

Living in Light of the Kingdom

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The “kingdom” that I am writing about is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the kingdom that God promised in the Old Testament—a kingdom in which He would deliver His people from their sins and bring them into an eternal relationship with Himself. The kingdom dawned when Jesus came to seek and save the lost. His death on the cross established this kingdom on an unassailable foundation. Jesus’ resurrection proclaimed His kingship and the reality of His salvation. His ascension took Him to the right hand of God where He now reigns over the world for the good of His church, and Christians await His return and the establishment of the New Jerusalem at the end of the age.

The interval between the first and second advents of Christ is more than two thousand years and counting, and no one knows how long it will continue. But the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated many years ago changes everything and casts a shadow over this world. Though the world does not know that Jesus reigns, He does—and He will complete what He has started. The kingdom is entered by grace through faith, but this does not mean it is without demands. It demands submission to King Jesus for all eternity, and this submission is most glorious because of who He is as our Lord and Saviour. This is the biblical-theological background for the topic: living in light of the kingdom.

When many today think about computers, they think of Apple. When they think about searching the internet, they think of Google. And when they think about books, they think of Amazon. When we want to learn about the kingdom biblically, we should think about the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. This sermon is a kingdom sermon given by Jesus. In Matthew’s gospel it is the first of five major discourses that highlight Jesus’ teaching. It must be interpreted in light of the whole ministry of Jesus the “Christ” or the “Anointed.” He is our anointed prophet, priest and king who is teaching us about the kingdom in this sermon. In this article, we will look at the Sermon on the Mount as a whole and highlight some of the things that Jesus wants us to know about life in the kingdom.

The Importance of Character in the Kingdom (5:1–16)

The importance of character can be seen by the fact that it comes first in the sermon. Character is important because the kingdom is about salvation or deliverance from sin that must inevitably change and influence character. In the sermon, Jesus emphasizes character by giving us eight beatitudes and two metaphors. Jesus pronounces a blessing on the poor in spirit, on those who mourn, on the meek, on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, on the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. According to Jesus, people who are characterized in these ways are “blessed” in that they know the approval of God and His grace is evident in their lives. The beatitudes do not describe natural personality traits, but rather evidence that the kingdom of God has come in life-changing power. As a result, those who are citizens of the kingdom are light and salt in the world. Both metaphors presuppose that the world is not all that it should be—it is a dark and flavourless place that needs the moral and spiritual “light” and “salt” that is provided by Jesus’ disciples.

Once again we should note that it is character and not education that Jesus emphasizes at the beginning of His kingdom sermon. It is character, not having the right friends and connections. It is character, not having the right study Bible, or a fancy home, or car, or boat, or vacation property, or six-pack abs, or whatever, that matters. In the kingdom, character matters—character comes first—character that is developed over a lifetime as we walk with Jesus through this world.

The Centrality of Christ in the Kingdom (5:17–48)

It is difficult to overstate the importance of these verses—particularly 5:17–20. In them, Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, or what we call today the Old Testament scriptures. This means that everything in the Old Testament is about Him in one way or another. For instance, the law of Moses points to Him and His teaching and His work on the cross that makes kingdom living possible. The history of Israel as God’s firstborn son anticipates the coming of a greater Son who, unlike Israel, is faithful to God in all that He does. The Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system teaches the people about holiness and what is necessary to live in the presence of a superlatively holy God. King David leads Israel in battle against her foes while at the same time he is the sweet psalmist of Israel and he intercedes for the people in prayer. In these ways he foreshadows a greater king, prophet and priest to come who would transcend David without any of his weaknesses and liabilities. And with many voices, yet one message, the prophets of the Old Testament foretold the coming of a new day in which God’s messianic servant would restore the fortunes of Israel, vanquish his foes, establish the kingdom of God, and inaugurate a new covenant that would be characterized by the abundance of the Spirit, the personal knowledge of God, and the complete forgiveness of sins.

The centrality of Christ in the kingdom also means that everything that comes to us in the New Testament is ultimately grounded in His person and work. We cannot read the Sermon on the Mount without the realization that the preacher is on His way to the cross to die in the place of His people. He is the one who makes it possible for us to live as the sermon describes. And what is true here is true throughout the New Testament. The strength to live the Christian life is tied to his death and resurrection and to the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. There is no other way, and we must understand this if we are to move forward in our walk with God. This is one of the things Jesus means when He speaks of a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (5:20). As “righteous” as the Pharisees and teachers of the law were, they did not see their need of Jesus. And they did not understand that kingdom righteousness is forever tied to Jesus and what He died to accomplish on the cross. It is only as we are humbled and empowered by the Christ-centered gospel that we can begin to live the kind of lives that God requires of His people.

The hermeneutical importance of Jesus is illustrated in the rest of the chapter. In the connection between murder and anger and the need for swift reconciliation, Jesus and His teaching have far-reaching implications (5:21–26). The same is true with regard to adultery and lust and the related matters of divorce and marital unfaithfulness (5:27–33). Outward purity is not enough because He asserts authority over our hearts. When it comes to oaths and truth-telling, He demands simple straight-forward language that does not twist or evade honesty (5:34–37). Even the need for justice in matters of right and wrong comes under the sway of Jesus (5:38–42). So pervasive and revolutionary is the influence of Jesus that He calls

on His followers to love their enemies as well as their friends (5:43–48). In so doing, He redefines what it means to be God’s children and shows us that one way we demonstrate our new paternity is to imitate God’s love for all of His creatures.

Ultimately, Jesus governs our understanding of the Old Testament. This is true whether we are talking about the ultimate meaning and direction of the Old Testament law, or about Pharisaic interpretations or misinterpretations of the law. Jesus unifies the scriptures. The dispensations, or distinct periods of time in which God reveals His saving purposes, are not the key to understanding the scriptures. The covenants which God uses to structure His relationships with human beings are not the key either. The key is Jesus. We must read and interpret the Bible as Christians committed to Him. We will never live in the kingdom as we should if we do not grasp the centrality of Christ. Issues of Sabbath, baptism, spiritual gifts, the nature of the church, leadership in the church, the place of the law, the definition of the gospel, and so much more, are ultimately connected to Him and a proper understanding of His work.

The Practice of Righteousness in the Kingdom (6:1–18)

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus focuses on 3 areas of religious practice: (1) giving to the poor (6:1–4); (2) prayer (6:5–15); and fasting (6:16–18). He assumes that these expressions of righteousness will be ongoing in the lives of His people. However, it is important to note that in every case His instruction has to do with performance and competition. Giving, prayer and fasting that are done for the applause of the audience will go unrewarded by God. This kind of “performance” or “competitive” righteousness is indicative of a deeper problem, namely, hypocrisy. The practice of kingdom righteousness is not the same as participation in sports, politics, or business. In these endeavours public opinion is king—and it is all about numbers, profits, and ratings; not so in the kingdom of God. In this realm, it is about honouring and serving God. And so when it comes to the practice of righteousness, we are to do it “in secret.” This is one way we show that our aim is His honour and glory and not our own.

It should be added that Jesus’ words do not prohibit all public giving, prayer, or fasting. What they require is that our public acts of righteousness are part of a larger practice of righteousness that is known only to God. His instructions rebuke the insane competition that often exists over who can plant the most churches, attend the most conferences, gather the largest crowds, have the most Twitter or Facebook followers, the most read blog, the right endorsements, etc. The non-Christian world does not care about these things because by their standards the biggest Christian stars are small potatoes and the crowds we gather to our biggest conferences do not begin to rival people that attend high school football games in Texas! What the watching world often wants to see is spiritual reality and authenticity. They want to see something different from the kind of competitive “look-at-me” attitude that is ubiquitous in the media, politics, business, sports, the entertainment industry, and so much of our i-culture. The kingdom of God is not a franchise that we buy into and then develop in terms of our own brand and audience. God is looking for people who delight in Him more than anyone or anything else and who are more concerned with what He thinks than they are with receiving the adulation of the crowd. Thus He rewards what is done in secret. Those who crave the attention of others will get what they desire, but they will never know the sweetness of God’s approval.

The Implications of the Kingdom's Arrival for our Lives (6:19–34)

The kingdom of the Lord Jesus is not of this world—it comes from another realm, and, therefore, does not operate according to the principles of this fallen order. But the arrival of the kingdom in advance of the final consummation has many practical implications for us. And it is to these that Jesus turns in the last half of chapter six. As disciples of the Lord Jesus we have new treasures and a new place to store them based on a whole new set of kingdom values and realities. What we treasure is important because Jesus knows that what holds our hearts and captures our affections moulds our lives. If we set our sights on the things of the world, we will be blinded to what is truly important as determined by God's timetable and what He is doing in our lives. Therefore we must choose carefully who we will serve because we cannot serve two masters at the same time – we cannot serve God and money.

One of the wonderful things about being a disciple of Jesus is that we do not have to worry about our lives in this world. Jesus tells us that our heavenly Father is in control and He will look after us and give us what we need. Worrying, does not change a thing. It is a futile practice because there are so many things that are beyond our control. And besides all that, the material things of this life are destined to perish one day. They will not last forever, and even if they did, we mere mortals cannot hang on to them forever. Given these realities, we are commanded to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We are to live by faith in the goodness of God and take one day at a time. The priorities of the kingdom must shape our priorities, and these kingdom priorities are in turn shaped by the changes that have been introduced by the coming of Jesus and the wonder of His person and work.

The Dangers of the Kingdom Age (7:1–29)

The kingdom age is the time between the first and second advents of Christ. The kingdom is good—the dangers I have in mind arise from the world in which we live. They are also present because of the progressive way that God has chosen to apply salvation to His people. We are not yet all that we will be. We continue to struggle with sin in our own lives and so we face many dangers as we live in expectation of the parousia. In chapter seven, Jesus highlights six of these dangers.

First, there are dangers associated with increased light and understanding, so Jesus warns us not to apply to others a standard we are not willing to apply to ourselves (7:1–5). This, however, does not mean that all judgment is suspended. We must be discerning and not give sacred things to those who have no appreciation of them (7:6).

Second, there are dangers associated with waiting for God while living in the world (7:7–12). One such danger is that of passivity, or sitting around doing nothing, while we wait for God to act. This is not appropriate behaviour for disciples of Jesus. He wants us to ask, and knock, and seek, and assures us that God will respond to our requests for help. Sometimes passivity is joined to a harsh view of God and His goodness. We do not seek help because we think that He will not answer. But this is not the case. God is good and He knows how to give good gifts to His children. Therefore we should be actively pursuing Him and we should believe that He delights to care for His people.

Third, there are dangers associated with the absolute nature of the kingdom (7:13–14). According to Jesus there are only two gates—a narrow one and a wide one. There are only two

ways—a narrow and a broad one. And there are only two destinations—life and death. Such absolutes are not looked on with approval today. This kind of theological construction is considered bigoted and narrow-minded. In such an environment we may be tempted to soft-peddle the truth, or to round off its sharp edges, or to blunt its impact. But Jesus will not allow us to do so. The kingdom stands over against the world. We are confronted with a choice. We can only enter through one of the gates and walk on one of the roads. In the end it is a matter of life and death. While many may not like the absolute nature of the choice, Jesus leaves us with no alternative. Faithfulness to Him requires that we obey His word.

Fourth, there are dangers associated with false teaching (7:15–20). Unfortunately, false teaching will always be a problem until the consummation. Tragically, it is often exacerbated by the fine outward appearance and clever sounding words of the false teachers. In fact, they are dangerous precisely because they are so believable and convincing. But the true state of their hearts will be evident by their fruit. What they are cannot remain hidden forever. Eventually it will come out. There is a connection between what we believe and how we live and what we teach. “Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”

Fifth, there are dangers associated with self-deception (7:21-23). Perhaps the worst form of deception is self-deception! Jesus knows this and so He tells His listeners not to trust in anything but knowing God and doing His will. Extraordinary insight, spiritual power, or sacrificial service are not a substitute for a saving knowledge of God. Many will arrive at the final judgment unprepared to face the Judge. They can think they are ready or that their fervency will influence the Judge’s decision, only to make the horrific discovery that there is a final judgment and they have been rejected as evildoers. So great are the issues at stake that we must be brutally honest with ourselves, or we may find that we have deluded ourselves into thinking that all is well with our souls.

Sixth, there are dangers associated with building on an alternative worldview (7:24-27). Jesus brings His sermon to a close by stressing once again the nature of the issues at stake. In His final illustration, He speaks of two builders building two houses on two different foundations. The foundation of sand is anything other than Jesus. The foundation on rock is Jesus and a correct interpretation of His teaching. Only the rock foundation can bear the weight of the building that is erected on it no matter what is going on around. Rains can come, streams rise, winds blow, and they can beat against the house but it will not fall because it is founded on the rock. The lesson is obvious: we are only safe as we hear the words of Jesus and put them into practice.

The end result of the Sermon on the Mount was amazement. Those who heard it were amazed at Jesus’ authority because He taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law (7:28–29). If we live according to the teaching of Jesus—which is another way of saying, if our living is kingdom living—people will continue to be amazed. In many ways there is no more pressing need today. The world is looking for the church to practice what it preaches. They do not care about many of the things that we think are so important, but they will still be amazed by the sweet and awesome power of the kingdom of God when that kingdom is lived out in the lives of God’s people.

In this regard, we must remember that it is not enough to merely resolve to live better or differently in light of the Sermon on the Mount. If we are to have a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, we must follow the Preacher of the

sermon to the cross where He died in order to secure this kind of life. Not only that, but we must walk in the light of His resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which makes it possible for us live to the honour and glory of God until we see Jesus face to face.