

Trusting God to Make His Kingdom Grow!

Lk 13:18-35 (text)

17 March 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

During our recent visit to South Africa, one of my nephews asked, “Uncle Pieter, is God’s kingdom growing in New Zealand?”

Here, roughly, is the way I replied to him: “If you mean, ‘Is God’s kingdom growing *in numbers* in New Zealand?’ then I can’t tell you.” “As far as my human eyes can see, it looks as if God’s kingdom is very small in secular New Zealand!”

My brother & sister, have the few numbers of professing Christians ever bothered you? On the other hand, have you looked at the multitude of non-Christians and thought, “How could such a large number be wrong?” “Yes, how could so many people (some of them even such *kind* people) be eternally lost – on their way to hell?”

And, what’s going through your mind when you hear about Christ’s loved-ones being persecuted for their faith (as is happening in very many places on this planet right at this moment)?

Yes, have the large number of unbelievers, the small number of committed Christians and attacks on Christians ever shaken your faith so much that you ended up praying quietly, “God, is your word to be trusted?” “Jesus, are You really the only way into God’s kingdom?”

My brother & sister, our Lord Jesus knew some of His followers would mistrust His words about His kingdom’s power & growth.

Look, is that not why He spoke the words of our text – words whose main message is: **“Christian, don’t let numbers or dangers put you off!”? Look, God is busy building His kingdom through Me! So, just keep on trusting!”**

Well, our text allows for us the following three points...

- Trusting Despite Small Numbers
- Trusting Personally
- Trusting Despite Dangers

Trusting Despite Small Numbers

It seems many Jews, who have just heard Jesus’ preaching, are now confused – they have always thought God’s kingdom would have large numbers – that just being a Jew would have you in (not out of) God’s kingdom!

But listening now to Jesus’ preaching, it looks like it’s a whole different “story!” – like not everyone who is of the nation of Israel will automatically be in God’s kingdom!

So, what does Jesus now do?

Well, He gives them two pictures...

The first one is about a mustard seed. Yes, compared to the tree that will grow out of it, the mustard seed is tiny – minuscule!

But then, a man plants it in his garden! It grows & grows – becomes an enormously big tree! Finally, it has lots of branches & leaves. Many birds perch & nest in its branches!

Well, here is something quite significant! You see, already 600 years before Jesus was born, God promised His people (in Ezek 17) that the great Son of David, i.e. the Messiah,

would come, and when He comes, He would be like a big tree which shades many birds in its branches!¹

What a clear picture of how God would make Messiah a blessing for all His people from all nations! Yes, through Jesus' cross-death and powerful resurrection, God's kingdom would become a place where believers from all nations find salvation, a place of righteousness and rest.²

So, Jesus' kingdom – despite its small beginnings – is like a big tree which is housing many, nurturing & caring for them!

And the emphasis is not on *numbers* in the church – neither is it on physical power – yes, Christ's kingdom is not enforced by violent means: guns, etc. – but by His Word and Spirit and *the protective presence of a caring God!*³

But look, Christ's kingdom is also like leaven! Our text tells us how a very little amount gets mixed into a very large amount (36 litres)⁴ of flour! Yet, be the flour ever so much, the yeast permeates (works its way through) the entire batch!

So, Christ's kingdom starts out small, but will in the end reach every corner of the world! Nothing can stop this Kingdom's growth! Trust God!

Are you still doubting?

Well, look, God's kingdom started off with one Person – Jesus, the Son of God. Then, already before Jesus ascended back into heaven, His kingdom had grown by including the twelve disciples and many more followers. Seventy years later (by the end of the first century), Christ had believers in many cities from India in the East to almost Spain in the west.⁵ Then, within three hundred years of Jesus' ascension, the Christian faith became

¹ Cf. Ezek 17:22-24 *Thus says the Lord God: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."*

² Through history, some proud people have tried to become that tree, e.g. Nebuchadnezzar, but God brought him low! Still, today, some are elevating themselves thinking they can be this tree (dictators etc.)! Cf. Dan 4:10-12 *The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. ¹¹ The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. ¹³ "I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. ¹⁴ He proclaimed aloud and said thus: 'Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches...'"*

Also cf. Ezek 31:1-14 for how already Assyria (long before Nebuchadnezzar) tried, in their pride, to become this tree!

³ Cf. Bock, D. L. (1996). *Luke* (pp. 378–390). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁴ **σάτον, ου** *n*: the Hebrew measure for grain, about a peck and a half or somewhat less than one-half bushel (a bushel consists of four pecks) or approximately twelve liters in the metric system—'saton, measure, batch' (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 708). New York: United Bible Societies).

For the Hebrew word *Seah* (שֵׁה) cf. BDB, "On size of *sē'āh* = 1/3 ephah, = 12.148 litres (= 10.696 qts.)" (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 684). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁵ For "Christianity in the First Century," cf. e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_the_1st_century "The first Christian communities outside of Jerusalem appeared in Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and the political center of Rome. The original church communities were founded by apostles and numerous other Christians,

the dominant faith of the Roman Empire!⁶ Was every citizen a Christian? No! But the Christian faith had spread to every major city in the Roman Empire!⁷

Today?

Well, according to Wycliffe Global Alliance, by October last year (2018), the whole Bible (not just portions of it) had been translated into 683 languages.

But the number of languages that now have the NT translated into them is 1,534.

And the number of languages that contain at least snippets of the Bible, is 3,350.⁸

At the moment, there are just over 7,000 languages in the world – many of them dying out because they're spoken by only a few people.⁹

So, what do these statistics tell us?

Well, that about half the languages of the world have at least *some* words of the Bible translated into them.

That's re Bible *translations*.

What about the *spread of Christians* around the world?

Well, a hundred years ago, *two-thirds* of Christians lived in Europe! But, look, by now the Christian faith has spread so far that no single continent or region can say, "We are the centre of world-wide Christianity!"¹⁰

Why?

Well, because, today, only about *a quarter* of all Christians live in Europe. More than a third are now in the Americas. Another quarter of all Christians live in Africa south of the Sahara Desert. And about one eighth is found in Asia and the Pacific.¹¹

soldiers, merchants, and preachers in northern Africa, Asia Minor, Arabia, Greece, and other places. Over 40 churches were established by 100, many in Asia Minor.

Paul was responsible for bringing Christianity to Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonica.[82] By the end of the 1st century, Christianity had already spread to Rome and to various cities in Greece, Asia Minor and Syria. Major cities such as Rome, Ephesus, Antioch and Corinth served as foundations for the expansive spread of Christianity in the post-apostolic period. Christianity spread very quickly throughout Asia Minor.

The Saint Thomas Christians are an ethnoreligious community of Malayali Syriac Christians from Kerala, India, who trace their origins to the evangelistic activity of Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century. The terms Syrian or Syriac relate not to their ethnicity but to their historical, religious, and liturgical connection to Syriac Christianity."

⁶ Cf. e.g. <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/the-spread-of-the-early-church-11629561.html>

⁷ For an animated map of the spreading of Christianity, cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ0dZhHccfU>

⁸ Cf. <http://www.wycliffe.net/statistics>

⁹ "Wondering how many languages there are in the world today in 2019? There are currently 7,097 (that's five fewer languages than two years ago!) known languages spoken by people around the world, according to **Ethnologue**, widely considered to be the most extensive catalogue of the languages of the world. Sadly, this number declines every month. Of these languages, 90% are spoken by less than 100,000 people" <https://www.theintrepidguide.com/how-many-languages-are-there-in-the-world/#.XlmjQCgzZPY>

¹⁰ Cf. The Pew Research Centre: Religion and Public Life, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> for, "A comprehensive demographic study of more than 200 countries finds that there are 2.18 billion Christians of all ages around the world, representing nearly a third of the estimated 2010 global population of 6.9 billion. Christians are also geographically widespread – so far-flung, in fact, that no single continent or region can indisputably claim to be the center of global Christianity."

¹¹ Cf. The Pew Research Centre: Religion and Public Life, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> for, "Today, only about a quarter of all Christians live in Europe (26%). A plurality – more than a third – now are in the Americas (37%). About one in every four Christians lives in sub-Saharan Africa (24%), and about one-in-eight is found in Asia and the Pacific (13%)."

Thus, although the Bible is not yet available in every *language*, one could say the Christian faith has now reached every shore!

Yes, despite its small beginnings 2,000 years ago in Israel, Christ's kingdom has grown into that big tree that houses & nurtures many believers – yes, like that yeast, it has permeated a big chunk of society!

So, are you doubting Christ's promise that His kingdom would spread? Well, look again what God has done in the last 2,000 years!

Someone might say, "But preacher, do all the statistics you have so cleverly quoted – do they really include *committed* Christians?"

Well, you and I won't know. Only God will know the answer to that question! But that brings us to point 2...

Trusting Personally

It seems someone who has just listened to these two parables of the kingdom, is still confused – still baffled – can't have peace with the fact that not all Jews will be in God's kingdom.¹² So, this person asks (v.23), "**Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?**" Then Jesus answers – and His answer is as much as: Your question is wrong, because it's not a matter of whether the saved will be *few*, but whether the saved will be *you!*

You see, my brother & sister, entering God's kingdom is all about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ!

Yes, (in v.26) Jesus says as much as, "Don't think (that) just because you ate & drank with Me and I taught in your streets, you will automatically be part of My kingdom! No, you have to *make every effort*,¹³ because the door to My kingdom is narrow!"

What does our Lord mean with "Make every effort"? Does He mean our salvation depends solely on us? No, Jesus *knows* we are saved by grace through faith alone and that not of ourselves (Eph 2:8-9). He *knows* that God alone works faith in human hearts! But look! Is Jesus not God? And is this exhortation not exactly an *instrument* by which *He* desires to create faith in His listeners!?" "Make every effort!"

What does Jesus mean by "narrow door"?

Well, that there's only one way to the Father, i.e. by receiving, as your Saviour, Jesus whom He has sent! After all, did not our Lord once *say* that He is the **door into the sheepfold**?¹⁴

Dear Wainui member, and dear visitor, there's a real danger: that churchgoers (even you & I) can assume that, because we have been born into a family that attends church, we are "in."

One commentator tells how his village in Scotland has a population of about eight hundred people. Of these eight hundred, only about *thirty-five* are regular church-attenders. However, twice a year this church holds a Lord's-Supper service, and it is the rule of that church that if you want to keep your name on the church's roll, you have to attend at least one of these Lord's Supper services. So, what's the result? Well, that on

¹² Yes, in Jesus' day, the Jews thought that the faithful in their nation would experience God's blessing! What's more, they reckoned that faithfulness was a *given* for most born in that nation!

(Words adapted from Bock, *ibid*)

¹³ ἀγωνίζεσθε Present Deponent Imperative 2nd Person Plural of ἀγωνίζομαι^c: to strive to do something with great intensity and effort—'to make every effort to, to do everything possible to, to strain oneself to' (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 662). New York: United Bible Societies).

¹⁴ Cf. Jn 10:9 ***I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.***

Lord's Supper Sundays, so many villagers attend church that they have to have three services on each Lord's-Supper day.

Well, this kind of cultural/social commitment to the church *is not a relationship with Jesus*.

What a fool you are if you think that a mere formal connection with Jesus means that you belong to Him!

No, make sure to receive Jesus – to enter through the narrow/only door – and receive Him personally!

Question:

Will self-reliant people receive Jesus? Will proud ones enter into God's kingdom?

No! Remember what our Lord once said: ***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***¹⁵

So, allow me to ask: Have you, humbly (stripped of your big ego/spirit) trusted Jesus?

Well, Jesus does not just say that we should make every *effort to enter through the narrow door!* No, He also says, "Do it *now!*" You see, there's a cut-off time when the door shall be shut!

As for those who will choose too late, Jesus says there will be weeping and gnashing of the teeth!

Just imagine that last day – the day of Christ's return!

Those who, because of the hardness, pride & self-reliance of their heart, have not received Him by then, will just find that it's too late!

And how painful it will be to, on that last day, see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – yes, to see your mother or father or sister or brother entering God's kingdom, yet you yourself can't enter – in fact, can never ever enter!

My brother & sister (and dear young person), though the birth of some made them excellent candidates for God's kingdom, they have missed out!

Why?

Well, because they have not *personally & humbly* responded in faith – also, not in time!

Yet, some who was *not* born into a churchgoing family – yes, some who only received Jesus *later in life*, will be in Jesus' kingdom! This way, those who *thought* they were first (in), will be last (out), and those who, at first were last, will be first!

Do you want to be in the kingdom of God? Then receive Jesus personally and with a poor spirit (humbly)!

Well, that was the second point to remember as you & I trust God to bring His kingdom to its fullness – trusting *personally!*

Here is the third point...

Trusting Despite Dangers

Well, Jesus is on His way to the province of Judea, to the city of Jerusalem, there to suffer and die! However, at the time of our text, He is not yet in Judea – no, He's still ministering in Galilee and Perea!

And who's the ruler of Galilee and Perea?

It's Herod Antipas,¹⁶ that ruler who once beheaded John the Baptist!

¹⁵ Mt 5:3 Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν. (Emphasis mine)

¹⁶ Bruce, F. F. (1996). [Herod](#). In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., pp. 469–472). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Well, v.31 tells us that, while Jesus is still preaching and healing in Herod's provinces, some Pharisees turn up. This is what they say: "Jesus, leave this place and go somewhere else, because Herod wants to kill You!"

Was it true? Did Herod *really* want to kill Jesus as he did with John the Baptist?

Well, it might well have been so! But, why are the *Pharisees* suddenly so protective of Jesus? I mean they usually hate Him!

My brother & sister, it seems it is only out of expediency (convenience) that they have come to warn our Lord! You see, it would make them so happy if such threatening words could scare Jesus out of their province!

Well, our Lord's answer says as much as: "Do you think I'm scared of Herod!?" "Tell that sly fox that I will first finish my ministry!" "Yes, I'm not in a hurry!" "I will leave when my work in Herod's provinces is done!" "Besides, I was going to leave after three days anyway, because I *have* to die, but not in *Herod's* provinces, for surely prophets usually don't die this far away from Jerusalem!"¹⁷ After all, is it not in *Jerusalem* that the headquarters of the Sanhedrin are – yes, the offices of those who kill God's prophets!?"

Wow, how could anyone be so bold and brave?

For a starter, how could anyone call a ruler as powerful as Herod a "fox"! I mean in those days and in that culture, rulers were not like ours, and there was no freedom of speech then! Would *anyone* in North Korea publicly call Kim Jong Un a "fox!"?

My brother & sister, the Person in our text who's calling Herod a fox, is not just anyone! He is the Son of God – yes, fully human, but also fully *God*! And He is the One through whom the universe has been created!¹⁸ Besides, He is God the Saviour who loves His own and who came to die for them in order to save them from the grip of satan and all who are in his team! So, for Jesus, *Herod's* threats did not weigh more than Jesus' kingdom-tasks, i.e. to save His loved-ones from satan!

See why Jesus was not scared of human threats?

My brother & sister, all who are heartfelt followers of Jesus, will see with His eyes – will see how earthly dangers are nothing compared to spiritual dangers posed by the devil!

Yes, he/she who trusts God to bring His kingdom to its fullness, will trust despite danger or threat!

Look, is this not what we're seeing at this time in Chengdu in China, where the pastor of the Early Rain Covenant Church is currently sitting in prison for his faith in Christ – where even eleven children have been imprisoned in the past month!?¹⁹ Whom should this pastor obey more – the Chinese government, or God?

Well, because this pastor trusted Jesus' words re His kingdom, he obeyed God more than the government!

Look, what else made Christ bold in the face of threats?

His sorrow for the nation of Israel who, having rejected their Messiah, was now in the devil's grip – a nation whom He had tried to gather together just like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings! But what's going to happen now is that, after Jesus' cross-death,

¹⁷ The ESV has rendered the words of v.33 best, because most other English versions have translated the Greek phrase *exō Jerusalem* (ἐξω Ἱερουσαλήμ) as "**outside Jerusalem.**" But the ESV has it as, "**away from Jerusalem.**" (Emphasis mine)

¹⁸ Cf. Jn 1:1-3 (especially v.3), "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**" (Emphasis mine)

¹⁹ "A further 44 arrests of Early Rain Covenant Church members have been made, including eleven children and a Chinese Christian journalist has been arrested after writing about how the elderly mother of detained Pastor Wang Yi was savagely beaten by a police officer" (From an Email sent out by the Barnabas Fund on 13th March 2019).

that nation will not see Him again until His second coming! At that time, all human beings – including the Jewish nation – will say, “Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the LORD!” However, scary thought: only those who have received Jesus in time will say these words *joyfully*! The rest will proclaim Him *ruefully and remorsefully – but not penitently!*²⁰

Dear Wainui member (Dear visitor), are you daunted by the humble numbers of God’s kingdom? Is your faith shaken by antichristian threats?

Well, through the words of this morning’s Bible text, Jesus says, “Look over the past 2,000 years!” “See how I have kept My word?!” “And don’t let threats or danger shake your faith in Me!” “The question is not: ‘Will those who are saved be *few*?’ but, ‘Will those who are saved be *you*?’” “So, I urge you: Make every effort to enter through the narrow door (i.e. through Me)!”

“And do you know who will enter?” “Only those who are poor in spirit²¹ – i.e. humbly trusting, like a child, every word I have spoken!”

Dear Wainui member (Dear visitor), is that you?

AMEN (2666 words excluding footnotes)

²⁰ Words well-said by Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.711).

²¹ Cf. Mt 5:3