

The Government On His Shoulder

Study Five — The Father's Kingdom

The world has many forms of government and it is natural enough for us to imagine a kingdom of God in the image of what we have experienced. We need a revelation of God's kingdom through new birth, a new experience of a new reign or government more powerful than all our images and experiences.

We come now to what the kingdom is all about—the Father and his will or plan. Jesus himself lived (John 4:34) and died (John 14:31) and rose (Rom. 6:4, 10; Eph. 2:5-6) and reigns (1 Cor. 15:28) for this. And now, he teaches us to pray to 'our Father in heaven' saying.... 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done...' (Matt. 6:9-10).

If the kingdom is the Father's, how do we understand the reign of the Son? We do well to remember that Jesus reigns as Lord. He says the Father appoints to him a kingdom (Luke 22:29). Jesus makes it clear that he is King and, after his resurrection, announces that all authority is given to him (Matt. 28:18). We preach that he is Lord, acknowledge him as Leader in battle and know that every creature will finally acknowledge that he is Lord. It is his victory that the gospel announces and his coming to judge that will conclude history. This is the fundamental message of the gospel. It is the substance of our faith and hope and the reason for our love. As we said earlier, it really matters who we believe is in charge! The reign on which we depend is the reign of Christ. We are transferred to the kingdom of the Son (Col 1:13).

But there is a goal in the Son's reign. He will continue to lead us in battle until he has defeated every enemy, and then he will hand the kingdom to the Father that he may be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:24). Knowing the Father is as important to kingdom living as knowing that Christ is Lord. In fact, it is what knowing Christ as Lord is all about. He had this in mind when he headed for the cross (John 14:31) and prayed that we would know the love of the Father in the same way that he did (John 17:23).

Both Jesus and the apostles keep talking about the kingdom of God, and where the kingdom is said to be Christ's it is usually linked with God, that is, the Father. The kingdom is 'the kingdom of Christ and God' (Eph. 5:5). The kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15; 12:10). (Exceptions are Col. 1:13; 2 Tim. 4:1 and 2 Pet. 1:11.)

Some distinguish between the kingdom of the Son and of the Father—the Son's kingdom now and the Father's kingdom in the age to come. However, it is clear that the Son's reign *is* the Father's reign and that this is the way the Father achieves his will. If authority is given to the Son, it is that he may lead us to the Father. And then, if Jesus gives the kingdom to the Father that he may be 'all in all'—that is, acknowledged as the Father by all creation, then that is what he is about now. The future will not involve a change of administration; rather, the present is a foretaste of what is to come.

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of the Father

It is worthwhile listing the statements in which Jesus links the kingdom with his or our Father.

Jesus teaches us to pray to our Father in heaven, and to ask that his kingdom—that is, the Father's kingdom—may come (Matt. 6:9-10). Those who do the will of his Father will enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:21). Your Father has chosen to give the kingdom to his little flock (Luke 12:32). The righteous will shine in the kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:43). He will give a kingdom to us as his Father gave him a kingdom (Luke 22:29). As returning King, he will call those who are blessed by his Father to receive the kingdom (Matt. 25:34). He will not drink the last supper cup again until he drinks it again in his Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29). After the resurrection, Jesus teaches his apostles about the kingdom and says they must wait for the Spirit promised by the Father (Acts 1:4) and leave matters of kingdom progress to the Father's authority (Acts 1:7). In the book of

Revelation, Jesus says he has made us ‘a kingdom, priests to his Father’ (Rev. 1:6)—that is, we are *already* exercising a priestly function on behalf of the Father as we announce this kingdom to the world.

But the reason to speak of the Father’s kingdom goes beyond these few references. The Gospel of Matthew has some 49 references to kingdom, but it also has 40 references to God as Father and the two themes are related. I want to trace this now, chiefly in the Sermon on the Mount.

The first Sermon references to the kingdom tell us who will enter it: the poor in spirit (5:3) and those who are persecuted for following Jesus (5:10). The world regards them as nothing or as criminals, but the **kingdom** belongs to them—that is, they will enter it and their detractors and tormentors will not.

Then Jesus adds that, far from being marginalized by their experiences, they should let their ‘light’ and ‘saltiness’ be evident to the world—so that people may see the works of the **Father** in them (5:13-16). Those who live under God’s reign should not be sheepish about their lifestyle or the reasons for it. They know that only the Father’s reign in this sorry world can make any lasting good of it, so they live humbly under God’s salvation and rule, and people see this—and give glory to ‘your Father in heaven’. But why give glory to him when we have done the hard work—unless it is the Father himself who is supplying the necessary grace and endurance and hope that enable those works. Jesus believes a life supported by the Father produces results that are evident to critics (cf. John 17:20-23).

We tend to divide things into God’s work and our work but Jesus, and all of Scripture, don’t allow this. It is precisely the goodness of the Father that is reflected, or represented, when we do good works. These good works are essential, not so as to deserve the Father’s goodness but to demonstrate that his love has come to its goal in us (as in 1 John 4:12).

Then, Jesus says that those who do and keep God’s law will be called great in the **kingdom** (5:19-20). Far from establishing a new regime, he will establish the way of life set out by his Father, and not merely as a standard to measure oneself against, but as a way of life eagerly embraced. We are to pray to our **Father** for his kingdom to come (6:10, 32-33). Gathered as children before the Father, we want his law and reign and will to prevail in this world, but we do so because we know that he knows we need food and clothing. The world must make these things their whole object in life—and shrivel because of it; we know the Father will look after everyday things and so we can focus on what is eternal.

Jesus speaks about our being sons of our **Father** who makes his sun shine on everyone, regardless of merit (Matt. 5:45). ‘Love your enemies...so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven’. The sun shining is not just ‘nature’; it is evidence of how our Father runs the universe—how he **reigns**, and he calls on us to let our care for other be the same. Paul uses the same argument among pagans in Lystra (Acts 14:15-17). Clearly, not all people are children of God but God treats them with fatherly care and this gives those who *are* his children greater reason to let their kindness shine on all, including enemies. Jesus is emphatic: ‘You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly **Father** is perfect’ (Matt. 5:48). Clearly, this kind of patience and good will is not possible unless we believe this is the way things are under God’s reign, and the way they will be in the new heavens and earth. It is the only valid and enduring way to live. By comparison, the passions of this life, the things the Gentiles live for, do not last; they are not of the Father and will pass away (1 John 2:16-17).

The Jesus says that *saying* ‘Lord, Lord’ to Jesus will not guarantee entry to the **kingdom**; it is *doing* the will of his **Father** that counts (7:21). We are reminded of God’s question to Israel in Malachi: ‘If I am a father, where is my honour?’ (3:6). Israel presumed that belonging to the kingdom of Israel was all that mattered and did not do what their Father asked. And they suffered the fruits of their hypocrisy. But God was hearing the cry of Isaiah, ‘Where are your zeal and your mighty deeds? ... For you are our Father (63:15-16). He had reversed the judgement of their idolatry and restored Israel to their land, and he looked for recognition of his active fatherhood towards them.

Now, the Father has sent his Son to establish his reign among his enemies. Jesus is standing among his people calling on them to recognise his, and their, Father as the saving authority in their lives

and to receive all that he wants to do among them by obeying their Father—through the words and works of his Son.

This aspect of God's Fatherhood is easily overlooked when our experience of human fatherhood is not true and deep. But we are not called on to infer what God's fatherhood is from our experience, but to know the Father, through Jesus Christ, and to let this reign infuse our living here. As Father, God has a purpose, and he reveals this so we may share in it with him. He provides what is needed for this journey. He chastises when we err but also sends salvation to send us forward to the goal again. Human fatherhood should convey all these elements in practical ways and by testimony to where it all comes from. That is, children should be able to look at their parents and give glory to the Father who is reflected, even faultily, in how they are treated.

God our Father, then, is to be honoured or 'hallowed'—made holy. He is to be obeyed and even feared. The world and its leaders want us to be afraid of their threats, but we have a greater 'fear'—who turns out to be none other than a **Father** who counts hairs on our head and supervises sparrows (Luke 10:27-33). Such an authority may well be confessed in our angry world, and trusted when danger threatens (cf. 1 Pet. 2:22).

Returning to the Sermon in Matthew, we notice the frequency of references to 'your Father in heaven' (14 times) showing that the dynamic of living in the kingdom is that we have been brought to live compliantly and contentedly under our Father.

Chapter 6, in particular, is an urgent and detailed appeal for us to expect to be looked after by 'your **Father** in heaven'. He will 'reward you' (vv. 1, 4, 6, 18), he knows your need without being told (v. 8), will forgive you (v. 14), he looks after birds and will certainly look after his children (v. 26) and knows we need many physical things in order to live (v. 32). He says this against the background of a culture that focuses on doing right things (charity, praying and fasting) in order to be seen. We are to live by faith not sight. The allure of a public approval from peers is enticing, but risky to say the least, and temporary. Better to seek the secret approval of our Father, particularly, by trusting him.

This urgency and detail should alert us that important things are at stake. What would it mean to be paid in full by the approval of our peers and receive nothing from our Father (vv. 1-2)? What would it mean to remain bitter about the sins of others and not be forgiven by our Father (v. 15; 18:35)?

We must ask our Father for what we need, seek him, and knock on his door expecting help (7:7-11). None of us are sufficient to ourselves and need to go somewhere for help. Parents are a witness to the care of the Father, but still evil. What, then, of the Father himself? Will we trust him? No other 'father', whether earthly father, religious figure or object of trust should be honoured above our Father in heaven (23:9).

Interestingly, this appeal to trust the Father is followed by a 'So...', a strong appeal to fulfill all God's revealed will by seeking the welfare of others as though it were our own welfare (7:12-14, 21). This is not a popular way to live, or easy, but the will of the Father, nonetheless, and the only way to enter his **kingdom**. This is the testimony of Jesus and our eternal welfare—Jesus confessing us before the Father—depends on it (7:22-29; 10:32-33).

God, as Father, provides for and saves his people but the only place to be safe under his reign is to revere him as the only one able to provide for us, define us, save us and bring us to our goal. Our obedience to him is not with a view to deflecting his wrath (though that may be helpful in our giving him our attention) but as the way of receiving the grace he is offering, with gratitude and love and expectation of a glorious goal.

The world loves to be autonomous (self law) but Jesus allows no such category. The Father rules—through the Son—and abundant or eternal life will always be found in trust of his reign and obedience to his will.

This has important implications for the nature of authority. Without this pattern and dynamic operating, the world assumes that submission indicates inferiority and spurns it. This is disastrous.

If humanity is to prevail, God and his Christ must die. But then, there is no true basis for human order. Our human relationships are soured by the idea that we can only be whole if we have autonomy. Children should not be subject to parents or wives to husbands or servants to masters, parishioners to pastors or anyone to the state. And then, 'leadership' which we call on politicians to exercise becomes no more than them doing what our sectional interest dictates. How necessary it is, in these days, to live under the Father and display the delights and strength and purpose and gentleness of his Kingdom!

Moving on from the Sermon, we listen to Jesus himself explaining to us how he lives before the Father, and calls us to share this life with him (Matt. 11:25-27; also Luke 10:17-24).

Jesus has sent out 70 disciples to preach the **kingdom**. They return, exultant that demons are subject to them (Luke 10:9, 17-20). They have been doing kingdom work. Jesus says he has been watching Satan fall from heaven. However, he says they must not exult in these powers but that their names are written in heaven—that is, the **Father** has received and recorded their names as belonging to himself.

He then takes them and us to the heart of kingdom as he says, '**Father**, Lord of heaven and earth...'.

Clearly, the Father is in charge of the kingdom, determining who understands and receives the message. But then, the Father has put everything into the hands of the Son—who is so great (i.e. sharing deity) that only the Father can know him. What the Son does with his great authority is to make the Father known, to whomever he pleases. Here is the great work of God's reign through Christ—to make the Father known.

The **kingdom** is not a harsh reign, an endless list of demands and requirements, but rest for those burdened with religious regulation. The Son himself reveals the kingdom in his gentle and humble life so that his yoke of discipleship, finding the eternal wisdom, is, in fact easy or light to carry (cf. Deut. 30:14). Their whole life will be infused with rest.

The parable of the prodigal son, or prodigious Father, may suggest that the role of Father is passive, that he waits to be approached. But Christ shows this is far from the case. It is he who so loved the world that he sent his Son (John 3:16). Everything we have in Christ has its genesis in the Father.

Mere descriptions of living in the kingdom under the Father may produce in us more of a hungering and thirsting for righteousness than satisfaction (Matt. 5:6). Before his death and resurrection, Jesus can only say what is so but not how it will come to be so. The Father's reign comes home to us as he shows the world that *he* loves the Father and is not subject in any way to this world's ruler (John 14:30-31). It is revealed when Jesus, being arrested, says he could ask his Father for legions of angels to save him (Matt. 26:53). It is exposed as Jesus dies asking the Father to forgive his persecutors (Luke 23:34). We learn to praise the Father who has chosen and predestined us to be his children, through the redemption obtained through Christ's blood (Eph. 1:3, 7). We give thanks to the Father who has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:12-13). It is through the reign of the Son—on his cross and because of it—that we can see the Father reigning.

Only the future will reveal all that is involved in the Father's reign, but we should resolve to know what we can, and to display what we can, now.