

Life in the Kingdom: The Subtle Kingdom, Already and Not Yet

Luke 17:20-37

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~ The arrival of the kingdom and the nature of its coming are different than everyone assumes, but what God expects from His children is simple ~

There is some debate within theological schools as to whether the Kingdom of God is a present reality or a future reality. And this debate comes from the fact that in the Bible the answer is clearly “yes.”

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Today our text is found in Luke 17, but before we get into that I want to establish a bit of the context we’ve developed over the last several weeks. If you are visiting with us today we are in the middle of a series titled “Life in the Kingdom” where we are looking at what Jesus meant when He spoke about the gospel.

Often in circles like our own the gospel gets presented as a four step process for getting “fire insurance” and a ticket to heaven for when we die. And then it gets treated like entry level information that is boring for anyone who has been around the church for any period of time at all.

But for Jesus the reality couldn’t be further away. When He preached the gospel it was and is that God’s kingdom is breaking into our world, and if we align ourselves with His will then we will live the entirety of our lives in the power of that kingdom right now. This isn’t to say heaven after death isn’t a reality – it is – but for Jesus it is the reality those who have spent their lives living in His kingdom will enjoy.

So when Jesus walked into Galilee He declared:

The time has come.... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! (Mark 1:15)

Friends, Jesus’ good news is worth repenting for. And that’s because a new era has arrived where the way humanity relates to God is remarkably different than it ever was before. And only those who change their lives to align with this new reality will get to enjoy it.

You see up to the point Jesus began His ministry, God’s people met with Him by bringing their sacrifices to the priest at the temple. Then the priest would approach the alter, offer that sacrifice and intercede to God on their behalf. Only the Old Testament heroes got to relate to God personally – the king or the prophet or the judge. Everyone else had to stand back and watch.

And then in Jesus God came to earth and the veil separating the divine from the common was torn in two never to be repaired. God’s presence was available to everyone who gave their life to Jesus. This was and is Jesus’ gospel.

But here we need to address some serious misgivings. After all, everyone is aware that there is a bit of difference between the way even the most spiritual of us interact with God and the way guys like the prophet Elijah did. We just don't often hear of king opposing, rain stopping, fire channeling, dead kid raising, Jordan crossing people in our day and age. If you know some I want to meet them. But God rarely acts like this today.

I mean when I'm up at the university talking with people about faith and the kingdom, and I'm hit with comments about how everyone's truth is equal and how all roads lead to enlightenment it would be handy to be able to call down fire in order to back up my point (though I can see insurance premiums going up in a world like that).

But God's kingdom is much subtler than that. It isn't at our disposal like a gene in a bottle. And as a result it can be in full bloom in a certain place and completely missed by almost everyone. And this isn't only the case today, the fact is it was just as hidden in the first century. And that's in spite of Jesus walking around opening the eyes of the blind, restoring shriveled limbs, walking on water and feeding thousands with a bit of bread and fish – miracles Elijah would have been proud of.

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So haven't you every wondered how even with God tearing open heaven like never before the people who witnessed Jesus' miracles weren't constantly falling at His feet in worship? Haven't you wondered why they couldn't get what He was doing? It turns out this wasn't an accident, this was the design.

You see it would have been easy for Jesus to "prove" that He was the king and that His kingdom was breaking into the world. This is what all the first century Jews were hoping for. They wanted the messiah to come blazing in and establish a kingdom that would overthrow the Romans. And so the only thing Jesus would have had to do to get every Jew in Palestine behind Him would have been to give a couple signs when the Pharisees asked. But Jesus wouldn't play their game. So Matthew says:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (Matthew 12:38-39)

He's the guy who spent 3 days in the belly of a whale before being returned to life on land. And Jesus said "I'm going to die and come back to life, this is all you get. And He took this hard line with them because He didn't want their endorsement.

You see the Pharisees were the religious watch dogs in the first century. Their job was to make sure Israel followed God's law. And they were the ones who were keeping a watch out for the messiah. If they would have endorsed Jesus the people who have flocked to Him, but it would have been on their terms. And the problem with the Pharisees was that for them keeping God's law was more important than meeting God, and for Jesus these two things were fundamentally reversed. Jesus' main message was that God would go to any length to restore relationship with us. And so the Pharisees totally missed out on Jesus and His kingdom.

But it wasn't just the Pharisees who were in the dark about Jesus' kingdom. Even Jesus' closest disciples were constantly getting Him wrong. The classic example is when Jesus asked them who they thought He was and:

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"....

[Peter nails it but then immediately we read...]

From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to You!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan!"
(Matthew 16:16-23)

Peter is Jesus' number one guy, and he gets his Master so wrong that Jesus calls him Satan – that's a bad day, even for Peter!

And this happened because God's kingdom was and is subtle. While it is powerfully transformative and life altering, it is constantly escaping notice and avoiding detection. And we run up against this in today's text. So if you have your Bibles please open them up to Luke 17 starting in verse 20. If you don't have one on your phone, or didn't bring one, you can use one of the pew Bibles. You will find Luke 17 on page 742.

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In this text Jesus addresses two misconceptions about the arrival of the kingdom and what it means to live in its power. And then He makes it clear what He wants from us. So my thesis today is that **The arrival of the kingdom and the nature of its coming are different than everyone assumes, but what God expects from His children is simple.**

Let's pick the story up in Luke 17 verse 20.

[Read Luke 17:20-21]

Now the story starts out with the Pharisees asking Jesus a question. And this might seem innocent enough, but the Pharisees were always asking Jesus questions and most of them were traps. So in Matthew 22 Jesus was telling parables about the kingdom when the Pharisees interrupted Him and we read:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Him in His words.... They said... "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show Me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought Him a denarius, and He asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then He said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left Him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22)

So the Pharisees made it their job to catch Jesus in His words, and that's what they are up to here as well.

They ask "when is the kingdom of God going to come?" And by saying this they are attempting to get Jesus to answer either, "it's coming soon", or "it is already here." And if He would give either of these answers then they would have Him.

If He said the kingdom was coming soon He would be contradicting His claim that since He was here the kingdom was already present. And if He said it was already here then the people would reject Him because they were expecting a military messiah who was going to overthrow the Romans and Jesus wasn't anything like that. This was the trap.

But trapping Jesus was like trapping God. And so in a single step Jesus avoids the trap and uses the question to teach us something about the kingdom. **The arrival of the kingdom is different than everyone assumes...** it can't be observed or nailed down.

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So the word "observed" in verse 20 is a scientific word used to describe the careful watching of the stars that astronomers would do, or the watchful eye of the physician as she attempts to identify the illness in her patient. But Jesus

says His kingdom won't be observed scientifically. That doesn't mean it is in contradiction to science, just that to experience it you have to live it, not study it.

And so the expertise of the Pharisees, who knew everything about the Law of God, was absolutely useless when it came to seeing the kingdom. And this is why Henry McCord from Madam Secretary can be both a brilliant biblical studies professor and a faithless man.

You see people don't stumble into God's kingdom when all their logical arguments against the divinity of Christ are answered and someone gives them a good reason for why bad things happen to God's good people. They get enraptured by it when Jesus shows up and rocks their world.

And this is why when it comes to giving a defense for your faith¹ it is much more effective to be equipped with some actual faith than with a bunch of arguments about how you aren't insane for believing that God, not random chance, is the source of human life on earth. It's only when we are living in God's kingdom that we can share that encounter with those we meet. But it's faith so doing think that sharing it has to be an airtight argument for the existence of God – faith is subtler than that.

So last week someone called me up on the phone and said they wanted to talk about faith and some life struggles. And I said "great, give me 15 minutes." And then I started praying "Jesus what do you want me to share with this person?" because I had no idea.

And while I was praying I felt compelled to open up Right Now Media, and the first slide that appeared in the top banner ad was John Ortberg's series titled "All the places you will go." Now I haven't watched this series, but someone had mentioned it a few days earlier, and the bold letters "Session One: The Open Door" caught my attention. This series is about finding God's will for your life. So I thought "maybe this will be good" and I left it open on my desktop.

A few minutes later the guy walked into my office and we got chatting. And he started telling me about feeling lost and not knowing what he was supposed to do in life – coincidence, or is this God subtly at work? And then he said, "hey I came across something in a book the other day that got me thinking" and he proceeded to show me a picture of a page with several underlined and highlighted spots on it. And in the very center of the page, underlined, highlighted and circled, were the words "open door."

Now I have no idea what else was on that page because my eyes just got stuck there. And I started getting excited. I looked at him and said, "I need to tell you something. Five minutes before you walked in I was praying that God would give me something to share with you. And while I was doing that I opened up a video

¹ 1 Peter 3:15

that I am confident is God's word to you." And then we proceeded to watch the trailer to the series and I sent him home with a link to Right Now Media and the invitation to talk through the videos with me as he gets through them.

Now I don't know what the end result is going to be for this guy because faith is subtle. I hadn't presented Him any absolute proof for God, but in that moment I got to watch his eyes light up at the prospect that Jesus had something to say directly to him. And I wouldn't give that up for anything.

You see God is active, His kingdom is everywhere and it's breaking into our world with or without us. So the question is not "is God on the move in my neighbourhood?" That's a Pharisee question, and it's never going to get answered. The correct question is "Am I seeing where God is on the move, and how can I partner with what He's up to?"

Friends Jesus was standing right there in the midst of the Pharisees transforming lives, doing miracles and teaching in a way no one had heard before and somehow they missed everything. And similarly God's kingdom is in full swing right here in Prince George – it's in our midst – but its movement can go completely undetected.

So brothers and sisters, don't fall into the trap of the Pharisees. Don't look for God's kingdom to show up with flashy signs and evidence that you can throw in the face of every doubter. God isn't interested in proving the existence of His kingdom. If He was Jesus would have done that! Instead He's interested in developing the eyes of our faith so we can see it in our midst. So stop trying to learn about the kingdom, and ask God to let you partner with Him in its expanse.

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Let's move on to the second part of our thesis: **The arrival of the kingdom and the nature of its coming are different than everyone assumes...** Look at verse 22

[Read Luke 17:22-25]

Now here Jesus puts the Pharisees aside and addresses His disciples. These were men and women like ourselves who loved Him. And He says there is a risk when it comes to the arrival of the kingdom for us as well. But it is a very different risk than the Pharisees faced.

Jesus says the main danger His disciples are going to have is connected to the fact that a time was coming after He would suffer and be rejected, when He wouldn't be physically present anymore and they are going to long for Him. Jesus was going to return to heaven. This is the time we are living in. And He says during this time we are going to long to see Him, and this is good, but it makes us vulnerable to deception. Jesus says we are going to be tempted to

follow those who say God's kingdom is over here, or it's over there when in fact the arrival of God's kingdom won't be like that at all.

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Now I wonder if you've noticed that there is another shift that has taken place here. The arrival of the kingdom Jesus is speaking about now is the future End of Days kingdom; this is the not yet aspect of the kingdom when Jesus will return in full force and His will will be done on earth just like it's done in heaven.

So Jesus says yes there is an aspect of the kingdom that isn't here now and it's going to involve judgment. In a couple verses He's going to mention the Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah which are both pictures of God's Day of Judgment. But Judgment Day isn't bad news for the elect, it's when Jesus is going to be physically united with His church. This is the day we all long for. But Jesus says for those who are hungry for His return there is going to be a temptation to make a big deal about finding out when and how this is going to happen.

And we've talked about this before; there have been hundreds of short lived fads predicting the immanent return of Christ dating back to the first century. And most of these fads made money. So a few years back the Mayan Calendar came to an end, and in the days leading up to that many Christians were excited that Jesus was coming back. More recently there were the blood moons of 2014 and 2015 that coincided with Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, and this had lots of Christians getting excited. People who love Jesus and are longing for His return were deceived by these fads.

And here Jesus says pay no attention to groups like this. You aren't going to miss the end of the world. My return will be like lightning. I'm going to light the place up and nobody is going to miss it. So don't stop believing Jesus is going to return, just stop worrying about when and how. Jesus wants us to put our energy elsewhere.

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And it's with this in mind that we get to the final part of our thesis and Jesus' words for how we are to live. So **The arrival of the kingdom and the nature of its coming are different than everyone assumes, but what God expects from His children is simple.** Look at verse 26

[Read Luke 17:26-30]

It's a scary text about judgment and vultures, but Jesus gives us six pictures here. And each picture is tied together around a couple themes. The first theme is that God's kingdom will come in fullness without warning.

So the two main pictures are of Noah and Lot, well known stories with a similar meaning. So both Noah and Lot lived among people who were exceedingly wicked. And then suddenly God's judgment fell seemingly without warning and

swept the wicked away. Now of course there was warning. It took Noah 120 years to build his boat, and Peter tells us he spent that time preaching but no one paid attention.²

And Lot lived a righteous life in Sodom and yet his neighbours just felt judged by His conduct, they couldn't see the value of his ways.³ And so judgment fell in both situations and only the righteous were left behind, everyone else was swept away.

So the first theme is that when the day of Jesus' return arrives it is going to take place seemingly without warning. While we will be able to look back and see the signs we aren't going to be able to predict it.

The second theme is that in the meantime, while we wait for the fullness of Jesus' kingdom to arrive, the lives of the elect will be outwardly undecipherable from those who are about to be swept away.

So notice how everyone in this section is eating, and drinking and getting married. Some are buying and selling, planting and building, some are sleeping and others are working. Everyone is just doing daily life when all of a sudden one is taken and the other is left.

And in order to make sense of this we need to focus in on the central thought in this section which is found in verses 32 and 33 – “Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will keep it.”

The story of Lot and his wife is a story about two people seemingly living in the kingdom, but then Lot's wife gave evidence that Sodom was in her heart. She looked back as they were escaping because she loved her things in Sodom, and she wished she could keep them. And she was then caught up in the destruction and only Lot was left.

Jesus' point is that when we try to obtain His kingdom while keeping our own we lose everything, it is only when we lose our lives for the increase of the kingdom, when everything we have, and everything that is important to us is about increasing Jesus' glory, that mysteriously is when we actually live. Or like last week we find that God will not be out given, so nothing we give up for Him will ever turn out to have been a sacrifice.

So the second theme is that to actually be in the kingdom when it arrives we need to be living with our hearts set on the kingdom now. And this is simply what Jesus wants from us now. He wants us to be prepared for the kingdom's arrival.

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² 2 Peter 2:5

³ Genesis 19:9; 2 Peter 2:7-8

Next week and the week after we are going to spend time in Matthew 25 and two of the three parables Jesus tells there about the Kingdom, but the one we don't have time for is about the Ten Virgins who are all waiting for the bridegroom to arrive with their lamps. All of them are waiting but five are wise while five are foolish. And the foolish one's lamps go out because they didn't prepare enough oil. And so in spite of being invited to the party they get left outside.

Jesus' simple point then is that the details of when and how His kingdom will come might be interesting to speculate about but they are of little importance when compared with being prepared. And being prepared is all about living today in a way that shows you are part of Jesus' kingdom.

So the call is that as we go through all the very same life activities our neighbours and the rest of Prince George go through: eating, and drinking, getting married, buying and selling, planting and building. Everything we give ourselves to must simply be done with the goal of bringing glory to God.

Paul says:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
(1 Corinthians 10:31)

So brothers and sisters following Jesus isn't easy, but it's simple. He wants everything we've got. He wants all our time and talent and resources. He wants us to hold nothing back from His mission. And He promises that those who live like this, who give up seeking their own kingdom – in essence who lose everything people here consider life– will ironically find themselves having preserved everything. This is what it means to give our lives to God. This is what it means to be saved and in the kingdom.

So brothers and sisters God's kingdom is in our midst, but it is not here in fullness yet, so don't be deceived. Don't be deceived like the Pharisees who knew everything about the Bible and God but hadn't given their lives to Him and so found out that everything they had done for God didn't gain them anything in His kingdom at all. This is probably the greatest waste of life possible.

But also don't be deceived by those who spend their lives reading the seasons and calculating the time of Christ's return. The only thing that Jesus makes perfectly clear about His final arrival is that no one will miss it.

So instead, in contrast to either of these pitfalls, give yourself to living prepared. Decide that everything you have, and everything you are will be dedicated to increasing and living in God's kingdom. And do this with the promise in sight that those who live in the kingdom now will enjoy its splendor forever when we die, or when the King returns.