

October 2-6, 2023 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 92

A Lamp & 2 Kinds Of Seeds

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. "The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' "An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. 'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. "No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'" Matthew 13:24-26 (NLT)

Reflection: This week we're looking at another one of Jesus' parables: The story of the Wheat and the Weeds. And this story is really about reality. What is true reality. How does this universe work? What is my role in the universe? That's what this story is about... it's about reality. This is how the story begins: This is how Jesus taught. He used stories, illustrations or parables:

Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables. Matthew 13:34 (NLT)

It turns out that Jesus, unlike many preachers, was interesting. The crowds loved listening to Him. In fact the Bible says they "delighted" in listening to Him. Why? Maybe because He always used concrete illustrations that they could relate to.

And the majority of His stories begin with the phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...". Now if you've read much of the gospels you've probably noticed that sometimes Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven and sometimes He talks about the Kingdom of God. What's the difference? Turns out there isn't one, at least not in Jesus' mind. He uses the two interchangeably because of the beliefs of His listeners. The Jews were so serious about not taking the Name of God in vain that many of them wouldn't say His personal Name (Yahweh) out loud. That practice was pretty much universal among the Jews of the first century. Instead they would insert the word for "Lord" in place of the personal Name of God.

But in some places in first century Israel they were even more conservative and wouldn't even speak the word for "Lord" or even the word for "God". They would be instantly offended if you used the word, "God" around them. They looked down on those who used the word, "Lord" as a euphemism for God's personal name and so they created a euphemism for the euphemism (I know... people are crazy, right?). Instead of speaking the word, "Lord" or even "God" they would insert the word, "Heaven". Heaven, as it turns out, was just another way of saying, "God" in some places in Israel.

So when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven you can be pretty sure He's being sensitive to people who would be offended by His use of the word, "God". I don't know why some Jesus was sensitive to some people's preconceived notions and others He smashed like a grape under His foot but there you have it. I'm sure He had a good reason... He just isn't sharing what it was with us as of yet ;o)

He spends a ton of His time trying to explain the Kingdom of Heaven/God to the people He was speaking to. Why? Because they thought they already knew what the Kingdom of God/Heaven was all about. But as it turns out, they were WAY off. So what is Jesus getting at in this story? Well first off He's making sure that everybody knows, His mission is all about the Kingdom. The people of first century Israel believed that the Kingdom of God was going to be an earthly kingdom. One that exerted its political, military, economic and social influence through the might of a sword.

But God had other plans. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies revolving around someone called the Messiah (or the Christ... same concept, the only difference is "messiah" is a Hebrew word and "Christ" is a Greek word). The mission of this "Messiah" was described in detail. There were two basic categories the Rabbis broke these prophecies regarding the Messiah into: that of the conquering King who would trample his enemies under his feet and that of the suffering servant whose sacrifice would somehow heal the people and the nations of their wounds.

But the Rabbis of the first century didn't believe these two categories of prophecies could possibly be talking about the same person. The Rabbis of the first century believed they were waiting for at least 2 different people (and maybe 3) to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. How could the Messiah be a conquering King and a suffering, sacrificial servant? One person couldn't possibly fulfill both roles.

And Jesus said, "just watch me." Watch as I conquer the enemies of Hell & Death and the Grave with the greatest expression of spiritual power this universe has ever seen resulting from what looks like the greatest failure and expression of weakness that this universe has ever seen. That's what happened on the cross. Nobody saw it coming except Jesus.

And now we try our best to understand this strange Kingdom that is already here and yet has not fully arrived. How best for Him to try to get us to understand something like that. How about farming? The Kingdom of Heaven is a like... farming.

Jesus replied, "The Son of Man is the farmer who plants the good seed. The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. Matthew 13:37-38 (NLT)

When does a crop become a crop? When the field is plowed? When the seeds are planted? Maybe when the seeds germinate but are still under the dirt and we can't see any progress at all. Maybe it's when the plant breaks free of the dirt and shows us that there is indeed growth happening. No? When then? When the plant is 1/3 the size that it will be at maturity? 1/2? 2/3? Or is it at the harvest?

No... it's a crop before the harvest but when a field with a bunch of seed in it becomes a crop is a pretty mysterious process to us. But it wasn't to Jesus. The Kingdom of God is already here, even though the harvest may still be some time in the future. The Kingdom as it turns out, is a process and not so much a destination. Jesus talked about it constantly because the people thought they knew what the Kingdom was but were totally mistaken, just like they thought they knew what/who the Messiah would be and do but man were they WAY off. So Jesus had to try to explain what the reality of the situation was:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew 4:17 (NIV)

Turns out the Kingdom was something that could "come near". How does that work? Jesus isn't saying it's almost time... He's saying it's drawing closer to us in space. Like it's sneaking up on us or something. But how could that be? Is it on a trailer? Can it be hauled around from one place to another? Sort of... that's kind of what Jesus is getting at. He spent most of His time talking about it:

Jesus went everywhere... preaching the Good News about the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 4:23 (NCV)

Confused? Good! So am I (oh great... that inspires TONS of confidence, Pastor Ed!). But hey, don't worry, Jesus wasn't confused. He knew exactly what the deal was/is with the Kingdom of Heaven and He's the only One who really has to be able to keep it all straight. For me understanding the Kingdom is sort of like trying to understand the relationship between a man and woman (ok... here's my theory on men and women... all men are idiots and all women are insane... at least to each other. The way guys handle things seems idiotic to women and the way women handle things seems like insanity to men... but it works out fine as long as they're both ok with that... but if later on in the relationship a woman is shocked that her husband is acting like an idiot or a man is shocked that his wife is acting like a crazy person... well that's when things start to fall apart... wonder what that has to do with Jesus' Kingdom? Me too so let's get back to that ;o)

... I'm not really sure I can explain it but I kind of know it when I see it. How about you? How would you explain the Kingdom to someone who didn't understand it?

Tuesday:

He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. Colossians 1:13-14 (NLT)

May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.
Matthew 6:10 (NCV)

Reflection: Turns out there is more than one kingdom out there. It's not just Jesus' Kingdom that exists on this earth. That may seem like a simplistic thing to say but it's important to make sure we all understand it... at least it was for Jesus. He continues with His parable of the wheat and the weeds:

But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew.
Matthew 13:25-26 (NLT)

Side by side with the "wheat" that is growing are these weeds that are competing with the real crop for space and the necessary ingredients to survive. The word for "weeds" that Matthew uses here is literally, "zizzania". Zizzania was a specific kind of weed that was the bane of ancient farmers, especially wheat farmers because zizzania was a form of wheat that never grew a grain head. That means, it was worthless to human beings (unless you thought

it was beautiful maybe... but farmers HATED it because you couldn't tell the wheat from the weeds until it was almost time for the harvest). Consequently, the weeds would compete with the wheat for the nutrients and moisture and sunlight that each plant needed to grow to maturity.

Jesus is pointing out that while His Kingdom grows/matures on this earth, there is another kingdom or crop growing right alongside His. His plan from the beginning was to rescue anyone who would join Him:

He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. Colossians 1:13-14 (NLT)

Does the fact that Jesus uses the illustration of wheat/zizania mean that we can't tell the people in Jesus' Kingdom from those who are coexisting right alongside but are in fact part of the kingdom of darkness? Maybe. Probably? I'm not positive about that. Sometimes I think we can get ourselves in trouble when we take one of Jesus' parables to (what seems to us) its logical end game.

One thing I do know for certain... we are not alone (any X-Files fans out there?). There is another kingdom that exists to harm the crop/Kingdom that Jesus has planted and if we're not careful we'll let that other kingdom stunt our growth. It's important to know that other kingdom is out there so I can always make sure to be moving forward with Jesus in His Kingdom. Which leads to our next point... My Job Is To Advance The Kingdom.

I think we sometimes get too wrapped up with trying to figure out all the different moving parts of Jesus' parables and miss the point... we miss the forest for the trees (although I'm not sure that's how it really goes. I know what the meaning of that little nugget is but not sure of the details which maybe is the whole point? Anyways... I digress again).

My number one mission on this earth, should I choose to accept it (any Mission Impossible fans out there?), is to advance the Kingdom of Heaven on this earth. When Jesus was teaching us to pray He gave us a model prayer. We call it the Lord's Prayer and right in the center of that prayer is this little nugget:

May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10 (NCV)

We should pray that God's Kingdom "comes" and that what He wants to be done (His "will") is done here on earth the same way it's done in Heaven. But what does that mean exactly? Well let's break it down (any M.C. Hammer fans out there?).

How is God's will (what He wants done) done in Heaven? Perfectly, right? What God wants, that's what happens. What He doesn't want, well nobody's going to do anything that God doesn't want them to do in Heaven. In Heaven, God's will is done perfectly.

Ok then, how is God's will done here on earth? Not so good, huh? If sin by its very definition is when I do something that stands outside of the will of God (and it is) then there is a TON of stuff going on here on earth that is outside of the will of God. Probably you notice a lot of it... maybe even in the lives of those you love.

So what's my responsibility here? What is Jesus asking me to do? What am I signing on to if I pray that God's will is done on this earth as it is done in Heaven? Maybe I'm supposed to try to force God's will on these others who are doing such poor job of doing what they're supposed to do. Maybe I'm supposed to force them to straighten up and fly right and get with the program.

Have you tried that? Yeah, me too. Doesn't work very well, does it? Turns out the only place I have any control over whether or not God's will is done on this earth the way it's done in Heaven (and therefore the only place where I have any control over whether or not His Kingdom "comes" to this earth) is in my own life.

If I'm going to advance the Kingdom of Heaven on this earth then it's going to have to be in my own life. I'm going to have to make that my number one priority:

That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life... Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. Matthew 6:25-34 (NLT)

What will that look like? Well, I'm not sure exactly what that will look like in your life. Neither are you, yet. And just when you start thinking you've got it all figured out (you know, like the Israelites of the first century thought they had the whole Messiah and Kingdom of God thing figured out but it turned out they were WAY off) you'll see another facet of kingdom living that you never realized was a part of it. We'll get to how we go about advancing the Kingdom of God in our own lives... but for today spend some time thinking about what it might mean to pray,

May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10 (NCV)

Wednesday:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so Jesus' parables are generally all about the Kingdom, there's more than one Kingdom and it's my Job to advance the Kingdom. Let's add to that the fact that the Kingdom is rarely what people expect it to be. This is why Jesus had to spend so much energy explaining the Kingdom. People already thought they knew what it was. But they were wrong. So are we most of the time.

In the first century the Jews thought the Kingdom of God coming meant that Israel would become the most powerful nation on earth. All their hopes would finally be justified and all the nations that laughed at them would be proven wrong and Israel could strut around the earth doing the superior dance while everybody else realized that they were wrong. That's what they expected but Jesus is constantly telling them that the Kingdom isn't about that:

Some of the Pharisees asked Jesus, "When will the kingdom of God come?" Jesus answered, "God's kingdom is coming, but not in a way that you will be able to see with

your eyes. People will not say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' because God's kingdom is within you." Luke 17:20-21 (NCV)

Don't we do the same thing today as Christians? We come to Jesus' Kingdom for power and change. We need His help to stop doing something we shouldn't be doing that is really messing up our lives or we need to start doing something that will vastly improve our lives.

Or maybe we want Jesus to change our culture's political reality, or social consciousness, or economic future (or maybe just our own economic future). We pray for Jesus to invade our lives with His power and blessings. When things go well for us we feel vindicated for our valuable time spent going to church or praying or reading the Bible.

But when things don't go so well we feel foolish. Others look at our lives and if our allegiance to Jesus isn't bringing with it tangible benefits then we feel foolish. We pray that God will intervene so we'll be vindicated. And while sometimes Jesus does intervene in ways that others can see, it's not mainly what the Kingdom of Heaven is about. Turns out, the Kingdom of Heaven, praying that it will come about in my own life, is mainly about developing the character of Jesus.

If the Kingdom of like farming, then wouldn't it make sense that there should be something growing in my life? The apostle Paul put it like this:

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard- things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Galatians 5:22-23 (MES)

I love the way the Message paraphrase of the Bible puts that last verse. He doesn't just list the "fruit" of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness & self control)... but describes what each one is supposed to look like in our lives.

So how about it? Are these things "growing" in your life? I'm not talking about perfection... no such thing. But do you see growth? If the Kingdom of God is like farming and what God wants to grow in your life is the character of Jesus then shouldn't we be making progress (however slowly) in each of these areas? I know... ouch. I feel your pain. But this is what the Kingdom is mainly about. Are you advancing the Kingdom of Heaven in your life?

Thursday

When the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. So let it grow, and don't try to squirm out of your problems. For when your patience is finally in full bloom, then you will be ready for anything, strong in character, full and complete. James 5:3-4 (TLB)

Reflection: This may seem redundant but I think it needs to be at least pointed out. The Kingdom of Heaven is like farming (according to Jesus), farming takes lots of time and patience, therefore the Kingdom of Heaven is going to take lots of time and patience.

We don't generally have an abundance of patience. If you're anything like me you can't stand to wait the nano seconds it takes for your computer to load the next page let alone endure a couple of minutes worth of commercials before my show comes back on. But Jesus isn't like us (let's all say it together, "THANK GOD FOR THAT!):

"The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' 'An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. 'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. 'No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Matthew 13:27-30 (NLT)

The Farmer is patient. He is willing to let things play out. He is confident that the good seed will be able to stand its own against the bad seed of the other kingdom. I wish I had that kind of confidence and patience. I'm working on it but I'm just not there yet (and before you start gloating and feeling good about yourself I'd wager you're not quite there yet either ;o)

For everyone who's ever felt impatient at the patience of Jesus, you're in very good company. At one point or another every human being has looked up toward Heaven in frustration and asked why things were taking so long?!?!? Even the disciples who were with Jesus on this earth didn't get it:

When they were together for the last time they asked, "Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?" He told them, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business. Acts 1:6-7 (MES)

I love that... timing is the Father's business. How are we doing with that one? We pray for change in our own lives and are frustrated when nothing seems to be happening. We pray for changes in other people's lives and are frustrated at the apparent lack of progress. We must come across like children to our Heavenly Father:

Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No. Are we there yet? No.

You'll notice I didn't use an exclamation point after Jesus' "no". That's because He's much more patient than I am. When our kids keep pestering us we eventually lose any shreds of patience we may have had and it comes through in our tone, volume and body language (sometimes translated as "scowl" or "mean face"). But not Jesus. He's patient and just explains that this is going to be more like farming than anything else. It's going to take time. When something goes from a seed to a fully formed flower in an instant it's generally because some cheesy guy in a tuxedo has just performed a magic trick (ok... so maybe it's not a trick... it's an illusion). But no matter what you call it, it's not reality. Turns out reality is a process, a journey. Reality as it turns out, takes time.

So for today maybe spend some time reflecting on your own life and how patient you've been with how things are going.

Friday:

"And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? Matthew 6:28-30 (NLT)

Reflection: We've already talked about this earlier in the week but I think it's probably important to revisit it. When does a bunch of seeds in a prepared field become a crop? Is it not until the harvest or is it as soon as the seeds are planted?

Maybe it's best to stop thinking about this in terms of wheat and focus on something more like a rose. Jesus used farming illustrations so much because that's what the people of His day could relate to. Nobody put much money into things like flowers because they didn't keep you from dying. Wheat did. People in the first century put most of their energy into survival but that's not true of God.

God loves beauty. He loves things purely for their aesthetic qualities. Some of you probably understand what it takes to raise roses so let's change the question: When is a rose a rose?

Is it when you plant the rose bush? Is it when the first bud appears? Is it when it's first started opening up or when it's at its absolute peak, just before the petals start falling off? I have a feeling the answer would be different depending on the likes/dislikes of the individual who is doing the gardening/farming. I can't tell you exactly when the Kingdom becomes fully formed in us (the answer is probably no until we see Jesus after we've spent years on this earth "growing") but I can tell you this... it's a process.

Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master's Arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time. James 5:7-8 (MES)

Again with the whole "patience" theme. Sheesh, is there anything else that we can focus on when it comes to the Kingdom? Maybe but for this story, patience seems to be the key. And thank God. If He was as impatient as we are what chance would any of us have? I imagine He'd have chopped me off the rose bush long ago because it looked like I'd never really bloom (some people might say that would have been a smart move on the part of the master farmer/gardener). Thank God for His patience!

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: To the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day. The Lord is not slow in doing what he promised—the way some people understand slowness. But God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost, but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. 2 Peter 3:8-10 (NCV)

God's patience is great news for me. It is great news for you too. But the last thing this story of Jesus' teaches us is that one day, the harvest will come and on that day the different plants will be separated and gathered together like a farmer gathers and separates the weeds from the good grain. The Bible calls that "the day of the Lord." Here's how Jesus explained it:

Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest time. At harvest time I will tell the workers, "First gather the weeds and tie them together to be burned. Then gather the wheat and bring it to my barn. Matthew 13:30 (NLT)

Terrifying, right? At least if you grew up in a church like I did it's terrifying. How can I be sure I'm one of the good guys? How can I be sure I'm not a weed? What if I work all my life and in the end it turns out I didn't do it right and so I get bundled up with the weeds?!?!?!?

A lot of people struggle with this and while I do think it's an important question to ask, I don't think God wants this question to haunt us every day for the rest of our lives. If we do we're giving ourselves too much credit.

Why does Jesus compare the Kingdom to farming so much? Probably lots of reasons but one of them is that if God is the Farmer and we are the plants, then it helps us to understand our part in this whole process. Does a seed decide to plant itself? Does a growing plant decide to grow more? Now obviously we can take this metaphor too far but I hope I'm starting to get the point that if I'm expecting anything I do to be the thing that justifies me or saves me then I'm giving myself way too much credit.

Yes, God wants me to be developing the fruit of the Spirit. Yes, how I live my life and what I do and what I think and what I look at and listen to and focus on will have an impact on that growth (or lack thereof). But the growth is not mine. Growth doesn't come from within me... it comes from the field and the nutrients that I'm planted in. It comes from the life giving Sonlight that only Jesus can provide. The growth is always due to the work of God, not me or anyone else's work:

After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work. For we are both God's workers. And you are God's field. You are God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 (NLT)

So relax. Ask the question, "Dear God, am I a weed?" Ask Him to show you if you're just clogging things up instead of growing into the beautiful creation He imagined you becoming when He planted you. Then relax. Do your best to develop the fruit of the Spirit in your life and every morning when you wake up pray this prayer:

May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10 (NCV)

There are a lot of things I don't know the answer to, but one thing I am VERY confident of is this: God isn't trying to trick anyone. If you ask God for His Kingdom to come into your life, it will. And you will be a son or daughter of the King whose growth potential will only be limited by how seriously you take the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven in your own life. In other words, how seriously you take becoming more and more like the King.