

Life in the Kingdom of God
Mack Avenue Community Church
4.29.12

Why talk about the kingdom of God?

The most obvious answer to this question is that God talks a lot about it in his word. In fact, kingdom language is one of the dominant motifs that runs from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus' own ministry begins with the announcement: "The kingdom of God is at hand."¹ He followed up the announcement by going from town to town preaching the good news of the kingdom,² which was often taught in the form of parables.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

- Matthew 13:44-46

The incomparable value of the kingdom, which is conveyed through these two parables, is another great reason to talk about it. Jesus' kingdom, is something worth *joyfully* giving up *everything* else to obtain, which is good considering that he commands his followers to make his kingdom our singular and preeminent priority in life.

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

- Matthew 6:31-33

We would do well to pay attention to this command because it is what separates believers from unbelievers. Simply acknowledging the facts of Jesus' life or even his sovereignty is not enough, for even hell-bound demons know that Jesus exists and that he is the Son of God.³ To be saved and enjoy him for eternity, we must actually worship Jesus as King, submitting ourselves whole-heartedly and unreservedly to his purposes. Sadly we get this wrong all the time.

What is the kingdom of God?

In short, the kingdom of God is his rule in the hearts and minds of humans (and angelic beings). This is a reality that requires the entirety of Scripture to understand, since we are given different glimpses of the kingdom in so many different places. However, for sake of brevity, consider the two passages below.

¹ Matthew 4:17 (ESV)

² Matthew 4:23-25

³ Matthew 8:28

The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.

- Luke 17:20-21

This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- Matthew 6:9

The parallel and synonymous connection Jesus makes in this second passage between the Father's kingdom coming and his will being done, "on earth as it is in heaven," is unmistakable. Combined with the first passage, it becomes clear that the kingdom of God exists in hearts that are obedient to his will of desire.

God's kingdom began with creation. He chose to establish his throne in the heavens, among the angels. From there, God ruled over all his works everywhere, including earth, which he refers to as his footstool.⁴ God's exclusive claim to the throne is based on his exclusive role as Creator, as the praises of his people indicate:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

- Revelation 4:11

At some level, all of creation points back to God as Creator and King. Yet, as we see in Genesis 1, humans are clearly set apart from the rest of earth's inhabitants, in both purpose and provision.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

- Genesis 1:27-28

While animals were made according to their kind, God created men and women, "in his own image." In other words, humans were given the unique ability to, "make the real, Trinitarian God of the Bible...visible to the world."⁵ Our distinction provides for both humility and dignity, reminding us that we are at all times below God and yet, above the rest of creation. Driscoll and Breshears explain this notion of image-bearing:

To image God is to "mirror" his invisible attributes to the world, somewhat like Moses, who radiated the glory of God after being in God's presence. Therefore, we are not to reflect Adam, the culture, or even ourselves to the world. Rather, God has bestowed upon us the amazing ability and awesome responsibility to be his mirrors on the earth, reflecting his goodness and glory to all for his glory and

⁴ Psalm 103:19-22; Isaiah 66:1-2

⁵ p. 118, Doctrine. Driscoll and Breshears.

*our joy. All persons are God's image in a basic sense, but Christians image him more than non-Christians and mature Christians do even more so.*⁶

The degree to which we fulfill our created purpose of mirroring God's invisible attributes to the world is directly related to our ability to set our hearts and minds on him. Turn to the right or left and we immediately begin mirroring something or someone. In a world of distractions, proper image-bearing requires constant reorientation to Christ, our reference point.

It is crucial that we remember image bearing is not simply encompassed in what we *do*. Image bearing is who we are and, thus, encompasses *every* part of our body and mind. We must fight the urge to separate out any part of our living, breathing, thinking, feeling, moving and doing as *the* means by which we image God to the world. Instead, we must make every effort to live a life of balanced godliness, without regard for which parts come easier or harder to us.

Moreover, image-bearing is not a static activity. As image-bearers, humans we created as stewards of God's kingdom. Our default mission was to, "fill the earth and subdue it,"⁷ on God's behalf.⁸ The prescribed means for accomplishing our mission was to, "be fruitful and increase in number." By multiplying ourselves in other image-bearers, who were likewise under God's rule, we were not to only cover the surface of the earth with mirrors reflecting God's glory, but with his kingdom reign, as well. This mission was quickly sidetracked, but the principle remains.

Adam and Eve let doubt in the goodness of God's sovereignty give way to discontentment and disobedience. They ought to have gratefully enjoyed the garden full of trees that were, "pleasing to the eye and good for food,"⁹ but instead, they chose to focus on the one thing denied them. Rather than seeing God's loving hand protecting them from death, they chose to believe the worst about him and his motives.

The decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil seems innocuous enough, does it not? However the results were devastating. The course of God's kingdom presence on earth was changed forever. When Adam and Eve rejected God's will of desire, they were rejecting his rule and kingship in their lives, thus following Satan's lead in establishing a kingdom for themselves. Their sinful rebellion brought about an unraveling of the natural, created order. Hearts and minds were darkened and relationships broken. Created things replaced Creator as humanity's reference point and preeminent object of affection.

We are born into this state of de-creation and, more specifically, the rival kingdom which has set itself up against the one true King. God is good and we are not. He is the all-powerful, all-good Creator and we are his traitorous creation. In de-creation, mankind's image bearing capacity was not lost, so much as misdirected. We no longer submit to God's will of desire, preferring instead to sit on the throne of our lives. Like Adam, we are too busy second-guessing God to obey him. The result is that we use creation, including other humans, in ways that build our own kingdoms; attempting to maximize our affluence, comfort, safety, and security.

⁶ p. 118-119, *Doctrine*. Driscoll and Breshears.

⁷ Genesis 1:28

⁸ In subduing the world, it is important to understand that we are not bringing something that was outside of God's sovereign control under his control. For he has no need of man's help in exacting his will of decree upon our fellow man or the rest of creation. Instead, by God's grace, we subdue the world in the sense that we are filling it, through his power, with those whose greatest delight is to do what pleases their King.

⁹ Genesis 2:9

Yet, despite all our efforts to get away from God, we are still rulers under a ruler. Scripture describes our fallen world as the, “domain of darkness,” where Satan reigns.¹⁰ He is the, “god of this age,” who blinds, “the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”¹¹ His goal is to thwart God’s rule in our lives by distracting us from our single-minded pursuit of God’s kingdom.¹²

While God allows humans to pursue the desires of their, “darkened hearts,” and, “depraved minds,”¹³ he still reigns sovereignly over everything, including Satan.¹⁴ However, God is not content to simply enforce his sovereign will on humans. He rightly and jealousy desires to be our greatest treasure, the one worth selling or casting aside everything else, *with joy*, to obtain. God also desires to be king on earth, just as he is in heaven where submission to his will of desire (not just his sovereign will) is still the default mode of operation.

When Jesus Christ came into the world, he ushered in the beginnings of a return of the kingdom of God to earth. He made it possible for us to finally obey. By paying the price, death, for our sin on the cross he broke sin’s hold over God’s people. Our earthly, de-created nature was crucified once-for-all with Christ on the cross. At the same time, we are made alive in Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Our hearts were turned from stone into flesh.

While a preeminent pursuit of God’s kingdom is essential for the true Christian, is by no means a perfect pursuit. It is a journey full of stumbling and bumbling, as our earthly nature continues to wage war (even in the throes of death) against our new heavenly nature. Praise the Lord that success does not rest on our efforts. Our hope is certain because it lies entirely on the guarantee of Christ, whose grace both starts the good work and carries it on to completion.

The evidence of Christ’s grace in our lives is not the *completion* of the good work, which occurs when we have either died or Christ has returned to re-create all things. Rather, the evidence of Christ’s grace in our lives is the *beginning* of the good work, which shows itself in the fruit of godliness, or Christlike character. This is the image of God that we were created to bear from the very beginning and represents the right-living that is inevitable for those in whom the Holy Spirit lives.

How do we live in the kingdom of God, which is now and not yet fully?

Kingdom living is simply the recovery of our created purpose of bearing God’s image and spreading his preeminent rule through the multiplication of image bearers who are likewise focused on the true King. The difference between our situation and that of Adam and Eve, prior to the fall, is that the command is now being given to sinful people in a sinful world. Rather than just procreate our way to healthy image-bearers, now God’s people are to multiply his rule in human hearts through intentional invitation and instruction.

We see this clearly commanded to the nation of Israel as they were on the verge of entering the Promise Land:

¹⁰ Colossians 1:13; 1 John 5:19

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:4

¹² 2 Corinthians 11:3-4

¹³ Romans 1:21, 28

¹⁴ Psalm 47:2,7; 1 John 4:4

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

- Deuteronomy 6:4-9

And, before Jesus left his disciples for heaven we see him too lay out a very similar command to observe and pass on singular obedience to the King:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

- Matthew 28:18-20

Two thousand years later, our call is the same. We are to fix our eyes singularly on the King, that we might be filled with his light and pass it along to others still stumbling about in darkness.¹⁵ This is the process of making disciples and it begins with us becoming disciples, learning what it means to measure our every thought, word, and deed, by our kingdom reference point, rather than the broken reference points of our world. Only as the Spirit of God focuses our appetite on those things that add to the kingdom are we able to cultivate a singular love in others.

But what does this look like? What are the works that believers bear in keeping with their repentance? And what does giving God top priority look like and sound like, not just in prayers or songs or service trips, but in everyday life? Are we all supposed to be in full-time ministry? Should each of us sell everything we have and give the money to a church or to the poor? Are we called to cross-cultural missions, or is that somebody else's job? Should we give up our day job to preach on the street or perhaps to work for an end to human-trafficking?

While we may be tempted to lose ourselves in the details, the proper response is actually quite simple. Using the kingdom of God as our solitary reference point leads us to remove the things in our lives which take away from our experience of God's rule and our ability to pass it along to others. And, at the same time, our kingdom-first pursuit leads us to make choices which enhance our ability to put on Christ in all his otherworldly glory of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and unity.

Despite its simplicity, the ordinary kingdom life represents a complete transformation. We have died to ourselves, completely, and we now live in Christ, completely. Each part of the transformation is all or nothing. That is, Jesus does not ask us to get rid of our top five sins or only gratify our earthly nature Monday through Saturday, he tells us to kill all of it. Nor does Jesus ask us to put on just our favorite parts of his otherworldly values and character. Christ must be our all or we will end up with nothing.

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¹⁵ Matthew 5:14-16

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Completion of God's kingdom will not happen this side of Jesus Christ's second coming. That is the "not yet fully" part of re-creation, that we must fight to keep in mind even as we strive to expand God's rule on earth. No matter how much we give of ourselves to alleviating the physical and spiritual depravity around us, we will not overcome it yet. That is not our job. Yet fight we must, as Christ's body, awaiting his return.

One day--Praise the Lord!--Jesus will return to earth. On that day, he who sits on the throne will make all things new. The old order of things will pass away. The curse will be lifted¹⁶ and all its effects on creation will be undone. Death, suffering, injustice, unbelief, poverty, famine, hate, and natural disasters will all be forgotten, in the blink of an eye. On that day, God will come to the new earth not to simply walk with his people, but to live with them. What a glorious day that will be!

What keeps us from living in the kingdom of God?

There are probably more than three things that keep us from living in the kingdom of God, but these do cover a great deal of ground.

Pitfall 1 - Focusing on the NOW

Focusing on this false reference point leads us to put our time, talents, and treasure entirely to use improving the world around us. This would not be so bad, except that our desire to see change invariably leads us to concentrate on the tangible, and more easily manipulated, aspects of folks' lives, and *better* is not so much measured in terms of extending God's rule in people's hearts as it is in bringing an end to the ravages of poverty, war, and disease, and ushering in peace, diversity, tolerance, sustainability, and economic development to the neediest members of our global community.

Such activities are wonderful, but they make horrible goals in and of themselves because they create an imbalanced approach to kingdom building that emphasizes ministering through deeds over ministering through words. Yes, Jesus expects us to meet the physical needs of those around us, but it is not our *whole* mission and nor will we be able to achieve it *entirely*. At the *same* time as we working to meet physical needs--without sacrificing any of our concern for them--we are to be speaking gospel truth into our neighbors' lives in order to meet their spiritual needs, as well. For, as Jesus taught, "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."¹⁷

Pitfall 2 - Focusing on the NOT YET

Other professing Christians will zealously pursue and defend eternity as the *real* point of Christianity. Because right thinking, or sound doctrine, is seen as the only thing that saves for eternity, concern for the physical needs of those around us takes a backseat while we combat the endless stream of false messages and false gods that spring from our fallen world. This kind of faith demands only that we know and be capable of proclaiming the uniqueness of our God.

¹⁶ Revelation 22:3

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4

Strict adherence to the black and white commands of Scripture is required, but the less well-defined and more active aspects of godliness, like loving our neighbors with compassion and mercy, are usually pigeon-holed into purely spiritual applications, which leaves us free to steward whatever time, talent, and treasure (less our tithe) we have been given for the worldly advancement and security of ourselves and our family.

Pitfall 3 - Serving God *AND* _____

It is relatively easy to identify the person who has made an all-out idol of something. Like the addict who has sacrificed family, home, and career for the endless pursuit of one more drink. Or the workaholic who will do anything to get to that next rung of the corporate ladder, without regard for law or loved ones.

But most of us are not that guy, right? We are not all-out for any one idol. Rather we are jugglers, answering to various *top* priorities all at once. Here the idolatry is much harder to identify, both for us and those around us who might hope to intervene and set us straight. For God is not done away. Rather he is honored, right *alongside* of our other gods. Though it be subtle, the pairing of God with gods is nonetheless toxic to our faith as pastor and author A.W. Tozer wrote years ago:

When religion has said its last word, there is little that we need other than God himself. The evil habit of seeking God-and effectively prevents us from finding God in full revelation. In the "and" lies our great woe. If we omit the "and" we shall soon find God, and in Him we shall find that for which we have all our lives been secretly longing.¹⁸

This pairing of God with an "and" most often results from our tendency as humans to add God onto our lives the way they already exist rather than beginning completely anew with Him. Certainly, most of us will do some renewing, or house-cleaning, at that point when we begin to consider ourselves Christians.

However, unless we intentionally go after our most basic assumptions and values, the ones hidden so deep we cannot imagine life by any other rule, then those values will continue to drive our day-to-day decisions. And we will go on in the rut-like patterns of the world, running after the same things the pagans run after.

Take Home Thoughts

Only when we have fixed our eyes solely on that Jesus, the Jesus of Scripture, will we be ready to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness in whatever we do. With Jesus as our reference point, you and I are finally able to purposefully consider the details and assumptions of our lives. So let us take them one by one and ask of each "Does this encourage me to cultivate Jesus' rule--putting to death all of sin and putting on all of Christ's otherworldly image--in my own life and in the lives of my family members and neighbors?" As you do so, decide:

- *What Needs To Stay?* What are the things that make me want to treasure Jesus more? What circumstances increase my ability or desire to put to use the tools of Scripture, prayer, discipleship, and fellowship? What good habits are in place? Where have I already

¹⁸ p. 18 The Pursuit of God, A.W. Tozer

begun to put on Christ-like love as demonstrated in otherworldly compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness?

- *What Needs To Go?* Am I currently living in unconfessed and willful sin? What are the top five things I spend time and money on? Are these things adding to my witness or distracting from it? What situations or people tempt me to make an idol of sex or money or earthly life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? What prevents me from going all-in for the kingdom? Is it pride, career, immaturity, family, religion, or amusement? What is my life building towards? Have I put a good thing in God's place on the throne of my heart?
- *What Needs To Be Added?* What areas of godliness are weak or non-existent in my day to day life? How can I make better use of the tools God has given me to cultivate godliness? Am I being rooted and built up? Am I making disciples? In what ways can I arrange the details of my life--who, what, where, how, and when--to better point to the worthiness of Christ or more completely bear his image? How can I intentionally approach decisions--where to live, if or who to marry, where to educate my kids, how big of a house to buy, what to do for leisure--as an expression of my thanks and with an eye for kingdom expansion?

The process of kingdom-first transformation will be costly and at first we will feel pulled in a thousand directions as the chains between us and our idols are stretched tight and finally broken. The fact that this process hurts should not surprise us or cause us to question our decision to follow Christ. Emptying ourselves of ourselves, requires putting our earthly nature to death on the cross of Christ.

Discipleship is a journey. There will be great triumphs and devastating failures. Sanctification does not happen overnight nor without some Holy Spirit inspired intentionality on our part. We need to continue to put the tools of scripture, prayer, discipleship, and fellowship to work, allowing them to refine our vision of the King, redirect our image bearing, and inform our discipleship of others.

Remember that we are all different. We have different temperaments, natural strengths and weaknesses, spiritual gifts and outages, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic capital. Because of that, we may require a different mix of life details--location, relationships, careers, recreational activities, education, family structure--to encourage the pursuit of our shared reference point of kingdom expansion.

If we are new to the faith or discipleship, then our initial steps should be towards finding a biblically-sound, local body of believers who exhibit well-balanced image-bearing. Before we make disciples, we must learn for ourselves what Christ taught and what it looks like to live under his rule. On the other hand, those of us who are already rooted and built up in the faith should begin to measure decisions more and more by how each choice allows us to cultivate God's rule in the hearts of others.

Sometimes the choice that best advances the kingdom will be obvious and sometimes it will not. If we reach a point where the two options have equal potential for building the kingdom, then we do not have to be paralyzed by trying to pick the *right* one. Success in the kingdom of heaven is doing, "whatever we do,"¹⁹ *because* it brings glory to the name of our Lord Jesus. So, we ought to let our focus on the King give us every confidence that we are being faithful to God's will of desire. With him as our reference point, we cannot help but walk into those God-glorifying and joy producing works that he has prepared in advance for us.

¹⁹ Colossians 3:17