

Last Tuesday I got word that a church I helped to plant in Athens, Texas, was torched by arsonists. That makes five churches burned in Henderson County this month. Who burns down a church? Whoever it is, knowingly or unknowingly, they are supporting the dark kingdom over the kingdom of light. Every day we feel the impact of these two kingdoms in conflict. Jesus expected resistance when He said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." You can burn down the building but you can't destroy the church. The pastor of one of the burned churches told a reporter, "I got here at about 1:20 a.m., and saw smoke pouring out of the building. As they fought the fire, someone from the fire department focused a spotlight on the cross on the building. Through the worst of it, there was the cross, shining bright at the top." That cross was a timeless reminder of God's enduring, indestructible kingdom.

Last week reporter Brit Hume was asked about Tiger Woods on a Fox News panel: "The extent to which he can recover, it seems to me, depends on his faith. He is said to be a Buddhist. I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So, my message to Tiger would be, "Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world." Brit Hume committed the unpardonable sin in a secular culture; he had the audacity to suggest one religion is better than another.

The response was as swift as it was predictable: In The Washington Post, Tom Shales demanded that Hume apologize, saying he had "dissed about half a billion Buddhists on the planet." On MSNBC, David Shuster invoked the "separation of church and television" bitterly complaining that Hume had brought up Christianity "out-of-the-blue" on "a political talk show."

Kingdoms in conflict. God's kingdom has a king and He has a name – Jesus. There is only one way into His kingdom; His way. The kingdom of this world has a king too and he has many names – Buddha, Allah, Krishna. Or how about (your name here)? Gary? Or Mary? In this kingdom you can choose your own king or, better yet, BE your own king.

The kingdom of this world is a visible kingdom apprehended physically. We can get a piece of this kingdom with our senses. That is why the kingdom of this world is easier for us to grasp than the kingdom of God. Even Jesus' disciples were anticipating a physical kingdom. They were eager for Him to announce the overthrow of Rome and reveal His strategy for becoming that King that the OT prophets spoke of who would sit on the throne of David forever. When He described the kingdom with folksy stories about planting seeds and pulling weeds they were really confused. It would be like Wade Phillips laying out his strategy for the Cowboys to win the Super Bowl by talking about bird watching!

God's kingdom doesn't come naturally, it comes supernaturally. For now, it is an invisible kingdom apprehended spiritually. Jesus came to earth to make the invisible kingdom visible. He came to demonstrate what the kingdom of God is like. In fact for the next several weeks we are going to consider His teaching that begins with, "The kingdom of God is like..."

The kingdom of God was not a new concept to Jesus' followers. Isaiah was sent by God to announce the Good News of a coming kingdom. "For behold, I create a new heavens and a new earth; And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem *for* rejoicing And her people *for* gladness. I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; And there will no longer be heard in her The voice of weeping and the sound of crying. No longer will there be in it an infant *who lives but a few days*, or an old man

who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred Will be *thought* accursed. They will build houses and inhabit *them*; They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not build and another inhabit, They will not plant and another eat; For as the lifetime of a tree, *so will be* the days of My people, And My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, Or bear *children* for calamity; For they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD, And their descendants with them. It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain," says the LORD. **Isaiah 65:17-25**

Earlier in his prophecy Isaiah had even identified who it was who would deliver the kingdom. **Isaiah 53:3-5**, "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed."

How did the people respond to Isaiah's message? They thanked him by sawing him in half! So, a few centuries later, God sent Jesus to earth to re-extend the offer of the kingdom. He did so using parables. Nearly a third of all Jesus' teaching was communicated through parables. In Mt. 13:10 Jesus' disciples asked why He spoke in parables. He explains in vv. 13-17. In other words some people are resistant to these stories of the kingdom but some grow in their understanding of what God is up to in the world. How can we avoid the mistake of the people in Isaiah's day?

The answer is given in the parable of the soils. This parable is given priority in the Gospels in sections where there are critical instructions given in parables about the kingdom. It is a parable about parables. The long-awaited kingdom is already at work. The parable is a warning that we not make the same mistake Isaiah experienced when people violently rejected his message.

In this parable Jesus compares the heart to soil. The seed sown is the gospel, the good news that you can be a part of this kingdom, and whenever the Gospel is proclaimed it will fall on four types of soil. The fruitfulness of your life as well as the security of your future depends on the condition of your soil, the receptiveness of your heart to "the word of the kingdom (Mt. 13:18). So this morning I want to ask, "Is it well with your soil?"

The Good News of the kingdom falls on the hard-hearted...v. 19. There will always be those who immediately reject the Gospel message. Whether hardened by sin or stubbornness, the word of God just bounces off. We all know people like this. I had a conversation this week with a friend who is trying to share the love of Christ with an elderly neighbor. This hard-hearted man told her that Jesus is just like Gandhi and, in fact, lived in India for a while before he returned to Israel. How can you convince those who are already predisposed to unbelief?

The Good News of the kingdom sometimes falls on the shallow-hearted...vv. 20-21. The word is received gladly but gets scorched by persecution. This response is common among people who made a profession of faith at a very young age. Maybe they did so to please their parents. Then they went off to college and found out it was not cool to be a Christian. It's cool to be an atheist or a Buddhist; a vegetarian or Rastafarian but not a Christian. It's cool to have Ahmadinajad lecture on campus but Jesus is not allowed to speak. It's cool to save the whales

and hate the males but to be a Christian - not cool. Still, there is a healthy Christian counter-culture on campuses today. Where Christianity is growing rapidly believers have been refined by the fires of persecution. Michael Yemba spent months in a Saudi jail surrounded by extremists. He was offered 80 thousand dollars to convert to Islam. That will test you. What would you do?

The Good News of the kingdom sometimes falls on the half-hearted...v. 22. There are people who receive the word gladly but get ambushed by the cares of this life. We can get so busy building our own kingdom that we forget about God's. The biggest threat to God's people has always been idolatry. In his new book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller says the human heart is, "an idol factory." An idol is anything more important to you than God and His kingdom. "If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life and identity, then it is an idol." (Keller, p. xix). When the French political thinker and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, visited the United States in the 1830's he made an interesting observation. He noticed, "a strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants...in the midst of abundance." He went on to say, "The incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart." (Keller, p. x).

Notice that two of these first three responses depict people whose initial response is enthusiastic. They receive the good news with joy but that's not enough. People can receive the word with joy and still have a hard heart. But there's one response that Jesus is looking for...

The Good News of the kingdom sometimes falls on the whole-hearted...v. 23. The result is a life of fruitfulness. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, all grown in the soil of those who are "transformed by the renewing of their minds" as they receive the word. That's why we are doing Join the Journey...demonstrate...

There is another benefit to embracing the word of God mentioned in vv. 12-13; the greater the receptivity to the message the greater the revelation. When people responded properly to Jesus' teaching they receive further revelation and instruction about the kingdom. Those who resist the message will lose even the slightest desire for God's instruction. As citizens of the kingdom we have the privilege of broadcasting the seed of the Gospel everywhere. (Meeting after service to inquire about short-term mission trips).

The message of this parable is both a promise and a warning. The promise is that the kingdom we all long for is coming. As surely as Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus, the promise of the King's coming is certain. **God's kingdom takes hold where people gladly receive the Word.** If you're here this morning and you would honestly say that you have not been receptive to God's word then I have some Good News for you as we close: you can break up your fallow soil and be fruitful beyond expectation. **Jeremiah 4:3-4**, "For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, 'Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds.'" The warning is that unless we respond properly to the message we will never see the kingdom. We will spend our lives desperately seeking to build our own kingdom which will end when we do. Is it well with your soil? Open your heart and let the word of God speak to you.