

There is Another King: Jesus

Luke – Acts

The Kingdom You No Longer Like

Luke 13:17 – 21

Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, August 13, 2017

Introduction: Unexpected Hospitality

There are times where it is important to say to people that because of their own choices, they are making themselves into people who will not like Jesus or his kingdom. Now is one of those times. Many of us have seen our Facebook feeds blow up because of the events at the University of Virginia. White supremacist groups marched with torches reminding us of the KKK. They were protesting the removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. They chanted slogans like, 'Blood and soil,' which was a Nazi slogan; 'White lives matter,' which in this context seems to mean 'Only white lives matter;' 'Russia is our friend,' and 'No more brother wars,' referring to uniting white people. People opposed to white supremacy also showed up in a counter-protest. Violence broke out. Three people are now dead, including one counter-protester who was hit by a car in the latest American act of domestic terrorism.

One very important fact I want to point out is that back in November, African American news journalist Roland Martin interviewed the most prominent of the white supremacists, Richard Spencer. And in that interview, Richard Spencer said, 'I identify as a cultural Christian.' Roland Martin said, 'What is that? What is a cultural Christian? I have a personal relationship with Jesus. Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?' And Richard Spencer said, 'I'm still figuring that out.' (Roland Martin, 'We're Not Going Anywhere:' Watch Roland Martin Challenge White Nationalist Richard Spencer, November 22, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr5BQS79H7g&t=1276s>; see also Joe Carter, The FAQ's: What Christians Should Know About the Alt-Right, June 14, 2017; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-what-christians-should-know-about-the-alt-right>)

What Richard Spencer and his camp believe is a very sad and very dangerous lie. Cultural Christianity is about culture, not Christ, because it always winds up defending one particular culture at the expense of Christ's love for all. So as Roland Martin asked, 'What is a cultural Christian? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?' That is still the question we need to start with, when we confront sin.

Including our own, when we have to ask ourselves that question. A few years ago, I was speaking at an event with college students, and a young white man came up to me after one of my talks, and said, 'I just want you to know that I wrote a paper arguing for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.' I was flabbergasted. I had just told the story of the hurt that was done to my dad and his family, who were sent to those incarceration camps. I had just told the story of how he, as an atheist-agnostic, interrogated me with Christianity being a white man's religion, because what the heck were the Christians thinking and doing during that time? I had just told the story of my research into how there were some white and black pastors and congregations who helped the Japanese Americans during that time. On top of that, in 1992, the U.S. government admitted fault; they gave reparations checks to every survivor of those camps; they admitted they violated the constitutional rights of citizens; they recognized that there was no meaningful way for people of Japanese descent on the West Coast to sabotage the United States, even if they did sympathize more with Japan. What could they do? Hole up on their farmlands? So there I was face to face with this young white college student. And I wanted to ridicule him, or throw up my hands and walk away. I, too, was tempted to make my Christian faith into something cultural - something that I use to just defend my family. For in that moment, I needed the biblical truth that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers, the lies of the enemy that mobilize large numbers of people and drive them on. What I should have said was, 'Young man, do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?'

In the heart of God - the one true, real God who has revealed Himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in the Jewish carpenter named Jesus of Nazareth - burns a deep and passionate love for every single person. And because he loves, Jesus calls us to love every single person. Love doesn't mean we approve of

everything they do. But it does mean that we are to want God's best for them, to want for them intimacy with Jesus, and to have an openness to them, because God does, too.

Text and Context

So there are times where it is important to say to people that because of their own choices, they are making themselves into people who will not like Jesus or his kingdom. We are going to look in the Gospel of Luke to see how Jesus knew it was one of those times.

We've been in this series on the parables of Jesus called The Stories Jesus Told. And we've been getting a sense for Jesus' vision for his kingdom and his vision for how he would transform us. He told these stories because the Jewish people did not have the same vision, largely. We see that in the setting of the two parables I'm going to cover today, in Luke 13:17 - 21. The context here is that Jesus has started his movement, which he calls 'the kingdom of God.' He's gathered disciples, he's training them to gather more and teach them what he taught. And he is gathering people who are sinners and looked down upon, or Samaritans who were regarded as not really Jewish and also heretics. He was doing miracles of healing which were really compelling. Jesus was winning public debates. So the Jewish leadership of the time was feeling really challenged. And we pick up the story at Luke 13:17.

Jesus' Challenge: v:17 – 18

^{13:17} As he said this, all his opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by him. ¹⁸ So he was saying, 'What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it?'

Now verse 17 shows us that there are actually three groups of people Jesus is facing. First, are his disciples. They are learning, and following him. Second, are 'his opponents.' These are mostly the formal Jewish leaders of the day. And Jesus was humiliating them. Third, is 'the entire crowd.' Jesus knows that he doesn't have that much time left before he goes to Jerusalem for his final showdown with the powers that be. And when he looks at his opponents and the entire crowd, he sees a kind of cultural faith, something that is more culture than faith. And that is dangerous.

Verse 17 shows us that Jesus is directing these two parables at his opponents, and the crowd. He is going to challenge his opponents, because they are Jewish nationalists. They are looking to Make Israel Great Again, like during the Golden Age of King Solomon, and the military Messiah who would liberate Jerusalem from the Romans and kick Roman butt. But Jesus had a different agenda. In his heart is the heart of God the Father, who has always loved the entire world. As Paul would say later in Ephesians 3, that the Gentiles are co-heirs with Israel, equal to them, in Christ. So Jesus wants to challenge his opponents about what God's kingdom is really about, and what is really good for them. Even though he's going to say something challenging, it's not that he gives up. In the very next chapter, he has lunch with some of these opponents, and gets into it with them!

Jesus doesn't trust the crowds either. The 'crowd' at this point in the story is sometimes interested, sometimes non-committal. So they are already fickle, and Jesus can see that. In fact, when Jesus eventually gets put on trial and crucified, the 'crowd' will be standing with the chief priests in Luke 23:4, shouting, 'Crucify him, crucify him!' So Jesus knows that these are not people who have deeply rooted themselves in the full story of Scripture, which starts with God loving the entire world in Genesis 1. They read the Scriptures in a very ethnic and nationalistic way that just confirms their own bias. They reason with alternative facts. And so they are unstable.

The Guests You Don't Want: v.19

So what Jesus does is warns these people that they are making choices to make themselves into people who will not like the actual kingdom of God that they say they want. They won't like it because they want to monopolize it, but the kingdom is not just for them. He says this by telling two parables. The first one is in v.19: 'It [the kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which a man took and threw into his own garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.'

Now doesn't this sound all nice? We've read about Jesus telling parables like this before. A seed falls into the soil, and grows. Great! And yes, that is in Luke 8. Or, in another place, Jesus says, 'If you have faith like a mustard seed,' you could do this or that by faith (Luke 17:5; Matthew 17:20). And yes, that is true, too. But the way Jesus throws the mustard seed element into this whole other setting makes it different. This story would have been a complete shock to Jesus' audience, because the picture he is painting here does not make sense. No one would do this. No one would want this. Why?

First of all, you would not put a mustard seed in your own garden. Mustard was considered a weed. This is a picture of what mustard looks like [SLIDE]. It's a wild and unruly plant, like dandelion. Yes, you can make dandelion tea, but you have to be careful where you grow the dandelion, and how you manage it. Because it's a weed. You don't want it in your garden. You want it in a field, far, far away from your garden.

Second, mustard was considered to be an unholy plant. Mustard plants were considered unruly and therefore, they were unholy. And it's against Jewish law to mix the holy and the unholy. So again, you could use it but you'd separate it from your garden.

Third, you do not want birds in your own garden! Who wants birds in your garden? They eat your food. Why do you grow a garden? To let the birds eat the fruit? No! You want to keep the birds out, so you can enjoy the fruit. Look at this SLIDE: 'How to keep birds out of your garden!' Because you don't want bird poop everywhere, like on this car [SLIDE]. Isn't that awful!?!?

What's even more significant is that the phrase 'the birds of the air nested in its branches' represent foreigners. It's a quote from Ezekiel [SLIDE]. Ezekiel pictured the kingdom of Assyria growing and growing until it became an empire, and the birds of the air nested in its branches (Ezk.31:6). Meaning, all kinds of people were drawn into it. By quoting this, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God would grow and grow until it became like an empire, and Gentiles would come to nest in its branches! Yikes!!! And it will feel like you are hosting unwelcome guests. Unwanted guests. When are these birds going to leave my garden and leave me in peace?!?

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God feels to you like other people - strangers, really - dropping in on your stuff and eating your food and using your resources. It's like something you don't want. But it's not the kingdom of God that is messed up. You're messed up.

Illus: In 2004, a 19 year old young man who lived on our street asked me if he could live in our house. He said he wanted to enroll at Roxbury Community College, and said to me, "Do you have any extra room in your house? I think it would be good for me to live with you all." I struggled with that a little bit. Because I thought that he and another young man had stolen from us four years prior. I didn't have direct proof that it was these two guys. But I suspected it. And, this young man had been to juvie lock-up twice, had gotten kicked off the high school basketball team for using drugs, and had generally not been interested in relationship with us. But last year, this young man cleaned up his act, and recognized that a better living situation would help him. I said, "But Lord, I think he's one of the kids who robbed our house!!!" But Jesus said, "I have a great deal of love for him, and I'd like to love him through you." So my wife and I invited him to live in one room in our house.

Jesus wanted people who would reflect his own hospitality. So if you think your wages and your possessions are just for you, no! Everything comes from God, including this creation, our skills, and whatever health we have. So we participate in His generosity. He welcomes people, of all backgrounds. When God stepped into human nature in Jesus, He was claiming everyone's human nature, and declaring His solidarity with every person. That's why He gives everyone an opportunity to repent and receive the teaching of Jesus. That's why following Jesus is not a liberal idea or a conservative idea. It's God's idea.

So ultimately, the question is always, 'Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?' And for all of us who would be his followers, we have to ask, 'Are we welcoming people in the ways that he would?' Yes, there are times when we will feel like Jesus is using 'our resources' to feed people we didn't want to feed.

To reach out to people for their good. But Jesus is saying, 'I am the King of this kingdom of God. And this is my table, not yours. This is my party, not yours. This is my family, not yours.'

The Bread You Don't Want: v.20 – 21

Jesus knows the kingdom won't be what these folks expect. So he tells the second parable: ²⁰ And again he said, 'To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?' ²¹ It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in sixty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.'

Now again, it's easy to read this as a happy story. We think, 'I know what this means – the kingdom of God starts small, and then it gets into everything, and it affects everything! And aren't we all happy about that?' But then you look at the cultural context. This isn't something people would be happy about.

First, what is yeast? Yeast is the stuff that makes bread rise. In Jewish life, yeast was used as a symbol of pride. Because it puffs up. It's what makes the difference between flat bread like matza, and yeasted bread like what you find at Panera's [SLIDE]. Yeast is what you get out of your house during Passover and Yom Kippur and other holy days. On many occasions, certainly the most important occasions, you wanted to make flat bread with no yeast.

Second, why is this woman working with sixty pounds of flour? What is sixty pounds of flour? It looks like this [SLIDE]. What do you do with sixty pounds of flour? Maybe you use it gradually, but more likely you bake bread for a big feast, like a wedding. You entertain a lot of guests at once. In fact, in Genesis 18, Sarah and Abraham take sixty pounds of flour – the only other place in Scripture that appears – and entertain God and two angels. So Jesus is making an allusion to one of the most holy meals in the Bible, but he throws in the surprise plot twist. This doesn't feel holy!

Third, you don't 'hide' yeast in flour. You can hide money in your underwear drawer because you can pull that money out again. You can't pull yeast out of flour. Do you 'hide' baking soda in flour? No. And, someone will find out pretty quickly, as soon as they start baking, what was 'hidden' in there.

The kingdom of God is like this??? It's when you expect holy bread, but surprise, you get not holy bread. In Acts 10, God tells Simon Peter to go to the house of Cornelius the Roman centurion, and receive his hospitality. Simon Peter at first says 'no' because Jews thought eating with Gentiles made you unclean. But God says, 'Go anyway. Eating with him doesn't make you unclean.'

The Jewish leaders at the time defined cleanness and holiness as primarily social because it was about whether you followed the kosher laws. Jesus said that the kosher laws are no longer binding. So he defined cleanness and holiness as spiritual, through attachment to God, having the love of God, acting out of the love of God. This means he went to the houses of 'sinners' and ate with them, like Zaccheus the tax collector in Luke 19:1 – 10. He hung out with the 'wrong people.'

The first parable, of the mustard tree in the garden, was about giving hospitality to the 'wrong people.' The second parable, of the yeast in the flour, is about receiving hospitality from the 'wrong people.'

Illus: When I was 23 years old, my mom disowned me because I lived in an apartment complex with Mexican immigrant families. I was receiving the hospitality of the 'wrong people,' in her view. I helped to lead worship for a Spanish speaking Bible study which was led by my mentors Jose and Jennifer Espinosa. And I moved into an apartment complex that was really run down. It had 100 units. Ninety-nine of those units had Mexican immigrants. One of those units had me. They were working a lot of low wage jobs. I was working at Intel in Silicon Valley. And I was welcomed in by them. They invited me to their tables. A couple of families virtually adopted me as one of their own. But when my mom visited me, she said I was wasting my education, even though I was using my degree at work. She ordered me to move out. I refused until we could talk again face to face. So she disowned me. We later repaired our relationship, and that's a longer story. But the important thing here is that she thought I was living with the 'wrong people.' She didn't know Jesus, and still doesn't, so to her, it was wrong to invest so deeply in these Mexican immigrants. But Jesus' vision of his kingdom doesn't change. And the reason I was willing to challenge her was because Jesus would challenge her.

So let me back up to ask a bigger picture question. In secular America today, we say we value tolerance. Then, we run into people who are intolerant, like these white supremacists. And in a secular mentality, the secular liberal person feels caught in a bind. Do I have to tolerate an intolerant person? Jesus does not have that problem. He just calls that person to repent. And so should we.

Illus: In 1966, a Catholic believer named Senator Robert F. Kennedy went to South Africa to speak out against Apartheid. At the University of Cape Town, he gave his famous 'Ripple of Hope' speech. In response, some white South African students complained about slavery supposedly being in the Bible, therefore Apartheid was supposedly okay. Neither of which was actually true. RFK said, 'Well, just think about this: What if you die and you go up to heaven; and suppose when you get there you enter the pearly gates; and suppose God is black.' There was silence. Those students had nothing to say. Because they had believed in cultural Christianity, and therefore their culture and not Christ.

God has always trained His people to embrace others who are different, others who we fear, others who we need to reconcile with. There is the old story in the book of Genesis about Jacob wrestling with God in the dark of night. And as dawn breaks, God sees the face of God. Then, Jacob continues on his journey home. And he meets his brother Esau, the brother he stole from many years ago. He had been wrestling with God's call to confess and reconcile with his brother. He thought his brother would be his enemy. So the wrestling with God the night before was a physical representation of the internal wrestling he was doing. But when Jacob meets his brother Esau, he says, 'Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God' (Genesis 33:10). Jacob had just seen the face of God early that morning when the sun came up. Is it possible that God appeared to Jacob wearing the face of Esau? Does God wear the face of the person you wronged? Or the person you fear? Or the person you need to apologize to? The person you need to be reconciled with?

That's what is going on here in these two short parables in Luke. Jesus knows when our hearts have become too small. And that's why, when that happens, he reminds us that his kingdom is big. Sometimes, he does that in gentle ways. Sometimes, he does that in jarring ways, like in these two parables. But the kingdom itself doesn't change. Jesus' love for all humanity doesn't change. The question is: How do you and I experience the kingdom? Or Jesus' love for all? Well, that depends on you. It depends on your posture.

I want to remind you that Jesus also does this with the theme of fire in the Bible. How do you experience fire? Well it depends on you. It depends on your posture. God is a fire, a consuming fire. And so, in every biblical book, fire starts off as God's way of purifying people. He is a refiner's fire. He wants to make us into pure gold, so He wants to refine away the dross, the impurities in us. So if your posture is, 'I want to be purified and refined and cleansed and healed,' then great! That's what Jesus will do by his Spirit in you, because that's what he's already done within himself. But if your posture is, 'I want to hold on to my sin, my addiction, my disease, and pretend that it's not really a problem,' then you have a problem. You will feel like Jesus is destroying you. In reality, he's just destroying the thing that's destroying you. But because you've identified yourself with your sin, you will feel like God is burning you. But it's not that God has changed. You have. And it's not that God is treating you differently than He treats anyone else. You're the one asking for special treatment. There might be people who want special treatment so badly that the fire of God's love becomes hell itself.

And so, as we the people of Christ continue to live in the aftermath of colonialism and empire, where 'race' was invented to create hierarchies of power, the message is the same as it's always been: Christ loves every single person. And that's good news. Unless you don't like it.

We carry a bottom line question with us into the world: Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Let's take courage.