

Sermon – June 9, 2019
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CROWN OF LIFE

Imagine this ... what if the good news of the gospel is even better than you thought it was? I think we are going to find out today that the good news of the gospel is far greater and more expansive than we previously thought. This week we begin a four-week journey of discovering the “Gospel of the Kingdom of God.”

You might be thinking, “I know the gospel. I’ve heard the gospel. I’ve accepted the gospel.” That’s great, and I am so glad you have. But today, we are about to discuss that this good news reaches more deeply into our lives than we probably ever imagined.

This good news gives us a vision of how to live our lives day by day. This gospel of the Kingdom of God not only gives us the assurance of salvation through Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life, it is also God’s radical plan to change our lives here and now; to help us grow into mature followers of Jesus Christ.

Over the years so many of us have only understood a small part of the gospel ... the promise of salvation through our faith in Jesus.

To be sure, this promise is the most important part of the gospel. But God has done far more than that, and that’s the purpose of this four-week series.

In this first week I would like to share with you how Jesus understood - and preached - the gospel. We will examine Biblical texts from all four Gospels to discover the depth of the good news He proclaimed. Next week we will discover how the gospel presents the very real possibility of life-change for us right here, right now ... before we die and go to heaven.

In week three we will look at how the gospel of the kingdom of God was originally revealed in the Old Testament. And finally, in week four, we will learn that the gospel presents a grand picture of a wonderful future.

By the end of these four weeks my prayer will be that we can view the gospel in a more practical and life-changing way than we have ever imagined.

So, let’s get started.

The first four books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell us about the life and teachings of Jesus. Each gospel also describes his death and resurrection. We call these books “gospels” because they contain the good news about Jesus. That’s what the word...

“gospel” means ... good news.

But what, exactly, is this good news? To begin with, it is communicated in this phrase, “the Kingdom of God is near.” John the Baptist is probably best-known for having preached this message (Matthew 3:1-2).

But did you remember that Jesus began his ministry with this message as well? ...

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” Mark 1:14-15

In fact, here is one-way Jesus characterized His mission...

“But he said, ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.’” Luke 4:43

So here we see, early in each of these gospels, that the good news is the proclamation that God’s kingdom has come near to people.

Other translations use phrases like “the kingdom of God is at hand.” Or, “the kingdom of God is breaking in.” Jesus was announcing that the Father’s reign was coming close ... coming near.

So, let’s try to understand what this kingdom is all about. We take the Lordship of Christ seriously when we confess God’s will is done ... God’s way ... among God’s people.

Early in his ministry Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7.

The sermon is a message directed to His disciples. It’s interesting to note that Jesus mentions the Kingdom of God eight times in this one sermon.

To get a better understanding of the concept, I want us to look at two of the central examples where Jesus mentions the Kingdom of God in this sermon.

First, as part of the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus Himself taught us, He said to pray this...

“...Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

Here Jesus teaches us, his disciples, to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom, and then He explained what God’s Kingdom would LOOK LIKE with these words ...

“God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven.” That’s what God’s Kingdom would LOOK LIKE. This is so important.

Jesus is telling us that God’s kingdom is not a physical kingdom. It does not have political boundaries or borders. It is not found in one single location, but it is found wherever God’s will is done on earth, just as it is in heaven.

Let’s imagine how God’s will is done in heaven. Do you think that in heaven people lie to each another, or try to hurt one another, or argue, or fret about their future?

There will be none of that because God rules in heaven. There will be peace and harmony and no fear or anxiety about who is in control because God is. There is no pride or ego.

Part of the good news from Jesus is that it is possible to live here, on earth, in peace and harmony, free from fear or anxiety, as well.

In fact, Jesus is instructing his disciples to pray that this will become a reality. The reality of God's kingdom should first be demonstrated among God's people. That's why Jesus instructs us - his disciples - to pray for this very thing in our lives.

This is very important. I have heard it suggested in the past that some think that this part of the Lord's Prayer is like praying for world peace and may not be very helpful. But the rest of the Lord's Prayer is about our everyday lives ... "give us our daily bread; forgive us our sins; lead us not into temptation; deliver us from evil."

But here Jesus is instructing his followers to pray that God's kingdom would become an everyday reality in their everyday lives.

Let's look at a second mention of God's kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount (remember, the Lord mentioned God's kingdom eight times in this sermon, but we are only examining the two times mentioned that come right in the middle of the sermon).

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us we should not worry about what we will eat or drink, nor should we worry about what we will wear, but...

"...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

By looking at these two verses together we can see that Jesus is teaching us to pray fervently for God's kingdom to become a reality in our lives, and that God's kingdom should be our highest priority.

Jesus talks about God's kingdom far more than he talks about what we call "salvation."

In the four Gospels combined, Jesus uses the words "salvation" or "saved" 23 times, which would certainly indicate that Jesus considers your salvation of utmost importance.

Yet, Jesus mentions God's kingdom nearly 120 times in the four Gospels. This does not mean that being born-again is unimportant, I am not even suggesting that. Of course, it is important since it's our entryway into God's kingdom

Remember ... His kingdom has no borders and no boundaries. It's not political or social - it's about God's will being done ... God's way ... among God's people.

And the result is always righteousness, peace, and joy. His kingdom brings the peace and order of Heaven into our everyday lives. Who doesn't want peace in your life?

But the way to peace is new birth in Jesus Christ. It's the starting point.

The reason why the good news is better than you first thought it was, is that the new birth opens the possibility of living in God's Kingdom here and now, as well as after we die and go to heaven.

Many of us think that the gospel is only about going to heaven when you die. And we ARE promised eternal life in Jesus Christ, but the gospel is also about learning a new way to live ... God's way.

And the result of living in God's kingdom is that a little bit of ...

heaven begins to break into our everyday lives here and now.

That's why Jesus began his ministry by saying the Kingdom of God has come near."

He wasn't trying to say God's kingdom was going to take over the earth once and for all. He was trying to say that God's kingdom finds its home in the hearts of God's people, if we will only receive him through the new birth, and learn to live as subjects of Jesus ... the King.

That's why being born from above is so important. It's the starting point. We cannot live fully as subjects of King Jesus apart from his grace and mercy, apart from his Spirit living in us.

Still, so many people have limited the gospel to mean only going to heaven after we die, and the gospel is so much bigger.

The gospel presents the good news that we can live godly lives here and now. Not that we will be perfect, but that heaven is being worked into us little by little, day by day, as we follow Jesus.

Living Kingdom lives requires that we be born again. No matter how hard we try by our own efforts, we will never reflect the goodness and the mercy of Heaven. But the same grace that saves us can also transform us, and this is good news.

Do you think that our heavenly father will force us to wait until we have died in order to receive the benefits of becoming God's children? Not at all.

First his grace gives us the assurance of life in heaven; then that same grace works the life of Heaven into us day by day.

Now that we've discovered how important the kingdom of God is to the good news Jesus preached, let's take a few moments to clear up two misconceptions about the kingdom of God.

First, we should not confuse the kingdom of God with heaven. God's kingdom includes heaven, of course, but God's kingdom is so much larger.

Remember ... the Kingdom of God is anywhere that God's will is being done God's way on earth as it is in heaven. It's where the king has dominion. That's how we get the word, "kingdom:" it's a combination of the two words, king and dominion.

So, it's true that God rules in Heaven, but he also rules in the hearts of his people.

This is an important distinction, because if we think "the kingdom of God" means only "Heaven," we will think that everything Jesus said about the gospel of the kingdom is for some future time after we die.

But Jesus said that God's kingdom is breaking into the here and now, or at least beginning to, so the kingdom is more than Heaven.

Second, the kingdom of God is not the same thing as the church. It's true that the Bible describes the church as "the bride of Christ." And the church has a very special place in God's heart.

But sadly, there are many churches where God's will is not done God's way. That is simply a recognition that churches are filled with imperfect people, and the church is where imperfect people worship God together. But God's kingdom is so much bigger than the church, so the kingdom is more than the church.

Perhaps the best way to understand the kingdom of God is the passage given to us by the Apostle Paul in Romans...

“For the kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit...”

Wherever people relate rightly to God, wherever there is the peace of God, and wherever there is the joy of our salvation, that's where the kingdom of God is.

This means we can discover the kingdom of God in some surprising places. For example, you can discover the presence of the Kingdom of God in the hearts of his people in offices, workplaces, schools, and yes, even on Sunday mornings in churches like ours, you can discover groups of imperfect people who come together to try to learn to do...

God's will ... God's way ... for God's sake.

Perhaps one great Old Testament example would be Daniel, who lived in exile, in Babylon, far away from Jerusalem. And yet, Daniel's life was characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy.

Daniel's life and ministry was an outpost of God's kingdom. If Daniel lived in harmony with God in a strange and foreign land, we can do the same wherever God places us.

This Kingdom of God is what we will continue to study for the next three weeks. His kingdom is not owned by any one culture, or any one church denomination. God's kingdom exists wherever Jesus has dominion in the hearts and minds and lives of his followers.

It means that the Kingdom of God can be present and operate in any environment. The first step, of course, is to be born from above ... to receive God's free gift of forgiveness in Christ Jesus, and to surrender your heart to him ... that's where it all begins. Jesus even said we cannot see or enter God's Kingdom without being born from above, without being a true believer.

My prayer for each of you today is that you are better able to understand your presence in God's Kingdom, and how that presence can work to transform your life here and now. Amen

CLOSING PRAYER:

Gracious Father, we totally surrender ourselves to You as we learn to do Your will, Your way, for Your sake. And we thank You most for the gift of forgiveness through our faith in the death and resurrection of Your Son Jesus Christ. And it is in His Holy name we pray. Amen