

Life & Teachings of Jesus

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Lakeside Institute of Theology
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(Materials for this lecture developed from work by Mark D. Roberts, PhD)

Life & Teachings of Jesus (NT3)

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What was Jesus' Core Message?

- The Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven).
 - “Kingdom of God” occurs 69 times in ten NT books.
 - “Kingdom of Heaven” occurs 32 times in Matthew.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mark 1:14-15

“I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

Luke 4:43-44

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

Luke 8:1

What was Jesus' Core Message?

“This theme of the coming of the Kingdom of God was central in (Jesus’) mission. His teaching was designed to show men how they might enter the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20; 7: 21). His mighty works were intended to prove that the Kingdom of God had come upon them (Matt. 12: 28). His parables illustrated to His disciples the truth about the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13: 11). And when He taught His followers to pray, at the heart of their petition were the words, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6: 10). On the eve of His death, He assured His disciples that He would yet share with them the happiness and the fellowship of the Kingdom (Luke 22: 22-30). And He promised that He would appear again on the earth in glory to bring the blessedness of the Kingdom to those for whom it was prepared (Matt. 25:31, 34).”

George Eldon Ladd

What was Jesus' Core Message?

Despite the centrality of the kingdom of God as Jesus' core message, many Christians are unsure of the meaning.

“You cannot know anything about Jesus, anything, if you miss the kingdom of God... You are zero on Jesus if you don't understand this term. I'm sorry to say it that strongly, but this is the great failure of evangelical Christianity. We have had Jesus without the kingdom of God, and therefore have literally done Jesus in.”

Gordon Fee

What is the Kingdom of God?

- Some have claimed the kingdom of God is *heaven*, and Jesus was simply saying “Now you can go to heaven when you die.”
- Others understand the kingdom of God to mean *the Church*.
- Still others have seen the kingdom of God as a world infused with *divine justice*, and Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom as a call to action.
- More “spiritually inclined” people have wanted to interpret it as an *inner awareness* of one’s own divinity – of “the god who is in each of us.”

But, in fact, all of these interpretations are at best inadequate, and at worst downright wrong.

Our inherent language problem

- In English, “kingdom” means a place where a king reigns.
- In Greek, *he basileia tou theou* (“kingdom of God”) means primarily the “reign, rule, authority or sovereignty” of the king, rather than a location. (The Aramaic *malku*, the word probably spoken by Jesus, has the same meaning.)

*A man of noble birth went to a distant country **to have himself appointed king** and then to return. Luke 19:12-13*

Literally, “*he went to a distant country to get a ‘kingdom’ (basileia) for himself*” – meaning he went to get new and greater authority to rule over the place where he already lived.

“Kingdom” means the reign or rule of a king – not the location being ruled. (See also *Psalm 145:10-11*.)

What is the Kingdom of God?

- When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has come near (as in Mark 1:15), he doesn't mean a location is approaching, but that God's own royal power has come on the scene.
- In effect, mark 1:15 means, *“God's reign is at hand. God's power is being unleashed. Turn your life around and put your trust in this good news.”*
- And this understanding of the meaning of “kingdom of God” is consistent with what the Jewish prophets had spoken about God's kingdom.

Jewish Prophetic Expectation for God's Kingdom

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. ⁹ Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. Isaiah 52:7-10

*Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. **The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;** never again will you fear any harm. Zephaniah 3:14-15*

How Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

Jesus does at times explain some of the features of the kingdom of God:

He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Mark 10:14-16

NOTE: the kingdom of God is something we receive – not something we can either create or take by our own efforts.

Therefore, those Christians who talk of “*bringing in the kingdom*” or “*ushering in the kingdom*” miss the biblical point that only God can bring the kingdom, which we can then only receive in a childlike way.

How Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

Jesus also describes the kingdom of God in parables:

“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

Mark 4:26-29

“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Mark 4:30-32

Echoes in the Jewish Prophetic Expectation

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.

Ezekiel 17:22-23

How Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

Jesus also proclaimed the kingdom of God **in works**:

Healings: Throughout the Hebrew prophets, healing was always seen as a sign of the presence of God's reign on earth.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Isaiah 35:3-6

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. Matthew 11:4-5

How Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

Jesus also proclaimed the kingdom of God **in works**:

Exorcisms: Whether or not we like it or are comfortable with it, driving out demons was central to Jesus' ministry, and was – according to Jesus himself – evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God.

*Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, **then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** Matthew 12:25-28*

How Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom of God

Jesus also proclaimed the kingdom of God **in works**:

Nature miracles: Jesus demonstrated the presence of the kingdom of God by walking on water, calming the storm, multiplying the loaves and fishes, etc.

You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, ⁴ ‘I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.’”

⁸ Who is like you, Lord God Almighty? You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you. ⁹ You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.

Psalm 89:3-4, 8-9

WHERE is the Kingdom of God?

Many people believe “the kingdom of God” refers to heaven – the afterlife – the eternal reward for Christians.

But what of the Lord’s Prayer, as found in Matthew 6:

“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

*¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth
as it is in heaven.*

Matthew 6:9-10

Jesus instructed us to pray for God’s kingdom to come and for His will to be done “*on earth as it is in heaven*” – which seems to establish the availability of God’s kingdom throughout all of His creation, including on earth, and not just in heaven.

WHERE is the Kingdom of God?

Part of our confusion of the kingdom of God with heaven is that Matthew uses the expression “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God.”

But this is simply a circumlocution – like saying “Good heavens” instead of “Good God” – because Matthew, the most Jewish of the NT writers, seemed to especially have a concern about not invoking the name of God or what might even sound like an invocation of God’s name.

So Matthew’s “kingdom of heaven” doesn’t mean the kingdom of God is in heaven, but is consistent with God’s reign being over both the heavens and the earth.

But didn’t Jesus say himself that his kingdom was “*not of this world?*”

WHERE is the Kingdom of God?

Jesus said (to Pontius Pilate), *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* John 18:36

Does this not mean Jesus’ kingdom is not here in earth, but is up in heaven?

Literally, it reads, *“My authority to reign is not from this world (ek tou kosmou toutou)... my kingdom is from another place (ouk estin enteuthen).”*

Jesus is not speaking of the location of his kingdom, but the source of his royal authority – which is not from any earthly source (like Pilate), but is from God above.

WHERE is the Kingdom of God?

So, the kingdom of God is not in what we call heaven (or at least, not *entirely* in heaven).

The kingdom of God also is not merely in our hearts.

This misunderstanding comes from a mistranslation of Luke 17:21, which reads “*The kingdom of God is within you.*” But a more accurate translation is:

*Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed,²¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ **because the kingdom of God is in your midst.**”*

Luke 17:20-21

WHEN is the Kingdom of God Coming?

- In many places Jesus seems to be saying the kingdom of God will come in the future:

*...**your kingdom come**, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Matthew 6:10

*I say to you that **many will come** from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Matthew 8:11-12

WHEN is the Kingdom of God Coming?

- But elsewhere Jesus plainly says the kingdom of God is here now:

*“The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, ²¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because **the kingdom of God is in your midst.**”*

Luke 17:20-21

*“The time has come,” he said. **“The kingdom of God has come near.** Repent and believe the good news!”*

Mark 1:15

*But 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

WHEN is the Kingdom of God Coming?

- So how are we to understand Jesus when he says both that the kingdom of God is here and now, and yet it is something that is to happen in the future?

“Already, and not yet!” – BOTH present & future

The contract has been signed; the deal is set; but the final closing has not yet occurred and so we cannot yet take possession of what will be ours.

I believe in the kingdom come, then all the colors will bleed into one, bleed into one. Well yes I'm still running.

You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains, carried the cross of my shame, of my shame, you know I believe it.

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for... U2

HOW is the Kingdom of God to Appear?

- HOW is the fulfillment of the kingdom of God to appear?
- 1st Century Jews expected a Messiah – an anointed king – to come and drive out the gentile oppressors (Romans) & make Israel a great nation again.
- These same Jews rejected Jesus because he did not affirm this expectation of what the Messiah would do or how the kingdom of God would appear to Israel.
- So they instead tried to force God's hand by rebelling against Rome, and in AD 70 Jerusalem and the Temple were completely destroyed as a result.

HOW is the Kingdom of God to Appear?

- But Jesus said the kingdom of God would come not through human strength, but from apparent weakness; not through military victories, but from what appeared to be a defeat; not through hatred and violence, but through sacrificial love.

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

Mark 8:27-32

SUMMARY: What was Jesus' Primary Message?

- *“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Mark 1:15*
- The “kingdom of God” does not refer to the place where God rules, but to the presence and power of God’s actual rule and reign. The kingdom is here when God exercises his rightful authority over His creation.
- Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God in words and works; both by what he said and what he did.
- The kingdom of God is not primarily in heaven or inside us, but is everywhere God reigns over His creation.
- The kingdom of God is already here, but is not yet fully realized – “Already, and not yet.”
- The kingdom of God will not be fulfilled by human effort, but by the culmination of Jesus’ sacrificial act on the cross.

How should we then live?

1. We should seek to live each moment in the reality of God's kingdom.

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:15

2. We should live in the world as salt and light.
3. We should take up our cross daily and follow Jesus.
4. We should live in both the present power and the future hope of the resurrection.