Yet that huge plane couldn't have lifted off without that man's contribution. Often you see only your seemingly small efforts and feel you aren't very important. But when the great Kingdom of God "lifts off," so to speak, how thrilled you'll be to find out that your efforts for Jesus were essential.

Do you remember how Jesus praised the poor woman who gave her last two cents as an offering at the Temple? Do you remember how He multiplied the little boy's lunch of five loaves of bread and two fish and fed 5,000 people? Do you remember how He stressed the importance of giving just a cup of cold water in His Name? Little is much when God is in it! Everything and anything you do for the Kingdom of God has eternal value because the Kingdom of God is eternal. It's the only thing that lasts! Don't buy into this world's screwed up value system about what's important! Don't listen to the Devil's discouraging words when he whispers into your soul, "You'll never amount to anything. God could never use someone like you. You've made too many mistakes. You've sinned too much. You don't have enough talent." The Kingdom of God is filled with people like you and me – little, tiny mustard seed types – who have the potential to make a big spiritual impact. You can have a big spiritual impact if you will make the Kingdom of God your mission, your heartbeat and your passion. Only eternity itself will reveal the size of your impact when you make Jesus your King.

I believe there's another kind of God-enabled expansion implied in Jesus' story. The Kingdom of God expands in terms of its inclusion of all kinds of people. In my study this week, I was intrigued to discover that Jesus' listeners would have heard in this story a veiled reference to non-Jewish people. This image of a tree with birds nesting in it was well known to them. For instance, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel had said, " 'On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.'" (Ezekiel 17:23 NIV) Jewish people knew that "birds of every kind" pointed to the Gentiles, in other words, the rest of the world who were not ethnically Jewish. When John had his vision that we now call the book of Revelation in the New Testament, he saw what the Kingdom of God was going to look like. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...." (Revelation 7:9 NIV) Not everyone in the Kingdom of God is white, economically middle class, speaks English and lives in the suburbs. God's heart is for the whole world and everyone in the whole world.

When Jesus is King, you start to develop a heart for the whole world, too. I see that at work in KRBC. We've had a wonderful history here of mission involvement. I think of Kim Brown's incredible ministry in Thailand, Pete and Judy Obregon's medical mission trips all over the world and the people they've influenced in our church to do the same, the youth mission trips, Brian and Jenny Metzger's ministry to OSU students, Jared and Chyloe's call to China, Aimee and Michelle's recent trip to the Mideast, the wonderful turnout for a recent seminar on poverty – these are just a few examples. I believe that God wants our heart as a church to get even bigger. That begins at a personal level. Is there any ethnic or racial group that you would personally exclude? Is there anyone of a certain socioeconomic level that you refuse to develop a relationship with?

Here's an irony that concerns me. I have the sense that the community around us looks more like the Kingdom of God in terms of its diversity than our church does. My hope and prayer is that in the years ahead, our church will start to look more like the Kingdom of God. Just a thought...! I believe that when the Kingdom of God really gets hold of a church or of a person, you end up rubbing shoulders with people that you would never relate to if it weren't for the fact that you serve King Jesus. His heart is becoming your heart. And His heart is for the whole world. When Jesus is King, you make a big impact spiritually. When the Kingdom of God is in you and you are in the Kingdom of God, you experience God-enabled expansion. You also experience...

## **GOD-EMPOWERED TRANSFORMATION**

That, for me, is the single most important truth in Jesus' story about the yeast in the bread dough. When the Kingdom of God is in something or someone – a movement, a church, a person – there is a pervasive, persistent transformation. Jesus probably watched his mother, Mary, make bread many times. Each day a typical housewife would grind some wheat into flour and then mix in a portion of dough she'd kept from the previous day. That dough had been allowed to ferment which naturally created yeast or leaven. When the new and old dough were mixed together, the bread would rise and be ready to be baked. It's a picture of quiet, hidden but effective transformation.

When the Kingdom of God is present, there will always be change for the better. That's true on a moral and social level. Christopher Hitchens is a writer and political commentator. He's also an atheist who's written a recent book entitled God Is Not Great. He basically argues that a belief in God and religion is the primary cause of everything wrong in the world today. It's hard to defend that argument when it comes to the influence of the Kingdom of God. Historically, Christians have been the ones most responsible for advocating the just treatment of women, the protection of children, caring for the needs of the weak and the ill and treating the elderly with dignity and respect. Recently, I watched a documentary about William Wilberforce on PBS. He was the English politician who led the effort to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire in the

early 1800s. It was a tremendous battle that caused much personal suffering and sacrifice for Wilberforce. Not only was the slave trade abolished, but just days before he died, Wilberforce received the grand news that slavery itself had been abolished throughout the Empire, also. William Wilberforce was a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Several historians in the documentary made it very clear that the only reason Wilberforce made the eradication of slavery a life-long passion was because of his profound allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

I hope our church will become increasingly involved in transformation. I believe Jesus wants us to become His agent of transformation on a variety of levels. Yes, lost people need to find Jesus as Savior and Lord here. Yes, all of us need to be growing in Christ-like character and a deeper knowledge of God's Word here. But, in addition, God wants to use us to help bring Kingdom transformation into our community. What will that look like? I believe the Lord will show us in the months and years to come. And when He does, we need to obey. After all, if – as a church – we aren't agents of transformation, what good is this church? The Kingdom of God is about God-empowered transformation.

When the Kingdom of God is present, there will always be change for the better. That's true on a personal and spiritual level. When a person first becomes a follower of Jesus, you can't always see much of a difference from someone who doesn't follow Jesus. By the same token, you can't see much difference at first between yeast-less dough and dough with yeast in it. But time reveals the transformation. Time reveals the transforming presence of that yeast in the dough. It makes the bread rise. It's the same spiritually. Time reveals the transforming presence of Jesus in your life. He makes you different. When you make Jesus your King, over time your behavior changes, your character changes, your language changes, your values change. There's unmistakable transformation. In fact, if there's no observable transformation, there's good reason to believe the King is not present in your life!

Could I ask you to pause just a moment and think about that truth? If Jesus is King of your life, there will be ongoing, observable transformation. Not there should be or there ought to be, there just will be! Are you becoming more like Jesus in your character? Do you know God better and love Him more today than you did last year? Are you developing more and more His heart for the world? Do you care more and more about what He values? Is Jesus stretching you and demanding that you grow, change and just get better at every level of your life? Rejoice if that's happening! Why? Because it means that you're in the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is in you.

I shared a story with Church Council recently that touched my heart. It's a reminder to me of what the Kingdom of God looks like and how it works. Kay Warren is the wife of Rick Warren, the famous pastor and author of the best selling book, The Purpose Driven Life. Five years ago, Kay says she became seriously and permanently disturbed by the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa where some

30 million people are infected and 12 million children are orphaned by this horrible virus. Because Jesus is their King, she and Rick have committed themselves to helping end AIDS in their lifetime.

Two and a half years ago, Rick Warren was at a conference in New York City. He met David Miller there. David had had AIDS for 20 years. He'd been an activist, a protestor, and had loads of attitude. He asked Rick Warren this question, "Where was the church when I needed help?" Rick responded by asking David for forgiveness for the failures of Christians and the Church. That led to a long conversation and Rick inviting David to attend the Global Summit on AIDS and the Church at Rick's Saddleback Church in California.

At the summit, David still had plenty of attitude. He spewed hatred against the government, drug companies, politicians – anyone and everyone who he thought had failed him. Near the summit's end, he reluctantly joined other HIV-positive men and women on stage to receive prayer. Over the next year, Kay and Rick called and e-mailed David, shared CDs and even visited him in his Bronx neighborhood. Gradually, David began to soften. One day, he said to Kay, "I'm beginning to think that if you guys are real, and you love me, maybe God is real and loves me, too." In November 2006, David went back again to the Global Summit on AIDS and the Church. Shortly after the event, Rick led David in a prayer of faith to receive Jesus as his King.

Soon David began to complain – tongue in cheek – about the fact no one had explained to him the fine print of becoming a citizen in the Kingdom of God. "Being a Christian is the hardest thing I've ever done!" he said. "I can't call the mayor of New York a Nazi anymore; he's a human being that God made. I can't hate my enemies. I have to love them!" At last year's Global Summit on AIDS and the Church, David gave his personal testimony and was baptized. A man who heard his testimony asked David to baptize him on the spot which David did. A new citizen of the Kingdom of God, David Miller assisted Rick Warren in the baptism of another new citizen in God's Kingdom.

That's a picture of the Kingdom of God! That's God-enabled expansion. Expansion in numbers, influence and in including all kinds of people. That's God-empowered transformation. Transformation on a big, macro level and on a little, micro level. Transformation on a societal level and on a personal level. The Kingdom of God can change the lives of millions and billions of people just as easily as it can transform the life of one person. God can do either without breaking a sweat! And you're invited to be in that Kingdom and for that Kingdom to be in you. When Jesus is King, you have a big impact spiritually.