

[Texting question: **The biggest hindrance to God's Way in our world is...?**]

A fascinating question, isn't it? Because how do we go about answering it? Do we look at the global stage? Do we consider the global stage? We could talk about threats like ISIS or anti-religious atheist regimes like those in China. The shift of our own American culture to a post-Christian culture, where even the buckle of the Bible belt is starting to tarnish. You can't automatically assume everyone's a Christian anymore... not even culturally Christian.

We can look at the rise of disbelief, the culture of skepticism we live in. More and more, it seems Christianity is under attack, from atheists, from the scientific community, from those who pose real questions about the nature of reality, the existence of suffering, the bloody history of the Church.

And if we're honest, that flips the question of what hinders God's Way in this world onto us. Who among us cannot confess doubt in the face of these very good questions? We too have doubted, have wondered, if God can truly be good in such an evil world. If God can truly be powerful if the Church has so often participated in the oppression of the innocent. If God can truly be God in a world that so loudly proclaims that God is dead.

Those of us who consider ourselves the people of God are acutely aware of our own failures, our own shortcoming. In the secret places of our own hearts, we wonder if *we* are in fact the problem: might our own insufficiencies be the biggest hindrance to God? For all the problems we see in the world, they are mere specks compared to the planks in our own eyes, blinding us, preventing us from working with God.

How easy is it to be paralyzed by doubt, by fear, by insecurity? For many, this is *the* barrier to faith in the first place. We have too many questions to come to God. We're too uncertain, unsure. We can't believe, so we don't believe.

So what is the biggest hindrance to God's Way being realized in this world? Is it atheists and terrorists and humanists? Or is it Christians, who can't bear the image of their creator faithfully? What is keeping God's kingdom from coming here on Earth as it is in Heaven?

Would you believe me if I told you that there is no barrier to God's Way in our world? That even now, God's Kingdom is becoming manifest among us. What changes if I tell you that our doubts are not threat to God's Way, our questions do not hinder God becoming known. And that no shift in culture, no rise in religious pluralism, no loss of Christian principles thwarts what God is doing.

That changes everything, doesn't it?

It's good news that God's Way is already here among us, persistent and insistent and relentless and we can't get in God's way. We can't slow God down. All that is for us is to say Yes, to join in what God is doing.

For all the ways our world today is different from the world Jesus lived in, one similarity is the overwhelming anxiety we have concerning God. The same doubts and insecurities we face today clouded the minds and hearts of those around Jesus as well. They too wondered if God was truly God, whether other nations with other religions were going to wipe them out. They wondered when God was going to arrive, to prove himself truly God as they had anticipated for so long.

And then this man Jesus appeared among them. His name meant "He Saves" and he was rumored to be a direct descendant of Israel's greatest king, David himself. People began to wonder if he might be sent from God at last, to reestablish God's kingdom, to make the Earth (where Rome was in control) look like Heaven (where God is in control).

And this Jesus began to teach about God's Kingdom. Things were looking good. Except Jesus' teachings didn't make a lot of sense, sometimes. He taught in strange stories, not using religious language they were used to. Instead, he used their everyday world to teach about this new thing God was doing, this new kingdom bursting forth right in the middle of the old world they all lived in.

But even though Jesus' stories were in their everyday language, they were still strange. Take this one for instance:

Here is another illustration Jesus used: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches." -- Matthew 13:31-32

Now, since most of us aren't Ancient Near Eastern farmers, we miss how strange this story is. For most of us in here, Mustard is a delicious condiment that comes from France. [\[picture of French's Mustard?\]](#) This is a great example of why Jesus' parables can be so confusing for us - we're just removed from the world of his listeners.

In this series, we've been asking what Jesus' stories would sound like if Jesus had come to our world rather than 2,000 years ago. We've been using a book called *The First Time We Saw Him* by my friend Matt Mikalatos as our guide, and this final parable is an adaptation of one Matt uses in his book. Matt asks, if Jesus came today, to teach us about this crazy, persistent, unstoppable kingdom Jesus brought about, how would he describe it? Here's Matt's idea:

God's Way is like a computer virus sent in an email. It's a few lines of computer code, but once it infests a computer, it takes over, replicates and sends itself to other computers until it affects every network, computer and phone in the world, until every device that connects to anything else is infected. In the end, there's not a screen or a drive that's safe, and every person who's connected to anything is connected to the virus.

Computer viruses are malignant pieces of code - on the surface indistinguishable (to most of us) from any other string of 1s and 0s. But they're insidious. On Friday, January 19, 2007, thousands of email users all over the US and Europe opened an email whose subject read, "230 dead as storm batters Europe." When those users opened that email, a Trojan Horse that came to be known as Storm Worm installs a host of small programs that carry copies of the virus. The entire host computer becomes a transmitting agent, emailing out fresh copies of the virus to new victims.

Within three days of the initial attack, Storm Worm accounted for nearly 10% of all malware attacks *worldwide*. Antivirus companies raced to eradicate it. They found the virus changes its packaging every 10 minutes or so, making it nearly impossible to detect and eliminate. Though most antivirus software today can detect at least some version of Storm Worm, the virus continues to evolve and spread.

And Jesus says, God's Way is like a computer virus. Like Storm Worm. Like a mustard seed.

[Side-by-side: mustard seed and mustard plant] A little easier to see why Jesus' listeners would be shocked, isn't it? Mustard was regarded as weed in Jesus' day, the bane of farmers everywhere. Much like viruses, weeds seem relatively harmless, difficult to differentiate from the healthy plants. But when introduced into the larger ecosystem, weeds spread despite the best efforts of farmers to stop them. Weeds can easily overrun an entire garden - and in the case of the mustard seed, become huge, towering plants that dwarf everything else.

This is what Jesus compares his Way to. Jesus says, My way is unstoppable. It's not big and flashy. It's small, innocuous. My way starts subtly, but it grows. Insistently. Persistently. Inevitably. You can't stop it. You can't stamp it out - every time you think you have, it pops up somewhere else. My way infects everything, turning it to God's purposes. My way is inevitable - before you know it, it's overrun the world.

How can that be? How can the Church be an unstoppable, inevitable force? It certainly doesn't *look* that way, not when we look around the world, when we see all the evil that exists even within the Church herself. How can we say that gathering here to sing and listen to a sermon is like an unstoppable virus?

But this hour we spend together is not the whole of the Way of God. No remember the stories Jesus has told in this series: the story of Roland and the Flea Market reminds us that the Way of God is like a treasure hidden in a flea market, a priceless gem hidden in a sea of junk, something worth your whole life, that's worth far more than you could ever pay for it and yet it's yours.

The story of Andy the 2nd Grade Teacher reminds us that the Way of God celebrates when both sinners and saints find their way home. Andy reminds us that God is like a teacher who will stop at nothing to recover a one student out of a hundred who wandered away during a field trip.

And the story of Frank, who went to Hollywood reminds us that God is like a father with two sons, one who stays and becomes bitter, the other who leaves and wastes everything.

The story of Gary the Dishonest Stockbroker reminds us that the Way of God isn't confined to "spiritual things" one day a week. When we follow the way of God, we realize that all we have are good gifts from God, that we should be creative and clever and relentless in using everything we have to chase after God's way.

And that means being aware, attentive for every opportunity to do justice and work for mercy, as the story of Richard the golfer and Dives the homeless man reminds us.

Nick, the guy who owed more than he could ever possibly pay back, who was forgiven his debt but then couldn't extend that same mercy to someone who owed him much less, reminds us that the way of God is characterized by a relentless forgiveness.

And the story of Mohammad, the Good Muslim, we heard last week reminds us that unless we love even those who don't love us, we are not following the Way of God.

[How can this list go on a slide?] This Way of God is a hidden treasure worth our lives.

This Way of God welcomes everyone, saint and sinner alike.

This Way of God uses everything at its disposal.

This Way of God works tirelessly for justice and mercy.

This Way of God forgives everyone.

This Way of God loves everyone, especially our enemies.

These do not happen once a week for an hour. These practices, these behaviors are found in small, everyday moments. In how we treat those who are different from us. In how we decide to use our resources. In whether we take opportunities to act justly or show mercy. In how we forgive.

These are behaviors: to welcome. To forgive. To love. We can choose to believe they are small, insignificant, that something so slight as these couldn't possibly matter in the larger scheme of things.

Or we could choose to believe that God is at work in the small, everyday acts of kindness. That's in God's boundless grace, these small, everyday acts could in fact be the seeds of eternal life.

Consider God's plan from the beginning: When God decided to create a world full of free moral agents, God knew we would choose our own way, ways that lead to Death. God knew we would need forgiveness and redemption. And so God launched a rescue mission through a wandering nomad named Abraham. God continued to work through Abraham's family. God repeatedly used younger brothers, slaves, women who had no power. Abraham's family ended up in slavery, and God rescued them. God preserved them in a desert for 40 years, and then God led that band of former-slaves into a new land, against fortified cities and technologically advanced armies.

Even after they were established, once Abraham's children had become a nation called Israel, they were still weak. Still small. The great powers of the world, empires like Egypt and Babylon and Assyria and Persia and Rome barely paid Israel any mind, unless they were fighting over who would rule her.

And so, through this nation of slaves and little brothers and powerless women, God stepped into the world of Empires. But God didn't come riding on a warhorse, sword in hand. God didn't come in a big flash of light, the armies of Heaven at his back, to establish his rule at the end of a sword.

God came to that little backwater country. And God came as a baby, born to a family we'd call "blue collar" today. And God grew up like each of us has, spent the vast majority of his life in anonymity. Only in the last few years did he make any waves at all, and even then, it was as a teacher with a strange new way of looking at the world. The well-educated and powerful looked at him as a bit of a hill-billy, an undereducated, backwoods preacher with strange ideas.

This teacher didn't recruit the best and brightest - his students were uneducated, blue-collar guys like himself for the most part. Either that or violent revolutionaries or Roman collaborators. Plus a group of women who followed him everywhere - borderline scandalous in his day.

Jesus led this rag-tag group of misfits around for a handful of months before marching to Jerusalem, the capital city. But instead of confronting Rome, he took on God's own people, castigating and critiquing them. The whole city turned against him, betrayed him and handed him over to be executed.

Jesus, this radical teacher, this God-become-human, this would-be-king, was executed as a failed revolutionary. His dead body was sealed in a tomb and that rag-tag band of followers was scattered to the four winds.

Talk about anti-climactic. If they tried to make that movie in Hollywood, it'd never get made. That's a boring story from start to finish. From the beginning, you want to say, God... look. Why don't you try something more... dramatic? Why don't you start with a king, someone with influence? Why don't you use the best of the best, instead of the least of the rest?

Why don't you make your people the most powerful, the flashiest, the most successful? Why use losers and dropouts and failures? Why insist on coming that way? It can't win. You'll lose every time. There's only one way that story ends, and it's in defeat and death.

Except, God whispers, that's *not* the end of the story. Within a few days after Jesus' death, his followers, that rag-tag group of losers and dropouts and failures, had reassembled. And they were telling strange stories - that their failed king had come back from the dead. That his plan had been to die all along. That his life hadn't been taken by Rome, but he had given himself freely to them. To save Rome and Egypt and every rag-tag loser who's ever been too small for the task at hand.

Something was different about this group of losers now. They were bold. Fearless. And they took Jesus' strange message of new life everywhere. First in Jerusalem but soon in the surrounding areas, and then beyond, to other countries, other continents, to Africa and Asia and even to Rome itself, the seat of human civilization at that time.

This small movement kept growing and growing and growing, infecting culture after culture not with death, but with new life. With hope and power unlike what they'd known before.

Today, people follow Jesus on every continent, in hundreds of languages, in dozens of cultures. We're continuing to build hospitals and work for justice. Christians are working right now, all over the world, to rescue children trapped as slaves in the global sex trade. Christians are working right now to combat crippling poverty at the local level. To ensure that when we offer help, it's not a long-term hurt, not a hand out, but a hand up.

Christians all over the world are involved every day in small acts of forgiveness, small decisions to use what resources we have to bring about the flourishing of all people, not just those who are like us.

So the question that's really before us today is: do we believe God's kingdom is coming here on Earth as it is in heaven?

Do we really believe that these small actions that seem insignificant *are* in fact meaningless? Or will we believe the Jesus who tells us that the kingdom of God is like a few lines of computer code that - no matter how insignificant they look - are unstoppable?

That those small acts of justice and mercy you choose to perform every day are part of an irresistible, unstoppable movement that's not just tweaking the world, but recreating our world, bringing about God's Way, God's rule, God's kingdom. God is bringing life from death. Hope from despair. And God is using you and me. Not presidents and prime-ministers. Not generals and CEOs and millionaires. But you and me. Regular, everyday people. People the larger world might consider small, unimportant, uninteresting.

God says, You are not insignificant. You matter greatly.

You are not powerless. Through me you can do much.

You are not ineffective. Every small action matters.

You are not unknown. I know you completely and fully.

[bring slide list back up] Take another look at what Jesus says God's way looks like.

This Way of God welcomes everyone, saint and sinner alike.

This Way of God uses everything at its disposal.

This Way of God works tirelessly for justice and mercy.

This Way of God forgives everyone.

This Way of God loves everyone, especially our enemies.

We're going to do a prayer exercise, an examine, and I want you to consider this list. Is your life one that welcomes everyone, that doesn't draw lines between insiders and outsiders?

Is your life one that uses everything you have to be a picture of God's good news?

Do you work for justice and mercy?

Do you forgive quickly and readily?

Do you work to love even your enemies?

Remember, God's way is about the small, every day choices. Those things that seem so minor as to be meaningless.

Examine

1. When in the last week were you a picture of God's Way?
2. When in the last week were you not a picture of God's Way?
3. When this week will you be tempted to ignore God's Way?
4. In what small way can you choose to be a picture of God someone else can see this week?

Benediction

You're unstoppable. Go and transform the world!