

# LUKE—WEEK 18

## PATIENCE AND HUMILITY



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is The Rich Fool by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669)  
on display at Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin*

Jesus teaches that the kingdom will grow gradually, like a mustard seed, that few will be saved, that the first will be last, and that he who humbles himself will be exalted.

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Thank you.

Luke 13:18–14:11 — Patience and Humility  
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1 Luke 13:18–21 (ESV)

*He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”*

*And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”*

This all seems obvious enough to us. But the audience here doesn't know the Christmas story. They're expecting the kingdom of God to start with a bang. God is all-powerful. Why wouldn't He do things in a spectacular way?

So, this is a surprising message. The kingdom of God is going to start small but grow over time. A mustard seed is tiny; you can hold hundreds of them in one hand. Yet it grows into a plant over ten feet high.

Three measures of flour is about 20 quarts. That will make 20 large loaves of bread—enough to feed a hundred people. Yet, the tiniest amount of leavening spreads through the whole batch.

This teaching is important because the early Christians will face many discouraging trials, which will be tough enough without the added burden of wondering why the whole thing doesn't look like what God's plan “should” look like.

By laying out a rough timetable for the expansion of the kingdom of God, Jesus prevents a lot of pain.

God's sense of timing is different from ours.

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God's priorities don't look much like ours either. Jesus' slow march to the cross feels crazy, both in terms of timing and in terms of, “What is He doing that for?”

We're not going to understand God's priorities or His timing, but at least we can recognize that they are light-years different from ours. That's the point of the lesson Jesus is teaching here.

We have a tendency to get depressed when things aren't going our way—and impatient even when they are. That's understandable, given our human perspective and our lack of knowledge about God's eternal plans.

So, Jesus gives warnings like this one to remind us to be patient.

The Christians of Jesus' day will have to wait about 300 years, enduring terrible persecution the entire time, as they watch the mustard seed of the kingdom of God slowly grow, until it finally takes over the Roman Empire.

That's a lot of patience.

2 Luke 13:22–30 (ESV)

*He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”*

The question, “*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*” isn’t really about numbers. They don’t want to know how many people are saved; they want to know if they’re saved. The reason they asked the question this way is that they assume God grades on a curve.

But God doesn’t grade on a curve. So, Jesus ignores their question and speaks to the real issue—how to be saved.

Except that Jesus’ answer is completely unsettling. It’s designed to be unsettling. The last thing He wants is for all these clueless people to become comfortable in their cluelessness.

So, everything Jesus says next is a wake-up call. For starters, “*many ... will seek to enter and will not be able,*” is definitely meant to feel like, “Yes. Few are saved.”

The rest of His message deliberately avoids satisfying their desire to know the “trick” for getting into heaven. He just paints a vivid picture of the “damned surprised”—people who were confident that they’re saved but were wrong.

That ought to get their attention.

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We all know some of those “nominal Christians” who aren’t serious about Christ, but who think they’re saved anyway. These are often called C&E Christians (for Christmas and Easter). They may be in more danger than an honest atheist.

But C&E Christians have one advantage; they enjoy Christian things. You can invite them to a picnic and they’ll come. That can lead somewhere.

This is an important (and often underappreciated) aspect of evangelism—reaching out to the “Christians” who still need to be saved. Social events are more important than most folks realize. The social side of church has a holy purpose.

Give this the attention it deserves.

3 Luke 13:31–35 (ESV)

*At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”*

Notice that Jesus’ message to Herod doesn’t end until the end of verse 33. “*Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’*”

Jesus isn’t just telling His audience that He must not die outside Jerusalem; He’s telling Herod.

His point is mainly to disrespect Herod. Jesus begins by calling Herod a fox—which isn’t exactly the king of beasts. Then He points out that He has been performing numerous miracles and that He’s going to keep on doing that, regardless. This is a clear put-down.

But then comes the surprise. He acknowledges **to Herod** that Herod has the power to kill Him. So, He’s going to hit the road after all. Instead of completing the put-down by implying that Herod has absolutely no power to influence anything, Jesus does almost the opposite.

This combination yields an important message. Herod’s weakness isn’t that he can’t kill the body; he can do that. His weakness is that this power doesn’t matter all that much.

It’s like realizing that a fox has the ability to steal your chickens, so you put up a fence. Yes, it’s a concession to the fox’s power, but you just solve it and move on. Big deal.

The take-away is to recognize the power of the evil one and just address it.

*Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. — Ephesians 6:11 (ESV)*

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We get way too cocky about dealing with the enemy. Yes, the cross has defeated Satan, but the forces of evil often score major points against us. We let down our guard at our peril.

One of the classic mistakes a Christian can make is to assume that we will be held to the same standard as everyone else. That’s not the way it works. We don’t “get lucky” when it comes to getting away with stuff. Things done in secret aren’t as secret as we might think.

*and give no opportunity to the devil. — Ephesians 4:27 (ESV)*

4 Luke 14:1–6 (ESV)

*One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” And they could not reply to these things.*

At first glance, this sounds like Jesus is going light on the Pharisees this time. He doesn’t call them hypocrites or anything like that.

But this is actually a more pointed criticism. The key is the word “*lawful*.” The Mosaic law doesn’t prohibit healing on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees follow something called “the tradition of the elders.”

*For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, — Mark 7:3 (ESV)*

This tradition only allows medical treatment on the Sabbath in life-threatening situations. So, Jesus asks, “*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?*”

They’re stuck, and no one says anything. So, Jesus heals the man and then says, “*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?*”

He’s saying that when push comes to shove, they don’t follow the tradition of the elders anyway. This implies that the traditions aren’t serious.

*And they could not reply to these things.*

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Our practice of Christianity is full of tradition. Christmas trees are tradition. Easter baskets are tradition.

Many of these traditions are good. Old traditions often reflect interpretations of scripture that have stood the test of time. That’s why the classic hymns hold a special attraction.

But not every tradition is right or even healthy. Some of them are designed to sell things or otherwise pursue a secular agenda. We are called to discern the difference. As always, test everything against scripture.

But don’t insist that everything be explicitly supported in the Bible; only make sure something isn’t contradicted by it. For example, no Biblical passage supports the idea of decorating trees to celebrate Christ’s birth.

But there’s nothing indicating it’s wrong either. So, that tradition passes the scripture test.

If scripture had to explicitly support everything we do, we couldn’t drive cars.

5 Luke 14:7–11 (ESV)

*Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

I often laugh at the way dogs like to smell each other’s rear ends. I wonder what kind of strange social dynamic lies at the root of this practice.

But I also wonder if we do things that would look just as ridiculous to a non-human. Is one logo on a golf shirt more impressive than another? Is there a car that turns your head? What makes something or somebody “cool”?

I laugh at how the Pharisees fret over who’s in which seat. Then I look in the mirror and wonder.

Jesus doesn’t just bust on how the Pharisees try to be “alpha,” He busts on the whole idea of wanting to be alpha. They’re just being silly. We’re all just hell-bait but for the love of God and His saving grace. *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

And it’s not the seating system that’s the problem.

*And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”* — Mark 14:62 (ESV)

The Pharisees act like they’re in a pride competition.

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Pride takes many forms. It’s not just the kind you normally see in university professors—thinking they’re better than everyone else. It’s also Christians taking pride in their church—thinking they’re holier than everyone else.

Even fans of some sports teams look down on others, and I’m not even talking about the players on those teams; it’s the fans. Is that nuts or what?

But make no mistake, this is the human condition. We are conditioned to be competitive, and that naturally leads to pride. Life is a competition, and success means out-competing everyone else. You can’t avoid it; society is structured that way. When you get a promotion, someone else has to get passed over.

Ask the Lord to search your heart and show you where pride lurks. You may find it in places you never imagined.

No one is exempt.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you been frustrated by a slow answer to prayer?
2. Do we act like God grades on a curve? Do you worry that the grading might be tougher than we expect?
3. Do you respect the power of evil?
4. What Christian traditions are your most and least favorite?
5. In what ways do you struggle with pride?