

**The Kingdom of God: What Is It?**  
**Luke 17:20-21 and Mark 1:14-20**  
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**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

I want to start this morning by asking: how many of you can recall hearing a sermon preached specifically on the Kingdom of God?

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of God” 40 times in Luke and 15 times in Mark. Matthew sometimes substitutes the phrase, “the kingdom of the heavens” for kingdom of God, but between the two they occur 50 times in his gospel. Altogether that is over 100 references to God’s kingdom. Clearly, a central focus of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was the announcement of the coming of God’s kingdom; yet generally speaking, the church has had very little to say about what it is, where it is, when it’s coming or what it means in the lives of Jesus’ followers. I want to make what may sound like a startling claim: we cannot understand Jesus’ message, or the purpose of his healings or teaching, or even the meaning of his death and resurrection, if we don’t have a good grasp of the kingdom he came to proclaim. That’s how critical the kingdom of God is, which is why I said a few weeks ago that this series is the most important I will ever preach, and today’s sermon is the most important of the series because it lays the foundation we’ll be building on for the next three months.

If you looked closely at the e-letter last a couple of days ago, you’ll know that we will be looking in depth at the kingdom—what it is, how we become part of it, what the traits of living in this kingdom look like, and what the future of this kingdom holds. More than anything, I want you to understand that the Kingdom of God has real life applications to us in the here and now. The kingdom is something we are meant to experience and to live—not just know about. So, let’s jump in....

Every person has a kingdom—a realm that is uniquely your own. Your kingdom is the place where you have a say over what happens there. If you get a voice in what goes on in a particular place that is your kingdom. My primary kingdom is a shared kingdom on South Yank Way in Lakewood. Inside that house, I have input into what goes and the decisions that are made. For many years I had two relatively loyal subjects who resided in my kingdom, my daughter Emily and son David. Now they only make sporadic visits to my kingdom because they are establishing kingdoms of their own.

My other kingdom is located here, at the corner of South Colorado and Hampden boulevards. I can call this my kingdom because I have some say over what takes place here. For example, I am the one who decided what scripture would be read and what the liturgy would be today. There are considerably more subjects here than at the kingdom on S. Yank Way, which means I have more help taking care of this kingdom, more opinions about how I should care for this kingdom, and more people than ever who can ask me, “do you know where the such-and-such is?” That’s pretty much the extent of my kingdom. My domain is, in the big scheme of things, rather limited.

Dallas Willard, in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* defines a kingdom as “the range of our effective will.” (p. 21) It’s the place where what we want done is done. That definition fits what we’ve said so far. My will extends in range to both my home and my work, and that’s my kingdom. But, what if we ask that question about God? What is the range of God’s effective will? Where is the place where what God wants done is done?

I want to offer three popular answers to that question that are all incomplete, at best, and then show, in contrast, what the kingdom of God is and what difference it makes when we understand it. The first popular misconception is that the kingdom of God is **synonymous with heaven**. This way of thinking says that where God is in control, where the effective range of God’s will is made known is in heaven. That makes the kingdom of God a purely eternal realm and a future reality for those of us still living. It may be something to aspire to, to hope for, or to believe in, but in this way of viewing the kingdom, it has nothing to do with us while we inhabit time and space. It only becomes a reality to us in death.

That is not at all what Jesus has in mind when he talks about the kingdom. The kingdom, according to Jesus, has already come. It is “at hand,” Jesus says. It has arrived. It’s here. It’s now. The kingdom is a present reality. That is not to say it does not have anything to do with eternity. There is, of course, an ongoing, eternal aspect of the kingdom. But, as Dr. Willard puts it, “the kingdom is not something to be ‘accepted’ now and enjoyed later, but something to be *entered* now.” (DC, p. 28) It already has flesh-and blood citizens who have been called by God, who have responded to that call, and who are working together in and for God’s kingdom. If we understand this rightly, that the kingdom is among us, then there is nothing to wait around for. We can live the kingdom life now. The eternal life for which we are made has already begun. It flows through us in the same way it flowed through Jesus. The question is whether or to what degree we are accessing that eternal life in our daily affairs.

A second misconception about the kingdom of God is that the kingdom of God is the **same thing as the church**. This line of thinking goes that it is within the church that God's effective will has reach and power and what God wants done gets done. In other words, God's effective will has power only in the realm of the religious. This approach, like the previous one, separates God from the material and physical world in which we live. In our work and family and civic life, we're on our own. The master puppeteer has wound us up and let us go, and we've got to make the best of it. But, that is a far too limited view of God's kingdom. Psalm 145 tells us God's kingdom is an "everlasting kingdom" meaning that it existed from before the foundation of the earth and will never end. Hebrews 12:27 adds that God's kingdom "cannot be shaken." It has never been in trouble and never will be.

Instead of being confined to the church, the kingdom of God (or reign or rule) is everywhere God is. Jesus came to tell us to look up, look around, look inside, even. Everywhere you see God present, every place you see God at work, wherever and whenever you see evidence of the divine footprint, God's kingdom is already there. Everything Jesus did shows us and teaches us to *see* that kingdom, to make us aware that we are frequently blind when it comes to God's realm and because we don't see it, we're not living the kingdom life as fully as we're called to live. To Jesus' eyes we inhabit a God-bathed, God-permeated world. It is a world filled with a glorious reality, where every aspect of it is within the range of God's direct knowledge and control—though God obviously permits some of it to be, for a while, other than what God wishes it to be. Still, it is a world in which God is continually at play and over which God constantly rejoices, a world that is inconceivably beautiful and good because of God and because God is always in it. In short, the kingdom of God is all around us. Jesus, in his teaching and in his miracles, is pointing that out so we can see it, too, because the life for which we are made is kingdom life. Jesus gives us greater access to that kingdom by teaching us what to look for, how to live in the kingdom, and how to be agents of the kingdom so that we are instruments in God's effective will being made manifest.

The third misconception about the kingdom of God is that it is a **private, inner place** that has to do with one's personal spirituality but not with the affairs of the world. If this were so, we would have to wonder why Jesus taught his disciples to pray for God's kingdom to come "on *earth* as it is in heaven," a prayer that we repeat every week in this very room. So, no, contrary to popular thought, the kingdom is not primarily something that is found in the heart. It *may* be there, and for those of us who claim to be Christians, I certainly hope it is there. But, it is not confined to the inner world of human consciousness. It is not simply a matter

of inner attitude or faith that might be totally disconnected from the public, visible, behavioral world. The kingdom of God pervades and governs the physical universe. It is embodied, incarnational, and sacramental as well as spiritual.

One of the reasons so many Jews struggled to receive Jesus as the Messiah is related to this very point. When the Jews thought of God's kingdom, they thought of the visible conquest of God's enemies, the vindication and restoration of God's people to their land, and the fulfillment of the promise that an heir of David would sit on the throne in Jerusalem and rule upon the earth in power and glory. The Messiah was whoever could lead them to the establishment of this kingdom. By this definition, if Pilate still governed Judea, the kingdom had not come. If the temple was not rebuilt, the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing Torah properly, the kingdom had not come. The Jews had one thing right: the kingdom Jesus described is a visible, sensory, touch and feel kingdom. But, where they got it wrong was that God's kingdom, unlike the one they expected or the ones you and I create, is not geographical or political. It has no protected borders or standing army. It is spiritual in the sense that it turns everything upside down, and it is embodied in the sense that it is a lived reality, not just a state of heightened mental or spiritual awareness.

The kingdom of God is radically different from anything you've ever seen. It involves turning the other cheek and walking the second mile. It a place where the high and mighty, the well-connected and well-heeled sit at the back of the bus and the poor, dusty and sweaty migrant farm worker sits at the front and gets first-class service. It's a place where those who try to hoard life lose it and those who give life away end up finding it.

Let me be clear. Jesus is not denying, nor am I, that at the moment, other kingdoms are also present, competing with the aims and goals of the kingdom of God. They, too, are "at hand." This is precisely what is meant by saying that we live in the "already, not yet." We already are citizens and agents of the kingdom, and the kingdom is already present among us. But, it is also true that the kingdom has not yet been fully consummated. We still have the ability, the free will, to create our own fiefdoms, to reject Jesus' invitation to labor in and for God's kingdom and to work, instead, for the kingdoms of our own desire and making. There is also a kingdom of darkness that is real. Evil does exist. There is conflict between the kingdoms, and the suffering that results can be painful and harsh.

But, Jesus came to proclaim that these other kingdoms are not all there is, that in fact, there is a kingdom that is more real, more present, more powerful than

these self-made kingdoms will ever be. God's kingdom is a reality *right now* with the power to shape and change and transform human relationships, the planet on which we live, and our lives. God's kingdom is not relegated to the eternal hereafter. It's not limited to what happens within the church. It's not something so otherworldly "spiritual" that it has nothing to do with the challenges and struggles we face every day. It's here. It's now. And, we've been invited to be part of it. Our call is no different from Jesus' call to Simon and Andrew, James and John. Jesus invited them to leave everything behind and follow him because the kingdom of God was right in front of them. It's in front of us as well. And like the fishermen, we've got to decide whose kingdom we will choose—our own or God's. Which one will it be for you today?

Let us pray....