

BEYOND SALVATION



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Beyond Salvation...

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Special Thanks:

First of all, I would just like to say thanks to the great group of people that I serve alongside at Real Life Ministries on the Palouse. I could not imagine what ministry would be like without the freedom to impetuously try on new ideas, scrap old ideas, and change direction on a dime – only to come back around to what we originally planned anyway. Ministry is a gift to me because of you all.

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Section I – What is the Gospel?

I grew up in church. I was a preacher's kid and while I had my moments of rebellion, for the most part, I have never known my life without God in it. My father had the true privilege of speaking in many churches outside of ours and I got to rub shoulders with preachers my whole life. I can remember countless conversations around our dinner table between my father and other preachers about theology, the church, the text, and how we should act in order to reach the world for Jesus. As a pastor for nearly 20 years now, I continue to not only hear those same conversations, but I am now a part of the dialogue.

I say all that to say this – I have a fairly large frame of reference for what I am about to say next. I believe that when the modern church says that we need to share the “Gospel,” it means that we need to tell someone how to “get saved.” We frame it all kinds of ways. But in modern Christian vernacular, “Gospel” means “salvation message.”

Tandem to this conversation, there is always another conversation that takes place. In the church where I grew up, it started something like this: “Don't leave them dripping wet at the baptistery...” And this conversation was always about the reality that the Gospel promises power for living, but not many were experiencing that power. And preachers would passionately espouse the reality that while Christians talk about the power of Jesus they don't experience it much in their lives and in truth, the world sees that and is repelled by it.

“The church is full of hypocrites.” I would hear this statement from the pulpit as the #1 problem that the world has with the church. If it wasn't #1, it was at least near the top of the list. So, I grew up feeling like the world was out to get me and that if I were ever going to truly live for God, love Jesus, and fulfill His mission, I needed to adopt this almost militant posture. It was “us against the world” and the world was actively looking to subvert any effort the church would make to reach people with this salvation message.

Stepping out into the world of paid vocational ministry for myself simply didn't bear this out. The world wasn't angry at the church. Oh, don't get me wrong; there are those who would get no greater joy than to see the church die. But honestly, those represent a very small percentage of people that I would encounter in the communities in which I lived. Quite frankly, the people that I ran into didn't think about the church much at all – good or bad. The church is an irrelevant side note to the day-to-day functioning of any community. It is good for some people, but “whatever.”

I believe with everything in me that as I explore the root of the church's irrelevancy in today's culture, the answer does not lay in contemporary music or hymns. The answer is not about preaching style or children's ministry. And the answer is certainly not in the location of the church building. The church needs a more accurate definition of the Gospel.

Please... before you brand me a heretic and string me up, hear me all the way out.

A simple cursory overview of the use of the Greek word we use to translate Gospel might start to shed some light on the subject. As we all know, the word used for “Gospel” is the Greek word “euangelion.” It means “good news” and is often translated as such in various versions of the Bible. It is not a uniquely Christian or even a religious term. Many of the Caesars sent out “euangelion” (messengers) with the good news of a new reign from Rome. Zeus was referred to as the “Giver of good news.” This was also a “euangelion.” It had a broad use for any bringer of good news or the good news message itself. One thing we might note at this point is that the term “angel” is also contained within this word. But that is another book for another time.

To the first hearers of this message, the idea that good news is tied to the Kingdom of God was absolutely revolutionary. Part of our struggle in understanding what the Gospel is, is that we forget that this message was written by and given to real people in a real time at a real place. There is a story behind the story. Understanding that “alongside” story or the “meta-narrative” will go a long way in shedding some light on the gospel and its meaning.

Jesus was born during the Pax Romana – the 200-year window of peace within the Roman empire. Rome was and is to this day the most successful empire in the world at maintaining peace amongst the nations that they conquered. To put this into perspective, The United States is 236 years old. How many wars have we endured in roughly the same time span? The idea that they had no wars for 200 years is amazing! And this was Rome’s message. The Caesar brings peace to the world! And it is by the power of his mighty right hand that Caesar does this.

When Julius Caesar died, his son Octavian took the throne. Octavian sent out heralds (euangelion – the same word we use for “Gospel”) with the message that a new star had appeared in the sky and this was his father Julius Caesar. The star was there because Julius Caesar had become a God. This made Octavian, who changed his name to Caesar Augustus, the son of a god and so the message went out that the son of god is now on the throne. They said that the Prince of Peace had come. They also said that the mighty one who rules with his right hand is now on the throne in Rome. This was Caesar’s “Gospel.” His “Good News” was that the son of god has come to bring peace and he rules by power and might and no one can oppose him. Anyone who tries will be crushed.

Meanwhile, Jesus is born in a small corner of the world. The Son of God has come to bring peace. But He doesn’t bring peace by the power of His mighty right hand. He doesn’t control or demand or tax people. He invites people to return to the intent of their created design. And it is in letting go of the things that interfere with that expression of us that we begin to truly experience freedom and peace. God’s agenda is always to maximize our created potential. The good news – our Gospel – is that through Jesus Christ, we can realize that potential without fear or anxiety. There is a Son of God. There is peace. And there is a ruler on a throne. But He is not in Rome.

Matthew 4:23 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Matthew 9:35 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

Mark 1:14-15 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Luke 4:42-43 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

Luke 8:1 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,

Luke 16:16 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Acts 8:12 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

I want to make a few observations at this point. When the “good news” is followed by “of...,” it is always either the good news of the Kingdom of God (or heaven in Matthew), or it is the good news of Jesus. It is never the good news of salvation – ever.

Second, there are times where the term “good news” or “gospel” is used with out the phrase Kingdom of God attached to it. But those usages must have the same connotation as when the phrase Kingdom of God is attached to it. Context and proper hermeneutics demands that. And Paul emphasizes that idea when he says that if anyone (even an angel) comes preaching another Gospel, let them be eternally condemned. They had one Gospel. That Gospel was the **Good News of the Kingdom of God.**

A couple things to consider here – first, you may be thinking, “sure, I agree with that. What is the big deal?” The big deal is that Jesus didn’t come as a man to “save” us alone. He came to show us what it looks like to live on this earth in a way that is properly ordered and aligned with God’s agenda. The Gospel is not about saying yes and “getting in.” It is about being a part of a certain kind of culture that is created by people living out Kingdom principles. Discipleship then becomes unpacking and applying these Kingdom principles. That takes time, relationship, and investment. Discipleship

has never been and will never be teaching some nifty concept that I can pack away and never apply or use.

Second, you may be thinking that this doesn't change the Gospel as a salvation message. If you are thinking this, then you have missed what the Scriptures teach about the Kingdom. And more importantly, what they don't teach about the Kingdom.

Let me try to help put our minds around what I am saying. This is a hard thing to do, because metaphors fall apart quickly when it comes to the Kingdom of God. Any attempt to show the relationship between salvation and the Kingdom makes the Kingdom take up physical space and that is tough (more on that in section 2). The Kingdom is not a space or a place we go into or out of. The Kingdom is a way of engaging the world. It is a new, deeper, more true reality bursting forth right in the midst of this one. As Dwight Pryor says, it is a power at work within our midst. Salvation then becomes the criteria by which we engage this new reality.

If the Kingdom were a large castle, salvation lowers the drawbridge. If the Kingdom were a freeway, salvation is the on ramp. But again, I don't like stationary metaphors. So, straight and to the point, if the "good news" is that the Kingdom of God is bursting forth right in the midst of us, then salvation is the decision to engage that reality with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.

The "Gospel" or "Good News" is that through Jesus Christ, we have the ability to live in His Kingdom now. Not "some glad morning when this life is over." We have access through Jesus Christ to the Kingdom of God right now.

The implication is that we are not waiting for the action to start some day far off. God is working right now and He is moving His Kingdom forward. And He is looking for partners. In the second section of this book I will pull apart what the Kingdom is, but for now, we must realize that the action is not somewhere else at some other time. God is here and now, fully present working and moving all around us all the time and He has given us a chance to be a part of His working. At its core, this is the Kingdom. Salvation simply gives us access to what the "good news" is really all about.

The Kingdom message is a really big deal. Jesus was ultimately crucified because they said He claimed to be a king. Jesus told 38 parables that we have recorded. Of those, 20 of them directly say, "the Kingdom of God (or heaven) is like..."

From the beginning of the Gospels, the Kingdom becomes the central message of Scripture:

John the Baptist's message:

Matthew 3:1-2 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Right after the temptation of Jesus, He starts His preaching ministry. The Kingdom was His message.

Matthew 4:17 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Jesus sends out the 12 apostles in Matthew 10. He gives them specific instructions and tells them what to preach and what to do:

Matthew 10:7 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'

In Luke 10, Jesus sends out the 72 disciples. He tells them what to do and what to preach.

Luke 10:9 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.'

After Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, he had 40 days with His guys to give them any last parting thoughts they needed. What did He talk to them about?

Acts 1:3 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

After Jesus ascended and the disciples are scattered from the Jerusalem persecution, they went everywhere preaching and teaching. What was their message?

Acts 8:12 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

What we have to realize is that the "Gospel" is not a salvation message. Oh, salvation is contained in the message, but the Gospel message is an invitation to live within a new context. It cries out to us to let go of false realities and live in alignment with God's ordering of the universe. It invites us to trust the story God is telling with our lives and within our context. And it also invites us to not only trust that story, but to engage it – to give our whole energy to God's agenda for every moment. To reduce that message to simply "how to ask Jesus into your heart" misses the very core of what a relationship with Him looks like entirely.

It also has a secondary consequence. In the minds of many Christians, once I say yes to Jesus, there is this sort of "holding on 'til the end" mentality. You can hear it said in lots of different ways. "Life is hard, hold on until heaven." It is almost as if once you say yes to Jesus, life becomes a war zone and you had peace before, but now it is nasty living in this world that is on the verge of hell at any moment.

If that is the case, then I don't want to be a Christian right now. I want to wait until I am a little closer to death so that the war is not as long. There is no advantage to being a Christian today. Life sucks then we die and get our "paycheck." I would strongly

contend that if you are waiting for heaven like the paycheck at the end of your life, you have missed the point entirely.

The invitation of the Gospel is an invitation to peace not to war. It is an invitation to hope and wholeness and healing and freedom. The idea that the Gospel is about walking into a war zone and trials and temptations is a popular notion, but it just doesn't square with the text.

I am not naïve. I know that there are lots of temptations and trials to be had. But the Gospel is an invitation to trust God's story and the goodness in it. Then fighting temptation is not a matter of exercising my will over it as Colossians 2:20-23 talks about. It is a realization that once I really wrestle with how good God is and how much He loves me and has a good story to tell in my life, why would I want anything else? Temptations truly become second-rate knocks offs of the real thing. They are not equal but opposite attractions. As Paul says, they are not even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rm. 8:18).

Part 2 – What is the Kingdom?

Let me start this section by saying that there are volumes written on this topic. And there is no way that in the short amount of space given here that I would ever be able to fully exhaust this topic. So as I am writing this, I am sensing that whomever actually gets this far in reading this will be full of contingencies and questions that I will not address here.

That being the case, my intent is to open the conversation, not to close it. For many reasons, this needs to be looked at as a conversation opener. It is my conviction that the ultimate definition of the Kingdom needs to happen within the Christian community of which you are a part. “What is the Kingdom?” and “How are we taking the Kingdom to the community?” should be fundamental questions that your church is asking everyday. This conversation is at the core of the Gospel message.

Jesus has an interesting conversation with the Pharisees about the Kingdom in Luke 17.

Luke 17:20-21 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”

Perhaps a better rendering of the phrase “within you” is “among you” or “in your midst.” The “you” here in Greek is plural. Gerhard Kittle in his Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says that when a plural form of “you” is used with the Greek word for “within,” it is about a thing that is within the midst of the group. Not internally, or within a person, but a better idea would be the culture at work around us. Jesus is saying that the Pharisees are seeing the Kingdom right in front of them because of the “vibe” being given off by Jesus and His disciples. It doesn’t come with careful observation because it isn’t about space or time. The Kingdom is a culture governed by the principles that God gives us in Scripture.

This would be an important time to say that much of the discussion around the Kingdom centers on eschatological timing and process. I would suggest that when Jesus taught on the Kingdom, His message was not about how things were going to end. It was an invitation to see the world from God’s perspective – to understand God’s principles and live them out among people who desperately need the peace and hope that God’s faithfulness and love provides.

Jesus’ message to people is that the Kingdom of God brings peace to this life. Not only to the life after this one, but right here and right now.

I cannot stress this strongly enough. God is not somewhere else doing other things until Judgment Day when He all of a sudden takes a more directed interest in us here on earth. God is fully present everywhere all the time. And He is fully engaged in my life whether I acknowledge Him or not.

I believe that over time, people have a tendency to pick up on the larger story we are telling based on the bits and pieces that they hear us talk about. Too many preachers

are talking about looking forward to heaven and their people see only the hereafter. We are missing God's Kingdom at work around us right now. The Kingdom is not in a holding pattern.

One of my major concerns with reducing the Gospel to a salvation message alone is that too many people say yes to Jesus in order to get out of hell. I have heard and have even said in the past that as long as they say yes, who cares why they say yes. Well, I think God does. Because when we tell people about a God that is separated from them and needs to be appeased before He will "let them in," those that hear the message say yes to being "let in," but they don't say yes to the Gospel – which is about living in God's Kingdom.

I am not suggesting that we don't talk about salvation, nor am I attacking or critiquing penal substitutory atonement. I am simply saying that an accurate picture of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God doesn't call people to the altar week after week to get them to say yes to Jesus so that they can get out of hell. An accurate Gospel message tells the story of an amazing God who is actively and intimately at work in this world right now and because of His great love for us, He is inviting us to be a part of His working in the world. This is the only true source of peace and hope and fulfillment because not only does God knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps. 139), but He marks our steps (Proverbs 16:9; 20:24). If God is as smart as the Bible teaches, then I believe that these two truths are connected. God marks our path and then designs us to be the perfect person to walk that path out – in every sense.

The Kingdom, then, becomes the unhindered expression of my design and my path (me being the best version of me) aligning with God's agenda and His principles (doing His things His way). This brings about a need for me to absolutely trust His story (faith), and it also brings about complete and total fulfillment in the truth of everything being as it should be (peace). The culture created by a faith community that is wholly committed to this way of living would be the purest expression of the Kingdom of God that the world has ever known.

So then, the answer to the question, "What is the Kingdom?" is best handled in looking at the teaching the Bible already gives about the Kingdom of God and deciding how the community of faith best applies those principles within the context and influence that God has already given them.

For you, the discussion of the Kingdom should revolve around how the faith community can apply the principles given to us in Scripture. In my opinion, this is what the writer of Hebrews is talking about in Hebrews 10 when he writes that we should consider how to spur one another on towards love and good deeds. And don't neglect the assembling of yourselves together as some are in the habit of doing. But encourage one another more and more (Hebrews 10:24-25 paraphrase).

It would seem that already, very early on in the life of the church, there are folks who are trying to pull out of relationships with other believers for all kinds of reasons. This passage calls us to not only make sure that we are fully engaging these relationships, but also that we are leveraging those relationships to inspire one another towards 2 things:

love and good deeds. This it would seem would be at the core of Kingdom living. What is the reputation of your church in your community?

So the Kingdom is foundationally built upon love and good deeds. These deeds should be measured by the principles taught to us in Scripture. And this creates a culture that helps people find out how to make sense of this life and the life after we die. This culture that is created is in fact the Kingdom “in your midst.”

Hopefully, we have started a very important conversation in your head and with your friends about how the Kingdom gets expressed in your community. At this point, further expansion on what the Kingdom is without conversation on the application of that reality would only serve to muddy the waters so I want to move to what the implications might be for us as the church in the contexts where we live.

Part 3 – Implications

I want to start first of all with some organizational implications. Since I can remember, churches that I have known and churches that I have been a part of have had “discipleship classes.” What that amounted to was 6-20 weeks (depending on how much the teacher liked to teach) of faith fundamentals. They have always been structured essentially the same way – I talk, you listen. Then at the end of 6 weeks or 8 weeks or 12 weeks, you are discipled. Or at least that is what is supposed to happen.

Not to go all “Dr. Phil” on you, but how is that working for us? This reduces discipleship to teaching. Discipleship should be awakening, empowering, and releasing people to live in the Kingdom – and then they actually go do it! But we have done none of that within this discipleship class. How do we know if they are applying it? How do we know if their marriage is better? How do we know if they are being more like Jesus in front of their friends, neighbors, or co-workers? How do we know anything about their lives at all? We don’t! What we do accomplish is setting a foundation for knowledge about the Bible to stay conceptual.

To take a brand new believer and help them feel like they have accomplished something by just finishing the class is catastrophic for their healthy spiritual development. We have made people who are not creating the right culture for people around them to know who God really is and how they can have real peace in the midst of utter chaos.

The Kingdom – The Gospel – is about intentionally walking alongside one another so that we can encourage and inspire one another to put God’s peace on display to the world. Jesus said, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me.” This is our sacred task – to lift Jesus up in all aspects of our lives.

Discipleship then becomes the journey of walking alongside others in the process of letting go of those things in our lives that we have chased that we thought would give us peace – but haven’t.

This reality of the Gospel being a message about living in the Kingdom of God substantially changes another commonly misused term – accountability. Typically, when someone “sins” or fails in some way, they realize that they don’t have the power to exercise their will over an issue. If they are serious about lining up with the moral code of their church context (which is different based on denominational affiliation, the part of the world you live in, and other factors), they ask someone they trust to hold them “accountable” to not doing that bad thing they did.

This has at least 2 negative consequences. First, it doesn’t actually empower the offender to have real freedom over that issue. It just raises the consequence of failure because now I have to tell someone. Second, the “accountability group” becomes a confessional session without any teeth to help one change. So the group meets for coffee, tells their sins, or at least the ones they are willing to be honest with, then prays and moves on.

In a proper understanding of the Gospel, accountability becomes more about calling out what I see God has placed in you. It is about coming to terms with what we see God

doing around us and getting involved in His mission that is going on right here, right now. Accountability is not about holding on 'til "some glad morning." It is about journeying together to maximize our roles in God's work right now – today.

The discussion of sin becomes a smaller part of this time together, not the point. The point is finding God's agenda in our context and aligning with it. Putting His peace on display to the world, lifting Jesus up, taking on His mission, however you choose to say it – accountability is not about confession. Accountability is about helping all of us take responsibility for our role in the Kingdom.

In my opinion, the biggest organizational implication is how we introduce people to God for the first time. Too many of these kinds of conversations start with the brokenness of man. We focus on how bad mankind is, how bad I am, and how bad you are if you are still listening by that time. If you take the average person on the average street and try to convince them that they are bad, you are already fighting a foolish battle. It is foolish on multiple levels.

First, when you open a relationship with "Did you know you are an abomination?" or some version of that, that conversation is most likely not going anywhere fast. It demeans me as a person and put me on the defensive. Even if I would have agreed with you, I am not going to now simply because of the approach. If I am going to be a part of God's Kingdom, then I have to care about what He cares about. And God loves people!

Nowhere in any world or at any level of relationship does starting out with me pointing out how bad you are as a person show I value you in any way. There has to be a better approach.

Second, my experience has shown that I do not need to tell people that they are bad. They already believe that. Show me one woman who is happy with herself. Show me one man who at his core isn't fighting insecurity about being man enough in something. We all feel like we are insufficient. This is at the core of advertising. Advertising makes us feel like we would be enough if we just had "this," or did "that."

Our Gospel message cannot start with the fallenness of man. It must start with the goodness of God. And if you think about it, that is where the Scriptures start as well. The story begins with a good God who creates a good world and creates man and woman very good. Rebellion gets in the way of that in "the fall," but the rest of the story is about a good God who is inviting us to trust His story and re-engage His mission.

This profoundly impacts sermons, conversations with non-believers, counseling, and just about every other aspect of how we communicate with people. Our banner should be the goodness of God. Consider the 10 commandments...

God says to the people, "Don't take my name in vain." Without going into a long explanation, this doesn't have anything to do with swearing or cussing. What God is saying here is that when you choose to call yourself a follower of God (a Christian), He doesn't give you a t-shirt or a medal. He gives you His name. This is what we are to strive to protect. It is the precious token exchanged at the wedding ceremony in our

covenant with God. It is the most important thing He has. We cannot take it without owning the responsibility of bearing that name.

Our sermons then, must be an upholding, celebrating, and praising of that great name. We should always be putting the awesomeness, goodness, and peace of God on display.

This also affects testimonies. Growing up in church, testimony night was part of the culture. It always seemed that the best testimonies, the ones that attracted the most response, were always about all the gory details of what someone was saved from. And the gorier the better. With a proper understanding of the Gospel, our testimony is more about who saved us and what we have been saved for than it is about what we were saved from.

Paul says that the old is gone and the new has come. We are not what we were. But when our testimony of the Gospel is about who we were, we keep fixating on things that God doesn't even remember. Realizing who we really are in Christ starts with letting go of what we are not. In Christ, we are not what God saved us out of.

I would like to wrap this all up with an example of how a discussion might go in the process of understanding the Gospel beyond salvation. First, just a bit of context. Jesus was a Jewish rabbi. He spoke to a Jewish audience and with a Jewish approach. I am not trying to validate or invalidate Greek or Hebrew teaching. I am saying that this is how Jesus taught and understanding this opens up all kinds of insight into His message.

Every rabbi taught in parables. This was nothing new. And every rabbi anchored the parables they taught into the text. Each story contained a "hint" that set that parable in an Old Testament passage. It is within that Old Testament passage that the meaning of the parable was found. This made a full and proper understanding of the text central to the Jewish life. Without that, no Jew would have ever truly understood the rabbi's point. This "hint" was called a *remez*.

The discussion that ensued after the rabbi taught was about where the *remez* was and why that was the *remez* and what the implication was to the rabbi's yoke (his particular interpretation of the text). When we approach the parables of Jesus understanding this, it opens up a very lively discussion that throws us neck deep into the scripture. And it shows how well or how "not well" we know our text. But I can attest to the fact that it will absolutely force people to not only know the story, but to wrestle and process it as well.

It is not unique to Jesus that He doesn't tell people the point of His parables. He says, "He who has ears let him hear." He who has ears, not only knows the point the rabbi is trying to make, but also the Old Testament text that the point is found in.

A rabbi never speaks in front of people without it coming from the text or in response to the text. This is why Jesus floored people when He would say things like, "You have heard it said..., But I say..." No rabbi would ever speak on his own authority. He was always tied to the yoke he had been given. This new teaching – though anchored to the text – was a revolutionary take compared to the rabbinic contemporaries of Jesus' day.

Mark 4:30-34 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

We all know this as the parable of the Mustard seed. I have heard many sermons given on this passage. And many good points were made about living the Christian life in a godly way. But I am not sure that they get at the point that Jesus Himself was trying to make.

Some initial observations about this parable: first, go to Israel and ask any Israeli today how they feel about mustard trees. These trees are considered a weed. They move in and take over. You can go there today and see whole hillsides that have been overrun by mustard trees. Think of the most aggressive, obnoxious weed that you can think of and you are getting at how the Jewish people felt and still feel about mustard trees.

Second, no rabbi would waste words on meaningless details. So whatever Jesus means by this parable, it has to involve the birds resting in the shade of the branches.

This then would be the kind of thing we are looking for when we begin our search for the remez of this passage. We have plants that grow and take over and birds resting in branches. Does anything like that exist in the Old Testament? Of course it does.

Ezekiel 17 New International Version 1984 (NIV1984)

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell the house of Israel a parable. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar, he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders.

"He took some of the seed of your land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out leafy boughs.

"But there was another great eagle with powerful wings and full plumage. The vine now sent out its roots toward him from the plot where it was planted and stretched out its branches to him for water. It had been planted in good soil by abundant water so that it would produce branches, bear fruit and become a splendid vine.'

"Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Will it thrive? Will it not be uprooted and stripped of its fruit so that it withers? All its new growth will wither. It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it up by the roots. Even if it is transplanted, will it thrive? Will it not wither completely when the east wind strikes it—wither away in the plot where it grew?'"

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Say to this rebellious house, 'Do you not know what

these things mean?’ Say to them: ‘The king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon. Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land, so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty. But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the treaty and yet escape?’

“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, he shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose treaty he broke. Pharaoh with his mighty army and great horde will be of no help to him in war, when ramps are built and siege works erected to destroy many lives. He despised the oath by breaking the covenant. Because he had given his hand in pledge and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.

“Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As surely as I live, I will bring down on his head my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke. I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare. I will bring him to Babylon and execute judgment upon him there because he was unfaithful to me. All his fleeing troops will fall by the sword, and the survivors will be scattered to the winds. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken.

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 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. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

“I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.”

Here we see all the connections to the major points that Jesus puts into the parable of the mustard seed. And I can tell you with absolute confidence that if you give this story to any orthodox Jewish person even today, they will know exactly what is being referred to.

Now, back to the broader question: What is the point of the parable? I would suggest that the point of the parable of the mustard seed is not the mustard seed or the tree that it turns into. And while it is true that the Kingdom of God grows and expands when it acts like the Kingdom of God, that is not what Jesus is trying to point out.

In Mark 4, this is the last in a series of parables that Jesus is telling the crowds. All the parables have a farming/ seed scattering theme, but this parable would have been His big “in conclusion” for this section of teaching. I think Jesus is brilliant in this section of teaching for lots of reasons, but probably the biggest reason in my mind is how He uses the remez in this parable. He changes the plant just to make sure that we know that His point doesn’t rest with the plant, but with the birds resting in the branches. Yet He

still uses a plant that has all the properties needed to fulfill His purpose in telling the story to begin with.

Jesus uses seeds and sowing to explain all kinds of principles in this section of teaching, and then He makes one final point about the Kingdom again using seeds. His point is that if we as Kingdom residents are going to actually walk this stuff out, then everyone receives the benefit, even if they just rest in the shade of the branches. This leads me to some important conclusions concerning the Kingdom, the Gospel, and how we live within the communities where we reside.

First, the Kingdom is the plant, not the birds. Second, while the birds are not part of the Kingdom, they receive the benefit of the Kingdom's activity. In an extremely hot and dry climate like the Middle East, shade is a precious commodity. And it is the greatest gift that a plant can give.

So how does this play out? Let me first say that these kinds of applications of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom is exactly the kinds of conversations that your church body should be laboring over. Believers should always be diligently studying the Scriptures and finding ways to apply the principles they find at work there. "How does this play out?" should be a question at the core of all our conversations.

This is how I see this parable playing out in our context. Too many churches are measuring the success of the activities of the organization based on how many people "come to church" or how many people "became a Christian." I am not knocking these measures at a certain level because these are certainly goals of what we do as the church in our community. However, I do not observe a lot of measuring how well we live out Kingdom Principles in our context.

The church I work at has a high value on generosity. We are called to be generous – period. Even if no one ever came to know Christ through it or no one ever came to church because of it, we are called to be generous because we are Kingdom residents, and our King is generous. We must be generous because we represent a King who is so generous he pays a whole day's wage to people who work only one hour. So, our church has done some things intentionally to be generous in our community.

My good friend, Jim Putman, used to say all the time, "If you want to show me that you really love me, love my kids." I see a lot of truth in that and so as a church we have taken that idea seriously. We have adopted 2 schools now and are working on a third.

We have purchased school supplies for every student that goes to those schools. No kids that goes to those schools has to purchase anything. There are some dynamics there that have proven to be the parable of the mustard seed lived out to the tee.

We are not able to advertise in any way that the church is responsible for doing this. Other than the announcement that the school itself makes about the fact that we are purchasing the supplies, there is no way that we are actually engaged with the families receiving the benefit of the school supplies. But in this time of economic uncertainty, it has been a welcome reprieve to many struggling families. And there was a fascinating thing that happened as a result of all this that we had not planned.

We have a saying in our church that goes like this... We must do our part, they must do their part, and God must do His part. I cannot do God's part, and I cannot do their part. I can only do my part. But I must do my part.

We did our part. We were generous because it is a principle that Kingdom residents live by regardless of the result. The result is God's part. And as you might imagine, God did His part.

We got more good press from people in the community writing the local newspapers (who refused to do an article on us) and from the word of mouth that spread from people talking about it than we ever could have gotten if we had put some flyer in with the supplies for every student.

If we had tried to force everyone to recognize our church for what we did, there would have been tremendous backlash and people would have said that we were doing this act of kindness just to get people to come to our church. But because we simply gave without strings, which is what generosity really is, we saw more positive response to the church as a whole in the community (not just our church, but every church) and to God's people than we ever could have imagined. And yes, even those who weren't part of the Kingdom of God got to rest in the shade of its branches.

We have adopted this idea in just about everything that we do in our community. We are not measuring how many people come to church as a result of the things we do in the community. We are measuring how true we are to living out Kingdom principles in our context. And, for what it's worth, we haven't had any trouble having more than enough people coming to church. It reminds me of the verse where Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow."

My friend Brian Mavis said something to me once that shaped me heavily. He said that instead of thinking about how to be the best church in the community, we should spend our time thinking about how to be the best church FOR the community (my paraphrase). The Gospel message is a message of that conversation taking place over and over and over again.

The Gospel message is not simply about salvation. It is a message of the Kingdom of God living out God's principles and inviting others to be a part of that reality right here and right now. The Gospel is not a message of "some glad morning" and the action being somewhere else. The Gospel is a message of every moment being pregnant with importance and the presence of God. And it is an invitation to those around us to awaken to that reality and see God's goodness playing out around them everyday.

The Gospel of the Kingdom takes us to places where we must trust God more, live in faith more, and engage the people around us more every day. It calls us to let go of everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us and to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

The Gospel calls us way past a decision to follow Christ. The Gospel is not simply saying yes to Jesus. It is an invitation to engage the world from a particular perspective; to walk out the principles of God without reservation or concern for the outcome. It

invites us to trust that God is telling a good story in the world right now. And we can see pain and suffering and mourning and victory and blessing and rejoicing through that lens. And it is good!

The Gospel invites you way Beyond Salvation. And so do I...