

March 9, 2008

Matthew 4:23-25 / Matthew 12:22-28 / Luke 4:38-44

Luke (#12) - Physical Healing, Salvation and the Kingdom of God

In seminary I took a course on the Life of Jesus, and the professor (Gordon Fee) came in one day and gave us a pop quiz that consisted of only one question (making it either pass or fail)! Here's the question he asked: *What was the central theme of Jesus preaching and teaching, and everything He did in the Gospels?* In fact, let me ask you that same question: *What was the central theme of Jesus preaching and teaching, and everything He did in the Gospels?*

Now, after nervously going over things in my mind, I wrote down my answer: The love of God. Others answered healing, discipleship, salvation, compassion, the fulfillment of Scripture, and so forth. But I was wrong. Yet I took great consolation from the fact that most of the others were wrong too!

In fact, most of us flunked the quiz that day, because the correct answer is — The Kingdom of God. (Anyone who wasn't in my ABH class last year get it right?)

You see, the very first thing Jesus preached was *"The Kingdom of God is near..."* (Mk 1:15) / *"Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near"* (Matthew 4:17). / Or as we read in Matthew 4:23, Jesus began His ministry by going *"throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom...."*

Throughout His ministry it remained His main theme, and the very last thing He spent all His last 40 days on earth preaching or teaching about (between His resurrection and ascension into heaven) was the kingdom of God. *"He appeared to them,"* Luke says in Acts 1:3, *"over a period of 40 days and spoke about the Kingdom of God."*

The very first petition in the Lord's Prayer is: *"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* And in this morning's text, when the people try to keep Jesus from leaving them and going elsewhere, the reason He gives them for not being able to stay is:

"I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."

THAT was the central theme of His message from beginning to end! In fact, He says, THAT is why God sent Him — to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God!

And LISTEN: By the term Kingdom of God He doesn't mean heaven! The good news of the kingdom that Jesus preached was NOT that one could go to heaven when they died! That is the message many Christians preach and teach, but it's NOT what Jesus came preaching and teaching.

In fact, that concept has very little to do with the message Jesus taught. Because for Jesus, the Kingdom of God wasn't a stationary ethereal place up there somewhere, it was a taste of the future blessings of eternity spilling into, or breaking in upon this age, in the here and now!

He started out His ministry saying: ***"The kingdom of God is near."*** Further into His ministry He said: ***"The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing"*** (that is, moving toward us or pressing in upon us!) And in Matthew 12:28 Jesus says: ***"If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God HAS COME UPON YOU."***

From that progression you can't help but get the sense that the "Kingdom" is like a moving, advancing, invisible power or force — like an invisible fog that moves in and overtakes people — a spiritual dimension that invades this fallen world and changes every person it overtakes!

"What is the Kingdom of God like?" asks Jesus in Luke 13:18. ***"What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?"*** asks Jesus in Luke 13:20. Well, He gives us numerous illustrations!

"The Kingdom of God," He says, ***"is like a man who sowed good seed in his field..."*** / ***The kingdom of God is like a MUSTARD SEED which a man planted in the ground..."*** / ***The kingdom of God is like YEAST which a woman mixes into a large batch of flour..."*** / ***It's like TREASURE hidden in a field... / a MERCHANT looking for fine pearls... / a NET let down into the lake that catches all kinds of fish... / a LANDOWNER who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in His vineyard... / or a KING who prepared a wedding banquet for his son..."*** And after giving them many such illustrations Jesus stops and asks them: ***"Have you understood all these things?"***

Why does He ask that? Because understanding the nature of the kingdom of God is of utmost importance. In fact, Jesus tells them: ***"When anyone hears the message about the KINGDOM, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart."***

Understanding what Jesus means by the term kingdom of God may NOT seem that important to many, but to Jesus, lack of understanding in regard to it spelled nothing but grave spiritual

danger! You can remain unclear or confused about numerous things in the Christian faith without great damage to your spiritual walk, but the kingdom of God is not one of them!

For without a solid grasp, or a basic understanding of what the "kingdom" is, we really fail to understand what Jesus was all about / risk being stunted in our faith / or worse yet, we risk having the seed of the Gospel planted in the heart "snatched away by the evil one."

That's why it amazes me that despite all the emphasis Jesus placed upon it, and the time He took to explain it over and over and over again, there are, to this day few concepts in the Bible that are more misunderstood in the church at large than the concept of the Kingdom of God. What Jesus means by the term / what exactly it refers to / how we should perceive or conceptualize it / and how we should live out our faith and our lives here on earth because of it.

"Seek first the kingdom of God," said Jesus, "and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." Which means that striving to lay hold of, and understand, and enter into the kingdom of God, should be one of, if not the first priority in a Christian's life (according to Jesus)! In fact, Jesus says in Mt. 24:14, ***"And the Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all men, and then the end will come."***

So, what is the "gospel" or the "good news of the kingdom" we are called to proclaim? If the term Kingdom of God doesn't mean heaven, and therefore the message we are to preach is not simply "You can go to heaven when you die," then what is it?

And LISTEN: If it took Jesus three years of teaching and preaching, and then an additional 40 day crash course on nothing but the Kingdom of God, and they still didn't fully grasp it, I don't expect you to get it in one sermon! It's taken years for me to wrap my mind around it, and I still struggle to fully understand all the implications!

But I can say this: Jesus would NOT have spent so much time teaching on it, from so many different angles, using so many different illustrations, if it weren't of the utmost importance that we at least begin to grasp what He means by it! Though don't despair if you don't get it today, because in Acts 19:8 we're told that Paul spent ***"three months in the synagogues (in Ephesus), arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God,"*** and still some didn't get it! Plus, it shows up another 40 more times in this Gospel alone!

So **FIRST** what is the Kingdom of God? And the most helpful answer comes from simply looking at what the term “kingdom” meant to the people who first heard it. The term “kingdom” (“basileia” in the Greek) was used in a way we don’t often use it, to mean the power and authority given to one who rules, or the exercise of kingly power. Literally “kingdom” means “Royal Dominion.” And that’s probably the best way to understand it: The kingdom of God means God’s sovereign rule or God’s sovereign reign — His royal dominion over the world, the flesh and the Devil, or as Paul puts it, the principalities and powers of this dark world.

When Jesus tells His disciples to pray: *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”* He’s asking them to pray that “God’s rule” or “God’s reign” or His sovereign dominion over the powers of darkness and sin and injustice and evil and prejudice and sickness and hatred, would come on earth, to the same extent, or to the same degree of perfect, uninhibited fullness with which it exists in heaven — where there is no sin, or evil, or darkness, or suffering, or sickness, or pain, or hatred.

In fact, maybe it would be best to visualize it this way: *At a coronation, a KING is invested with authority to rule, and that authority to rule or that bestowal of royal dominion to reign over his subjects was called “a kingdom.”*

And I know that’s NOT how we talk nowadays, but that is how they talked! That’s why Luke can say (Lk. 19:11-12) and I’ll quote from the KJV because it translates it more in keeping with the literal sense of the Greek:

“Because Jesus was near Jerusalem, and the people thought the kingdom of God was going appear at once, He said: A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and then return.”

Now obviously it didn’t mean he was going to receive or be given a country! It meant he was going to be “coronated,” or “invested with royal dominion” —the right and authority to rule. He was going to “have conferred upon him,” the authority to rule over the people who lived in a certain geographically bounded area.

That’s why the NIV, knowing that we don’t speak in those terms any more, tried to remove some of the confusion such a statement would generate by translating it: *“A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king, and then return.” Though it does literally say, “he went off to receive for himself a kingdom” — like Herod who would have had to travel to Rome, to be invested by Caesar, with the authority to rule in Israel on Caesar’s behalf, or “to receive a kingdom.”*

And THAT is important to know: Because if you don't understand that, you'll never understand why Jesus, on at least three separate occasions, takes of the royal dominion, power and authority He was invested with by God, and confers it upon His disciples!

Of the "Son of Man," or of Jesus, Daniel had written, ***"He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, and glory and sovereign power. Nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."***

So Jesus comes from the Father (from the Ancient of Days) having been given ***"authority, glory and sovereign power."*** He had been given royal, ***"everlasting dominion,"*** or we could say ***"a kingdom that could never be destroyed!"***

Yet as the one invested by God with such kingdom authority, He then turns, takes of that authority, and gives it to His disciples! As we read in Matt. 10:1: ***"He gave them (the disciples) authority to drive out evil spirits."*** Jesus took of His own kingly right to rule over sickness and evil spirits and gave it to his disciples!

And that's not the only place! We see the same thing again in Mark 3:15 where we are told, ***"He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."***

Three chapters later he does it again! ***"Calling the twelve to Him (again), He sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits."*** That is, He conferred upon them a degree of His own kingly authority over the forces of sin, evil and Satan.

And He does it once more at the Last Supper, where He says to the disciples: ***"You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred it upon me..."*** (Luke 22:29) — a "kingdom" being the right, and the power, and the authority to "rule" or to "reign over something!"

Reign over what? Evil spirits (as in last weeks passage), sickness and demons (as in this weeks passage) — people (Lk. 5:1-11), leprosy (5:12-16), paralysis and sin (5:17-26), death (Luke 7:11-17), the wind and the waves (8:22-25), the physical matter (9:10-17), and so forth!

In every Gospel Jesus begins by preaching the nearness of the kingdom, and then shows that it has actually come by exercising its authority over the powers of sin, and evil, sickness. Things they thought would only happen in the future, when the kingdom as they perceived it had come, were spilling over (in part) into the present.

And Listen: As Ambassadors of Christ, we not only represent Christ, but like any other ambassador we are also invested with the authority of our sending king! It isn't just the disciples and apostles who were invested with kingdom authority, we too have been given (by virtue of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit) a degree of Jesus kingly authority to rule over "all the power of the enemy." And in that sense Jesus "has conferred a kingdom" upon us as well — upon all who by virtue of being born again by the Spirit have entered His "kingdom" — His rule or reign over their lives.

When Jesus said, "***No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born again,***" He didn't simply mean you won't be able to get into heaven without being born again (though that is true). He meant you can't come under God's Royal Dominion, or His Lordship — His rule or reign over your life — unless you have been born again by the Spirit! Because an unregenerate soul cannot submit to Christ's Lordship or "rule" over their life!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Since the Kingdom of God is God's future rule or reign spilling over in part into the present, it should never be equated with a territory or a place! And that's hard for us, because it means we must erase from our minds the concept so commonly ingrained in them — that a "kingdom" refers to a country with geographical borders or boundaries. That's our great disadvantage — we associate the term "kingdom" with countries like the United Kingdom, or the Kingdom of Denmark, Cambodia, Morocco, or Norway. But that's not so with the kingdom of God (not even if one makes that place a spiritual place like heaven)!

It would be better to think monarchy. Think kingship. Think power to rule. Think of Jesus sovereignly governing the affairs in heaven and earth.

Think like Mary would have when the angel said of the baby to be born, "***He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will have no end***" (obviously meaning the "exercise of His rule or reign over His people and this world" will have no end).

Now it is true that Matthew's hesitation to use the divine name (like many Jews in His day), which led him to change the term "Kingdom of God" into "Kingdom of heaven" in the Gospel he wrote, has sometimes confused people in this regard, inevitably making them equate the "kingdom" with the place we call "heaven." Yet both expressions mean the exact same thing!

They're synonymous, as we know by merely comparing statements in Matthew's Gospel with the same statements in Mark's or Luke's Gospel, where the only difference is that Matthew inserts the word heaven in the phrase, where the other two leave the term "God" in the phrase.

Then **THIRD**, we come to one of the hardest things to grasp about the kingdom of God — the fact that it is partially present but not fully present. It is here, but not fully here. It is already, but not yet, as theologians put it.

We know its already here, not only because Jesus said, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God HAS come upon you,” but also because we’ve experienced the power of the Spirit, seen lives transformed through the gospel, experienced the forgiveness of our sins, seen bondages broken, sicknesses healed, demons cast out, and so forth.

And those are all undeniable evidences that the authority or kingly rule of Jesus over those things is being exercised, because if the kingdom of God were not present to any extent or degree in the present, then those things would not be happening!

But we also know from the teachings of Jesus is that the Kingdom is not fully present. For if it were, we would not need to be transformed, or forgiven, or healed! There would be no sin, or pain, or suffering, or tears, or demons to cast out! It would be paradise, utopia or the “perfection” which Paul says is coming in I Cor. 13:10.

You see, the Jews were under the impression that the Kingdom of God would come in an instant! God would rend the heavens and come down with and apocalyptic display fire, smoke, lightning, earthquakes, destruction, and calamity — and it would all be done in an instant! It would NOT be present one day, and WOULD be fully present the next day! Or as Jesus put it, ***“They thought the Kingdom of God would appear at once.”***

But Jesus had repeatedly taught otherwise! He had clearly taught them on numerous occasions that the kingdom of God would spill into the present slowly, “spreading” or “growing” slowly. It wasn’t a matter of not being here one day and then being here fully the next!

“The Kingdom of God,” Jesus said (trying to replace their apocalyptic understanding of the kingdom with His eschatological understanding of the kingdom) ***“is like a MUSTARD SEED, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”***

That's what He wants them to know — the kingdom doesn't come in cataclysmic style all at once, but like a plant that grows so slowly its growth is almost imperceptible to the human eye.

Or He said, *"The kingdom of God is like YEAST that a women took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."* And what does yeast do? It mixes in with the dough and then it slowly causes the dough to rise or seemingly "grow" right before one's eyes!

And I'm not telling you anything new!

If you've grown up in the church, you've sung hymns about the growth or spread of the kingdom since childhood! *"Jesus shall reign wher e're the sun, does its successive journey's run; His kingdom SPREAD from shore to shore, Till moons shall wax and wane no more."*

It's true. That is what Jesus had taught! The kingdom of God grows, expands or spreads like a mustard seed planted in the ground, or that yeast put into the dough.

Or take another hymn which speaks of the gradually growing or spreading influences of the kingdom of God, where the refrain goes like this: *"For the darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noonday bright, And Christ's great kingdom shall come to earth, the kingdom of love and light."*

Through the "story we tell to the nations" (the Gospel story about Jesus), says the song, the kingdom of love and light spreads over the whole earth, like the rays of the rising sun that pierce the darkness, grow into dawn and then noon-day bright, until the "Kingdom" shall come on earth in all its beauty and radiance and perfection and fullness!

Then LAST, we come full circle to our text for this morning where we see Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law from a high fever by "rebuking it." That is, by commanding it to leave her – exercising His royal dominion over that sickness.

But it wasn't just that fever. People, hearing He had this power and authority to heal, brought to Him *"all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying hands on each one, He healed them."* *"Moreover,"* Luke goes on to say, *"demons came out of many people, shouting 'You are the Son of God. But He rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew He was the Christ.'"*

Did you note what Luke said? He rebuked them, and ***“would not allow them to speak.”*** What’s He doing? He’s simply exercising the Kingly authority God had given to Him as the “Son of Man!” He’s showing them He has dominion and rules over them! By the Spirit of God, He casts out evil spirits, proving the Kingdom of God has come upon them!

That’s what all the healings in the Gospels are! Evidence — proof positive that the many of the blessings of the future Kingdom have begun to spill over into the present.

The great reversal of the effects of the Fall has begun / the powers of darkness are being beaten back and are submitting — as they must — and the disciples of Jesus have the privilege of being in part of God’s great move to redeem all creation!

So, what are we to do?

- 1.) Believe the Good News about the Kingdom. The kingdom of God has broken in upon this present world to disarm and push back the powers of darkness, and Jesus simply invites us to believe that Good News and join with Him in that task!
- 2.) Preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God. We are to PREACH the “gospel of the kingdom in the whole world, as a testimony to all people, and then the end will come.”
- 3.) Pray that the Kingdom comes. Pray earnestly that it comes in all its completeness, which is to simultaneously pray for the return of Jesus when that will occur – ***“Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.”***
- 4.) Obey the King! That’s how one evidences the fact that they have been born of the Spirit and entered the kingdom — they obey the KING! They submit to His Lordship or His royal dominion over their lives! They come under His “rule” or “reign” by doing what He says!
- 5.) Go forth in confidence, assurance of faith, and full of hope knowing that you have not been left to confront the powers of darkness alone. In the battle against sin, and evil, and oppression, and prejudice, and injustice you are upheld and invested with the power and authority of your KING whose kingdom is ***“forcefully advancing!”***

When the disciples of John asked Jesus if He was the Christ (ie: the Son of Man invested with God’s glory, power, authority, dominion or “kingdom”), or if they should look for someone else, Jesus answer was simply this: ***“Go back and tell John what you see and hear: The blind see, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”*** Case closed! That’s it! That was His answer!

The KING had come, because only the KING can exercise such kingdom authority over sin, and sickness and evil — the king and those upon whom he chooses to confer the kingdom!

We are (to use Paul's words in Colossians 4:11) "*fellow workers for the kingdom of God.*" We have a job to do — proclaim the kingdom which one "receives" or "enters" by believing in the KING!

For wherever the KING is, there also you will find power over sin, and evil, and sickness, and injustice — a taste of the blessings we will enjoy to the full in the age to come, yet now spilling over into this present world!