

“Jesus . . . on the Kingdom of God”

Matthew 13:10-17; 31-33, 44-46 ¹

In her book *Mystery on the Desert*,² Maria Reiche described a series of strange lines in the plains of Peru, some of them covering many square miles. For many years after their discovery, people assumed that these lines were the remnants of ancient irrigation ditches. Then, beginning in 1939, Dr. Paul Kosok discovered that the true meaning of these lines could only be seen from high in the air. When viewed from an airplane, these seemingly random lines form enormous drawings of birds, insects, and animals.³

“In a similar way,” wrote Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, “people often think of the Bible as a series of individual, unconnected stories. But if we survey the Scriptures as a whole, we discover that they form one great story of redemption—from the opening scenes of Genesis to the final chapter of Revelation. Weaving through all the diverse strands of the Bible is a divine storyline, the overarching story of what God has been up to in the rescue and restoration of fallen human beings, from the first nanosecond of creation through the final cry of victory at the end of time.”⁴

If I were to ask you to describe what the “divine storyline” of the Bible actually is, what would you say? Or what would you say is the central theme of the teaching of Jesus? Many might say that Jesus’ central teaching was about the nature of love. That would be a very good guess . . . but it would miss the mark. **The central theme of all that Jesus said and did was actually the Kingdom of God.**

In Mark, the very first Gospel to be written, the very first thing Jesus says is, “*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*” (1:15). The Lord’s Prayer contains six requests, and the first three of these have to do with the Kingdom of God:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).

An examination of the four Gospels quickly confirms that the Kingdom of God was the central theme of all that Jesus said and did. The “Kingdom of God” appears 162 times in the New Testament, and 126 of these times it was spoken by Jesus.

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, He wasn’t talking about a geographical area such as the land of Israel. He wasn’t talking about a political entity such as the nation of Israel. He wasn’t even talking about a group of people such as His disciples or the Church.

While it’s true that the rule of God implies a people to be ruled, and Jesus did indeed invite people to enter that Kingdom and to become part of that group, the Kingdom itself is different from the people who enter it. **The Kingdom of God has to do with the sovereign reign of God, independent of all geographical areas or political entities.** ⁵

Though Jesus’ Model Prayer did not neglect concern for our daily needs—the rest of the prayer has to do with those—Jesus gave clear priority to the needs of the Kingdom. As He would say later, “*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*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on January 11, 2015.

² Privately printed, 1949.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Kosok

⁴ Timothy George, “Big Picture Faith,” *Christianity Today* (10-23-00).

⁵ Fisher Humphries, “Kingdom of God,” *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman).

them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31-33).

Although “the Kingdom of God” doesn’t appear in the Old Testament as such, the Jews did expect the goal of history to be (1) the universal acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty; (2) the triumph of righteousness; and (3) the establishment of peace and salvation in the world.”⁶ “Sovereignty, righteousness, and salvation” sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? Wouldn’t it be great to live in a world like that?

Jesus told us that such a world is possible, and that no price is too great to achieve it. That was the point of the parables of the treasure and the pearl that we read earlier. Nor is this treasure hidden any longer. Jesus burst onto the scene with the cry, “*If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you!*” (Matthew 12:28).

So why did Jesus come to earth, anyway? Happily, we don’t have to guess about that, because Jesus told us that “*the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10). Like the Delta Force in *Black Hawk Down*⁷ and the Coast Guard in *The Perfect Storm*,⁸ it was—and is—Jesus’ intent “to leave no one behind.”

Jesus made this purpose clear in the three powerful stories of Luke 15: When the shepherd realized that one of his sheep was lost in the wilderness, he left everything to go and rescue that sheep. When the woman realized that she had lost one of the coins in her dowry, she turned her house upside down until she found it. When the prodigal son chose to leave home for a life of drunkenness and debauchery, the Father’s heart yearned for him day after day until he came to his senses. **Jesus came so that the lost would be found, the dead would be brought back to life, and that the Father’s house would resound with joyful celebration!**

The surprising thing was that the Kingdom of God didn’t come in the form that was expected. Like Elijah, the Jews expected the Messiah to come “in earthquake, wind, and fire” (1 Kings 19:11-12). They expected gallant military campaigns and glorious military victories. Even John the Baptist, the first to identify Jesus as God’s Anointed, was surprised by the approach Jesus took. “*Are you the [Messiah] who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” (Matthew 11:3).

And Jesus replied, “*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 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*” (Matthew 11:4-6).

The nature of the campaign that brings in the Kingdom of God is very different from what we expect today, as well. This is a campaign of compassion, not of control; of forgiveness, not of hatred; of kindness, not of manipulation; of poverty, not of wealth. As God would later tell Paul, “*my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9). The Kingdom of God advances, not by human power, but by the power of God’s Spirit (Zechariah 4:6).

The truth of the matter is that Jesus turns our expectations about the Kingdom of God on their heads. We see worldly wealth as a goal to be desired, but Jesus said that “*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God!*” (Matthew 19:24). We see “being religious” as worthy and honorable, but Jesus told the most religious people of his day, “*Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you*” (Matthew 21:31). Hearing this, we cry out with the disciples, “*Then who in the world can be saved?!*” (Matthew 19:25).

⁶ George Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*.

⁷ Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (Grove Press, 1999).

⁸ Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men against the Sea* (W.W. Norton, 1997).

So who are the citizens of the Kingdom of God? The Citizens of God's Kingdom are those persons who realize their need for God, who mourn for their own sins and for the sins of others, who place their trust in God's forgiveness through Christ, who live powerfully yet humbly through God's indwelling Spirit, who are hungry and thirsty for justice, who are merciful, whose hearts are pure, who work for peace, and who sometimes suffer because they resolutely choose to live for God.

Do those characteristics sound familiar? You probably realize that these are the character qualities we call "The Beatitudes" in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5:3-12). You're not likely to find these characteristics highlighted in most books on how to get ahead in the world!

You and I enter God's Kingdom by willingly choosing to become God's subjects and by willingly choosing to obey God. As Richard Foster put it, "Some today like to refer to the kingdom of God as a 'kin-dom,' emphasizing Jesus as our friend. True, Jesus is our Friend—the very best—but He is only our Friend if He is first and foremost our Lord. Jesus made this unmistakably clear when He said, '*You are my friends if you do what I command*' (John 15:14)."⁹

Now "command" is not a word of which we're very fond. The whole idea seems indecorous. Still, that's how things are. Foster continued, "This is not some warm, cozy club, but life in a 'kingdom.' In the kingdom of God there is a sovereign ruler and His will is obeyed. Indeed, the kingdom of God means simply the reign or government of God; it is the place where what God says is done. This is no smorgasbord spirituality, no pick-and-choose faith. . . . God is in charge and what God says goes."¹⁰

But once again, obedience to God's commands is a very different experience than what the religious leaders of Jesus' day thought it was, and it's probably rather different from what we imagine, as well. The reality is that God's commands are liberating, not burdensome. The Psalmist exclaimed, "*I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free* (Psalm 119:32, NLT). And Jesus said, "*The burden I give you is light . . . you will find rest for your soul*" (Matthew 11:29-30, NLT).

I suspect that nearly all of us would agree that Mother Teresa was a model member of God's Kingdom. Many have reported that to be in her presence was to experience peace, power, and freedom, and she described her life this way: "By blood and origin, I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus."¹¹ That's our goal, too.

Now the day will come when "*at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11), but until that final curtain falls, the Kingdom grows quietly. Just as the quiet and gradual growth of a tree can crack the largest rock and shatter the strongest foundation, Jesus compared the growth of His Kingdom to a tiny mustard seed that grows little by little, and to a bit of yeast that permeates even large amounts of dough. God's Kingdom will advance!¹²

This was the same principle that Jesus taught in the *Parable of the Four Soils* (Mark 4:1-20). There Jesus said that the invitation to become subjects in the Kingdom of God elicits at least four major categories of response: (1) some who hear the news do not receive it at all because of the work of the evil one in their lives; (2) some hear the news with joy, but they wilt as soon as they

⁹ Richard Foster, *Renovaré* Newsletter, May, 1999).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mother Teresa, quoted by Ruth A. Tucker in *Guardians of the Great Commission. Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 17.

¹² It's interesting that one of these activities (farming) was largely men's work in Israel, while the other (cooking) was largely women's work.

experience any problems in their lives; (3) some respond in gladness, but the cares of this life and the lure of wealth cause them to bear no fruit; and (4) some produce a huge harvest of souls. Part of Jesus' point in this parable was that, like the seed and the yeast, a large harvest can be gathered even though a great portion of the seed has been lost.

It was in the context of this teaching that Jesus told His disciples: *"To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. That is why I use these parables, 'For they look, but they don't really see. They hear, but they don't really listen or understand'"* (Matthew 13:12-13, NLT).

What does Jesus mean by all this hiddenness? We have hidden treasure, hidden pearls, hidden seed, and hidden stories. Why has *"the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom"* been given to some, but not to others (Matthew 13:11)? The reason for this hiddenness is really rather similar to the purpose of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:16-17).

It is God's eternal desire and purpose to give us access to and to make us stewards of God's own cosmic power. As Paul put it, *"I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him. . . . **For the Kingdom of God is not just fancy talk; it is living by God's power**"* (Ephesians 1:19; 1 Corinthians 4:19, NLT). But today, even as long ago in Eden, the possession of such power is quite often a temptation we are spiritually unprepared to face. Adam and Eve weren't up to the test. If they couldn't handle the tree, they couldn't handle the power, either.

Simon the Magician provides an example of this in the New Testament. When Simon saw the spiritual power God released through Peter and John, he tried to buy access to this power. He wanted the franchise rights. But Peter replied, *"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God"* (Acts 8:21).

For us, as well, unless our hearts are right before God—gentle, merciful, just, and pure—having access to God's power turns us, too, toward Darkness rather than toward the Light. ***But God's desire and purpose continues to be transforming us—transforming you—into a person who can be trusted with the Power that lights the stars!***

My friend, do you want to live in a world where God's will is truly done, where all people are governed in righteousness, where *"the earth [is] filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea?"* (Isaiah 11:9). I'll bet you do, and the way to get there from here is to do two things:

TRUST: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight"* (Proverbs 3:5-6).¹³

OBEY: *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all the commands [of Jesus]"* (Matthew 28:19-20; John 15:14). If we make this goal, which has to do with the establishment of the Kingdom and Reign of God, our primary concern, God's power will be set free in us, and we will begin to live the adventure for which we were created. As an English patriotic hymn puts it:

¹³ See also Psalm 9:10, 13:5, 20:7, 22:4, 25:1, 37:5, 56:3, 91:2, 118:8, 119:66, 125:1; Isaiah 30:15; Nahum 1:7; and Romans 15:13.

I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love;
The love that asks no question, the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice. . . .

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently, her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace.¹⁴

May it become so in you, in me, today.

¹⁴ Cecil Spring-Rice, "I Vow to Thee, My Country" (1908),
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Vow_to_Thee,_My_Country.