

The Gospel of the Kingdom: The Kingdom of Heaven

Franklin Church of Christ
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Introduction:

The king sprung awake, drenched with sweat. His bed linens were a tangled mess and his breathing heavy, as if he had just finished a hundred yard dash. What had his dream meant? There had been a great statue of various substances. But the beautiful statue had been crushed and ground into powder by an ever growing rock cut out without hands. He tossed and turned, anxious about the dream's meaning. Whether it was the middle of the night, early the next morning or after a few nights of restless sleep, we don't know, but Nebuchadnezzar called for his wise men to tell him the dream and its interpretation. None could do so until a young Jewish boy requested a brief amount of time. Daniel gathered with his three friends. They requested God have compassion on them and give the dream and its meaning. Daniel returned to Nebuchadnezzar and explained the dream. The statue's head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom of Babylon. However, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom would not last forever. A second inferior kingdom would rise. Then a third. Finally, a fourth kingdom as strong as iron and yet brittle as clay would come forth. However, in the midst of this fourth kingdom, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom. It would not be left for another people, but would overrun the world (**Daniel 2**). From the time of Daniel, the Jews looked for this kingdom. They were ever watchful for the Kingdom of Heaven and its king, the Son of Man (cf. **Daniel 7:13-14**).

For over 500 years, the Jews watched. Nebuchadnezzar died. The Jews remained in captivity. Cyrus of the Medo-Persians conquered Babylon and the Jews were allowed to return home, but this was not the promised kingdom. They eventually rebuilt the temple and Jerusalem, but they were still a subject nation. The Medo-Persians were defeated by the Greeks. When Alexander died, the Jews were just passed back and forth between the divided Grecian kingdoms. Then the Maccabees came. They brought fire into the Jews. They rallied and defeated the Greeks, winning their religious and political independence. But this was not the promised kingdom. A fourth empire arose. Rome dominated Israel. In the days of Caesar Augustus, a child was born in that little backwater, subservient country of the Jews. The angels proclaimed good tidings to nearby shepherds. Wise men from the east traveled to honor Him. Prophecies surrounded His early life. Could this be the king?

About 30 years later, his cousin began to preach in the wilderness saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (**Matthew 3:2**). He baptized Jesus, the Nazarene. Then Jesus began to teach the gospel of the kingdom (**Matthew 4:17, 23**). His teaching was coupled with miracles His enemies could not deny. Could this be the king? What kind of kingdom would He establish? Jesus' audiences were well acquainted with kingdoms. But they were well acquainted with the wrong kind of kingdoms. They did not understand what the promised kingdom would be like. Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, explains what this kingdom is and how we can be part of it. What a shock it was for those Jews to finally hear what that kingdom, the ever growing rock cut out without hands, is really like.

Discussion:

- I. The kingdom of heaven.
 - A. The Sermon begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:3**). A few verses later, Jesus continued, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:10**). Those who obey the commands will be great in the kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5:19**) and those whose righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees will enter the kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 5:20**). We must not get so caught up in learning about the kingdom of heaven from the Sermon that we miss the point of primary importance. This kingdom is of heaven, not earth.
 - B. Nebuchadnezzar's dream proclaimed this difference contrasting the kings of men as a carved statue with the kingdom of God as stone cut out without hands. In **John 18:36**, Jesus said His kingdom is not of this world unlike the kingdoms surrounding us. In **Luke 17:21**, Jesus explained the kingdom is within us (**NKJV**). It is not about land and territory, but about hearts.
 - C. From the very outset we should know the kingdom will be different. It will not seek to conquer nations, but liberate them. It will not seek to wage war but bring peace. It will not seek to dominate, but show mercy. What an amazing kingdom it is.

II. The kingdom of the poor in spirit.

- A. **Acts 22:28** demonstrates the two ways the Jews knew to enter a kingdom. Paul had been born a Roman and the commander had bought his way in. Jesus' opening statement shoots both of these in the foot. He said the poor *in spirit*. This kingdom is about spiritual qualifications, not physical. Your birth doesn't matter; your spirit does. This is an early indication the kingdom is not just for Jews. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the Jews born into the kingdom." In fact, in **John 3:3, 5**, we see it is not about our birth, but our rebirth whether we are Jews or Gentiles.
- B. Further, Jesus said the *poor* in spirit. This kingdom is not reserved for the wealthy. In fact, the wealthy have a particularly hard time entering the kingdom according to **Matthew 19:23-26**. No doubt, all things are possible with God. Wealthy people can be part of the kingdom (cf. **I Timothy 6:17-19**), but very few are because wealth distracts us from serving God (**Matthew 6:24**).
- C. What a surprise. The kingdom does not go to the worthies. It goes to those who recognize their unworthiness. It goes to those who know they have nothing to offer God forcing Him to let them in. They cannot buy their way in, work their way in, talk their way in. God will never owe them anything and they know it. Therefore, they are reduced to crouching in His presence, prostrating themselves to beg for mercy. They are not just poor, they are impoverished. They have nothing and they know it. They mourn and gently submit to God, hungering and thirsting for His righteousness. He provides them righteousness, an inheritance, comfort and the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom does not belong to the haves, but the have-nots.

III. The kingdom of the harassed.

- A. This is the oddest of world dominating kingdoms. It has spread throughout the entire world. It has outlasted all other kingdoms. Yet, it has been harassed the entire way. **Matthew 5:10-12** says the kingdom belongs to those who are persecuted. The word translated "persecuted" means to put to flight. How amazing must a kingdom be for its citizens to be repeatedly put to flight and yet it continues to grow. Interestingly, in **Acts 8:1-4**, we learn it was the very act of being put to flight that caused the kingdom to grow, spreading the gospel of the kingdom outside the bounds of Jerusalem and its surrounding region.
- B. As shocking as this, we need to understand entering God's kingdom does not mean being held out of physical harm's way. **II Timothy 3:12** says all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. In **Acts 14:22**, Paul told the newly established churches, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Entering God's kingdom means protection from Satan on a spiritual level, but not on a physical one. We still live in the world and we still suffer Satan's attacks. We must not assume these attacks mean God is not with us. On the contrary, they very much mean we are on God's side. They very much mean we are in the kingdom. They can help us look to the reward because the reward of the persecuted is great. It is reserved for us by the power of God through faith (**I Peter 1:3-5**).

IV. The kingdom of the righteous.

- A. **Matthew 5:20** says, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees were extremely righteous. If you don't believe me, ask them. **Luke 18:11-12**: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." They were righteous. They could be seen being generous to the poor (**Matthew 6:2**), praying long prayers (**Matthew 6:5**) and fasting (**Matthew 6:16**). How could anyone beat that?
- B. However, notice **Matthew 21:31**. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you." Tax collectors and prostitutes were more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees? How did that happen? It happened when tax collectors and prostitutes realized their brokenness and turned to God hungering and thirsting for righteousness. When they did that, God gave them the righteousness that came by faith in Jesus (**Philippians 3:9-11**). The Pharisees had as much righteousness as they could possibly get by relying on their own ability to keep the law. However, the righteousness that comes from realizing we can't keep the law and turning to Jesus is much greater.
- C. That righteousness sets us free from our own wheel-spinning attempts to obey God (cf **Romans 7:14-25**) and God's grace allows us to actually pursue the good deeds He created beforehand

for us to walk in (**Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14**). If the Pharisees ever broke down in a moment of honesty, they would have had to admit they just couldn't cut it. But they had nowhere else to turn because they were relying on themselves that they were righteous (**Luke 18:9**). However, even tax collectors and prostitutes can continue in Christ's righteousness when they start that path because they know God is at work with them (**Philippians 2:12-13**).

V. The kingdom of the obedient.

- A. Jesus apparently recognized how many might twist His teaching about grace and righteousness. We see it around us today as many so discuss poverty of spirit, grace and the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus that they act as if all we have to do is claim Jesus is our Lord and we are suddenly a part of the kingdom. It doesn't work that way.
- B. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus spoke of very religious people who called Jesus Lord. They were so religious they even argued with Him when He said they hadn't obeyed Him. He pointed out it is not enough to call Jesus, "Lord;" we actually have to do what He says. As Jesus said in **Luke 6:46**, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"
- C. We must never lose sight of the balance. Our righteousness comes by faith in Jesus through God's grace. But we must not forget we are to pursue righteousness and obedience ourselves. No doubt this is a growth process (**II Peter 1:5-8**), but nevertheless we must grow. We must increase faith, knowledge and virtue. We will not be part of the kingdom of heaven if we view God's grace as a license for disobedience.

VI. The kingdom of the militant.

- A. When Jesus taught us to pray, He said we should pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (**Matthew 6:10**). Too often, we argue about this verse and the establishment of Christ's kingdom. It is established and we no longer pray for that. However, that is not the limit of this verse. We are praying for God's dominion to spread throughout the entire earth as it is spread throughout heaven.
- B. But, the kingdom of heaven is not violently militant. We are a kingdom of peacemakers (**Matthew 5:9**). We do not spread the kingdom with the sword. We do not spread the kingdom through political mechanisms. We spread the kingdom by spreading the peace of God. We have a ministry of reconciliation (**II Corinthians 5:18-19**). In **II Corinthians 10:3-5**, Paul explained our warfare. It is one of teaching and the mind, bringing thoughts into captivity, not people.
- C. We militantly spread the kingdom throughout the world, but we do so through peace and reconciliation. We do it with intensity, purpose and courage. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that started small and spread to fill the whole earth (**Matthew 13:31-32**) and like a little bit of leaven that eventually spreads through the entire measure of flour (**Matthew 13:33**).

VII. The kingdom of the minority.

- A. Though the kingdom militantly spreads through the entire world, it will never be more than the minority. According to **Matthew 7:13-14**, the path to the kingdom is difficult and few ever find it.
- B. We are not seeking success through popularity. We are not seeking success through having the biggest numbers. We are not seeking success through world domination. We know we will always be in the minority. Our way will always be the path of most resistance. We know few will want to be part of us. But we keep on as the vocal minority that continues to spread the good news of peace even though men harass us continually.

Conclusion:

There is a story that gives us pause to examine ourselves. In **Matthew 13:24-30**, Jesus told the story of the kingdom and explained it in **Matthew 13:36-43**. The good seed has been planted, but Satan has infiltrated. He has sown tares among the wheat. We must take care to make our calling and election sure (**II Peter 1:10-11**), we must make sure we are the wheat that will shine forth brightly as the sun in righteousness. We must make sure to live this Sermon. It is our foundation. It is the Gospel of the Kingdom. It is the guide for kingdom citizens. Let us never fool ourselves. We do not enter the kingdom of heaven by "going to church." We enter the kingdom of heaven by walking the narrow path Jesus outlined. We can do it. If we ask, seek and knock, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, God will provide the way delivering us from evil and transferring us into the Kingdom of Heaven.