

I want to begin with an important question: What was the message of Jesus? I mean, if you had to boil it down to one sentence, what did he come to tell us? Was the core of his message, "Love one another?" Was it, "I'm the Son of God — believe in me?" Was it, "Here's how to get to heaven?" Certainly Jesus talked about all those things, but none of those capture his fundamental message.

To find the answer to that question, we should look at the trustworthy accounts of Jesus' life, called the Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four present a unified witness. The message of Jesus was this: "The kingdom of God has come near." That was his message. And this "coming near" of the kingdom of God was embodied in the person and work of Jesus. He's the King. And everything else he says and does in the Gospels shows us what life in his kingdom looks like. Even the miracles he performs are examples of what life is like in the kingdom of God: wholeness, healing, and fullness of life. Everything he did illustrates the main point of his message, "The kingdom of God has come near."

This is crystal clear in the opening of Mark's Gospel. After introducing John the Baptist as the forerunner to the Messiah, Mark says,

**After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"**  
**Mark 1:14-15**

That's how Jesus began his ministry. He went on to mention the "kingdom," "kingdom of God," or "kingdom of heaven" over 100 times in the four Gospels. By the way, the "kingdom of heaven" and the "kingdom of God" are interchangeable terms. The Jewish people felt the name of God was too holy to speak, so Matthew, who wrote to a Jewish audience, used "kingdom of heaven" instead.

This is the start of a five-week series called *One Kingdom. Indivisible*. We're joining several churches in the Bay area as an expression of our unity. I don't have to tell you that we live in a divided land. Politics divide us. Race divides us. Economic means divide us. In light of this, we pastors want to express our unity in a divided world. We want to declare there's something bigger, something that transcends our divisions, and that is our allegiance to the kingdom of God. That may be hard for some of

you. Maybe you hold onto your convictions about these things very tightly. Maybe you find it hard to even have a civil conversation with someone who differs from you. This series is going to challenge that.

But my goal with this message is to simply define what the kingdom of God is. What did Jesus mean when he declared the kingdom of God has come near? I want to define this and show how this theme can be traced in the Bible's storyline and what this means for us today. In the coming four weeks, we'll unpack this in more detail.

For some of us, this may be a challenge because we don't relate to the idea of kings and kingdoms. We either think of them as tyrannical dictators or token figureheads with no real authority. And when we speak of the kingdom of God, we just think of things like "all the Christians in the world" or maybe just heaven. But the kingdom of God is more than that. When Jesus used this term, he was speaking of something more.

### **What is the Kingdom of God?**

The term itself is never found in the Old Testament, but, as we'll see, the concept is. In the New Testament, the phrase "kingdom of God" is all over the place. But, again, what is it? The kingdom of God isn't a place like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or the United Kingdom. The kingdom of God is the rule or reign of God over his people. Maybe a better way to put it is the kingdom of God is what life is like when people live under his rule; what life on earth is like when God gets his way. Now we know God is the King of the entire universe; he does rule. But not everyone submits to his rule. So when we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," we're asking for his rule be embraced here on earth as it is in heaven.

Believe me, when Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come near," he was making a threatening statement. There was a king in Israel at the time. His name was Herod. Even above Herod, there was an emperor in Rome named Tiberius. Jesus could have stayed out of a lot of trouble if he just talked about the family of God or the people of God. But instead, he spoke of a kingdom that's near.

So, for some, this news was threatening, but for others, it was very good news. Notice that's exactly what Jesus calls it — good news. That's why he said in Luke 4:43, "*I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God...*" A bit later, while John was in prison,

he sent two men to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20). John was having doubts. How could he be sitting in prison, awaiting execution, if the kingdom had arrived with Jesus?

Look how Jesus responded. Luke says,

**At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Luke 7:21-23**

You see, that's what life is like when God is in charge, and his kingdom breaks through: sickness, disease, evil, and injustice are vanquished. That's good news! In the past few weeks, we've seen several horrible and brutal examples of racism. We should be saddened, shocked, and embarrassed that this is still a part of our national legacy. This is not what happens when God gets his way! This is not the way of the kingdom!

That's why Jesus says in Mark 1:15, "...Repent and believe the good news!" To enter his kingdom, there must be a change of mind. That's what repentance means. You can't go on living like you were and live under his rule. There has to be a change. You're not in charge anymore. You choose to submit to King Jesus. You seek to live according to his values.

By the way, the kingdom of God isn't something we build or even advance. Jesus never spoke of it in that way. He just said, "The kingdom of God is like this..." Or, "Here is how to enter the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God isn't like a pile of bricks. Jesus gives us and says, "I need your help. Take these bricks and build me a kingdom." No! He simply invites us to see it, enter it, and live within it. We join in on something that already is.

### **How is the Kingdom of God developed in the Bible's storyline?**

So you might wonder, how is the kingdom of God developed in the Bible's storyline? When Jesus announced the arrival of his kingdom, it wasn't a foreign concept to his Jewish audience. You see it all the way back in the creation account. When God created the first man and woman, he said,

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:28**

Adam and Eve were made in the image of God and given the responsibility to rule over God's creation. Of course, they ruled under God, but they were given freedom and responsibility to rule and govern.

But we know what happened. They rebelled against God. They failed in their kingly task. So God cast them out of the garden. What was a unified kingdom was now divided, and that division played out in the generations to come. Their son, Cain, kills his brother, Abel, and eventually, the nations of the earth are divided.

But God wasn't finished with humanity. Out of sheer grace, He chose Israel as his people. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, he delivered them and brought them through the Red Sea. Through Moses, he made a covenant with them and gave them his law. He said to them,

**Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19:5-6**

Israel was given the task of spreading the glory of God across the planet. Israel was to be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

God then leads them into the Promised Land, and they take possession of it. At this point, they have no earthly king. For the next 200 years, they're just a loose confederation of tribes united under one God. One of their great leaders, Gideon, said this when people tried to make him king "...I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:23).

Eventually, Israel did choose a king and become a nation-state. But God made it clear he would choose Israel's king and that king would operate differently from other kings: he mustn't rely on the military aid of foreign powers; he must guard his heart against idolatry; he wasn't to accumulate wealth; he must rule according to God's law (Deut. 17:16-20). Israel's first king, Saul, was an utter failure in this regard. But Israel's second king, David, was a man after God's heart. These were Israel's glory years. And then David's son Solomon came along, and although he enjoyed great success, he began to act more like a secular king than a king who ruled under God.

And things kind of went downhill from there. Eventually, the kingdom of Israel was divided by civil war into a northern kingdom and southern kingdom, each with their own kings. More and more, these kings failed to rule well under God. God warned them repeatedly through the prophets he wouldn't put up with this. Eventually, both the northern and southern kingdoms were taken into captivity by foreign powers. The city of Jerusalem was sacked; the temple destroyed. After 70 years, some of those taken into captivity were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, but it was never the same.

One thing became clear: the kingdom of God was not the kingdom of Israel! By the way, this is true of any earthly kingdom, including the United States of America. I love our country. We're a nation founded on many Christian principles. But as John Bright

wrote in his excellent book, *The Kingdom of God*, "No earthly state is established of God, guaranteed of God, and identified with his purposes."

But with regard to Israel, in some respects, this was good. Because it forced Israel to hope for a new king, one called the Messiah, who'd deliver them, restore the kingdom to them, and rule over them. Isaiah spoke of that King when he wrote,

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever..."** Isaiah 9:6-7

So they hoped and waited for a new king, an everlasting king, a just and righteous king, who'd deliver them and reign not just over them but over the whole earth.

And then, after 400 years of silence, Jesus arrived on the scene and declared he was that King. But the tragedy was they couldn't see it. They missed something embedded in the words of the prophets: this king would come as a servant. He'd appear "*lowly and riding on a donkey*" (*Zech 9:9*). Isaiah pictured him not just as a servant but a suffering servant. He said of this servant,

**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.** Isaiah 53:4-5

For the most part, His people missed that. We know the rest of the story. Jesus was rejected and crucified, but he was resurrected and vindicated as the true King overall. He now sits at the right hand of the Father, and he'll come again in glory to establish a new heaven and a new earth over which he'll reign forever. In Revelation 21:4, John pictures it as a place where "*... There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" He even says he saw one seated on the throne (a King) who said, "*I am making everything new!*" (*Rev. 21:5*). And that's what we all long for; that's what we were created for! John Eldridge writes,

**I'll let you in on a little secret: your heart is made for the kingdom of God. This might be the most important thing anyone will ever tell you about yourself: your heart only thrives in one habitat, and that safe place is called the kingdom of God.**

So I hope you can see how the kingdom of God is an idea that is seen from Genesis to Revelation. And from this, I want to make three applications to help you live your life as a part of the kingdom of God.

## **The Kingdom of God is both now and not yet**

First, as we heard earlier in the video, the kingdom of God is both now and not yet. It's both a present reality and a future hope. As I said, the kingdom of God has come near to us in the person and work of Jesus, and we can choose NOW to repent and believe and live under his rule, but the day has yet to come when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God. So we need to live in and embrace this tension of the already and not yet aspects of the kingdom.

Why is that so important? First, those who focus exclusively on the "now" part of the kingdom and ignore the "not yet" tend to think they can create some kind of heaven on earth by their own hard work. They fall for utopianism, unrealized expectations, and politicized gospels. It's like if we just work hard enough to eradicate injustice, if we just vote the right people into office, if we can create a just society, if we can eradicate disease, we can have the kingdom of God on earth. We just have to work harder and get it right. But that's a myth because only God can eradicate evil, and he's promised he'll do that when he creates the new heavens and the new earth.

On the other hand, those who focus exclusively on the "not yet" aspect of the kingdom will tend to blow off doing anything about the problems of this world. They tend to gloss over the injustice all around us. The only work that really matters to them is getting people into heaven. Work that centers on trying to make this planet a better place really doesn't matter. But, you see, if the kingdom of God is here, then we're called to live as citizens of that kingdom now. Our future hope is the merger of heaven and earth, which is when the dwelling place of God transforms and renews creation, and the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God. If that's the goal of history, it should actually heighten our engagement with the world. Russell Moore puts it this way, "If God is aiming to restore the material creation, not to scrap it, then we ought not to recklessly misuse the world around us."

When I was in college as a new believer, I was very excited about my newfound faith. I wanted to share it with as many people as possible. Honestly, I didn't really care about politics or social issues. I just wanted to get people saved. If I ran into a homeless person, I didn't try to meet his physical needs; I focused on getting him saved. But living in this tension of the now and not yet means both evangelism and social justice are important. The kingdom is both a present reality and a future hope.

## **The church is a signpost of the Kingdom of God on earth**

Second, the church is a signpost and colony of the kingdom of God on earth. It's important to understand that the church is not the same thing as the kingdom of God. The church is a fellowship of believers who've received the kingdom of God. We're called

to be a preview to the watching world of what the rule of God looks like. Our job is to model what life in the kingdom looks like and announce to the world to be reconciled to the coming King.

Listen to what Paul wrote the church at Philippi, *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ," (Phil 3:20)*. When Paul says our "citizenship is in heaven," he uses the word, *politeuma*, from which we get our word politics. It means exactly how it's translated here - citizenship. This is interesting because the Philippians were proud to be a colony of Rome; there were many Roman army veterans living there. The Emperor of Rome gave them Roman citizenship because he wanted them to represent the Roman way to their neighbors. But Paul says to the church, "You're a colony of another kingdom; the kingdom of heaven. You're to live under that rule. You're to represent all things in heaven."

John Calvin said it's the task of the church to make the invisible kingdom visible. We do that by living in such a way we bear witness to the reality of the kingship of Christ in our jobs, our families, our schools, and our neighborhoods because Christ is King over every one of these spheres of life. The only way the kingdom of God is going to be manifest in this world before Christ comes is if we live as citizens of heaven.

R.C. Sproul talks in an article in the Ligonier Ministries website about being invited into Eastern Europe to do a series of lectures in the 90s. As he was leaving Hungary, he was warned the border guards in Romania were hostile to Americans, and he should be prepared to be questioned. Sure enough, when his train reached Romania, two guards got on. They couldn't speak English, but they pointed for his passport, then to his luggage to be opened. Suddenly, their boss appeared, a burly officer who spoke some broken English. He noticed someone in their group had a paper bag in her lap. The officer said: "What's in bag?" He opened the bag and pulled out a Bible. Sproul thought, "Uh-oh, now we're in trouble." The officer began leafing through the Bible. Then he stopped, looked at Sproul, and he said, "You no American." He then smiled and said, "I'm not Romanian." Then he pointed at the Bible and said, "Read what it says." He looked at it, and it read, "Our citizenship is in heaven." The guard was a Christian. He turned to his subordinates and said: "Let these people alone. They're OK. They're Christians." This man understood something about the kingdom of God; that as the church, our first place of citizenship is in the kingdom of God.

## **Our primary allegiance is to the Kingdom of God**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

And that brings me to my last statement: Our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God. Our primary allegiance isn't to our nation, a political party, or a candidate for office. Why? Because there's no nation, political party, or candidate that perfectly embodies the kingdom of God. Don't get me wrong, as Kingdom people, we can love our country and be patriotic. We can register and vote as a Democrat or Republican, but our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God. Our hope isn't in any candidate or party but in the King of kings.

Christians who get this wrong allow their politics to inform their theology rather than their theology to inform their politics. It can happen if you're on the left or the right. Eugene Cho writes,

**When Christians pledge blind allegiance to a political power and its leaders and cannot objectively evaluate what a politician states or espouses, we travel down a dangerous path. We cease to see the world informed first and foremost by the life and teachings of Christ. Instead, when we allow political allegiances to identify us, we distort the Bible to justify our politics and allegiances. Put another way: this is idolatry.**

Ravi Zacharias, who we just lost from this planet a few weeks ago, put it more succinctly, "Anytime religion is politicized, it's in danger of extinction."

So what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is the very GOOD NEWS that the King has come and is coming again to establish his reign of God over his people. And when life is a place where God always gets his way, the deepest desire of our heart will be met.

And each one is called to live now under his reign. He is our King, and our primary allegiance is to him. Where the rubber meets the road is how we view and relate with fellow believers who differ from us. The beauty of the church is we can disagree on all kinds of things, but our shared love for Jesus and participation in his kingdom is bigger than that which might divide us. I can't imagine any other institution that can gather people from different ethnicities, political affiliations, and experiences and expect them to love one another unconditionally. The hope for the church isn't found in any election or political party. Neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party will save us. What we need is a kingdom-minded, Spirit-filled faith big enough to draw different people together in a bond of love.

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