

JESUS' KINGDOM: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
Matthew 6:25-27, 33-34

Living God's Word—A Walk Through The Bible
September 14, 2014
Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

This morning we continue where we left off finishing the Old Testament in August; we will now make our way through the New Testament in messages and Bible readings. I hope you will join us in this study of the life of Jesus and of the early church.

This morning of course we are focusing in on the first New Testament book which is the Gospel of Matthew. As you may know there are four gospels as they are called; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospels are known as the accounts of the life of Jesus. They include historical accounts of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection as well as eyewitness accounts of Jesus' sermons, parables, miracles and conversations together.

What we know about Matthew is that he was the disciple of Jesus who had been a deceitful tax collector before Jesus called him to leave his sinful life and follow him. Therefore Matthew, whose life was radically changed by Jesus' love, wrote the words in his gospel for mostly those people who were of Jewish heritage and background.

Matthew wanted the Jewish people to especially know that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah; that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and prophets of the Old Testament. In doing this, Matthew includes more quotes and references to Old Testament passages than the other gospel writers; not only that but he shows how Jesus fulfills them all.

In Chapter 4:17 Matthew lifts up a major theme in his writings, *"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"* The coming of God's kingdom, of his reign, is a major message for Matthew. The truth is that in the coming of Jesus God's kingdom has come and broken into this world; in his eternal throne in heaven God's perfect kingdom reigns forever.

Yet the question is: what about the Jewish authorities and the Roman Government? What about the kings, kingdoms, rulers and legal structures of this world? According to Matthew God's kingdom and reign in this world is seen as Jesus comes into people's hearts and lives through faith; as people crown Jesus as Lord of their lives.

God's kingdom comes in this world as believers in Jesus unite together in his church; as Christ's church lives for his mission and purposes. In the evils and craziness of this world, with political divisions and imperfect government leaders, Matthew's message is to bring a foretaste of God's perfect and eternal kingdom on this earth in, and through, Christ's church.

It is to go, as Jesus says in Matthew 28, and *"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always to the end of time."*

Matthew was so passionate about this mission of Jesus because he believed it was the only hope for this mixed up world. He knew that it is only as we live by God's values that true love and peace will be part of our lives.

He knew that only in Jesus do we have the light of hope that shines in the darkness and despair of this world. He knew that only in Jesus; only in God's kingdom do we find forgiveness for our sins and the promise of life everlasting.

This does not mean, however, that Christians and the church on earth are in anyway perfect or immune from sins and failures. God's perfect and eternal kingdom is only found with him in heaven. Yet as Christians and as Christ's church; as we grow deeper in God's Word and faith, then the light of God's kingdom can also shine on this earth.

God's kingdom shines in this world as believers in Jesus, as you and I his church, live the promises and truths of God's kingdom. When we share our witness of what God has done in us, we let the light of God's kingdom shine brightly. When we act with integrity, with mercy, with tenderness and compassion, we let the light of God's kingdom shine brightly.

Yet the problem in us and in the church is whether we want God to truly be Lord over us all; do we want him to be Lord over our mission and work as a church? It is so easy for us to want to be the Lord rather than God. It is so easy for us as people to want to decide the priorities and truths that we like, rather than following God's Word of truth.

The truth is that there are people and churches all around who call themselves Christian yet are just existing. It is so easy to make Christianity like a country club where people like the social part of being together; where people like to simply go through some religious rituals and practices, yet the radical power of God's kingdom is not being lived out or felt.

This is why I believe Matthew includes the words of Jesus in Chapter 6:33, "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" It is why Matthew includes Jesus' words/parable that the kingdom is like seeds that fall on different soils; like a mustard seed that can grow very large. Without God being number one in us we just exist; yet when he is Lord in us miracles, and new life, can burst forth and grow.

Rick Warren says that even in his church at Saddleback, when people have been members for around five years or more, they often lose their passion for God's kingdom; they so easily settle into a more comfortable faith of weekly worship; perhaps some other activities. Yet there is no noticeable reproduction of their faith in the lives of others.

Rick Warren however says that what is bringing about the most mission and growth in their congregation are the many new Christians who are coming to faith each year. He says as people come to a personal faith and assurance in Jesus Christ, they are then on fire to pass this life-changing message on to others. In fact, they just can't keep it to themselves.

It's like when Jesus visited with the woman at the well and offered her life-giving water where she would never be thirsty again. This woman went to all her neighbors and friends; she told them they needed to come and see this Jesus who had given her forgiveness and new life. She was an evangelist who wanted to build the kingdom of God in the lives of others.

That's the passion and vision that Matthew had for the world. Jesus had forgiven him and had changed his life. It was as Jesus was Lord of his heart and life he then wanted everyone to live by faith in Jesus. Matthew knew that with Jesus as Lord of people's lives, and of his church, that God's kingdom and reign could totally change this world; could totally change all of history.

A few years ago I read a news article in the newspaper about how the Korean church has become one of the fastest growing churches in the world, as well as the second largest source of sending Christians and missionaries out into this world. This has all happened mostly in the last 30-40 years.

This article told the story of the Onnuri Presbyterian Church in Seoul, the church my daughter, Karis attended one of the two years she spent in Korea. This congregation, only about 30 years old, has around 30,000 members and it alone sends out 500 missionaries to 53 countries. Our whole ELCA of 4-million members and 9,000 congregations only sends out less than 150 missionaries.

The truth is that there are churches and Christians around the world who really believe in building God's kingdom on this earth. Yet, many of these churches are now in places like Korea, Tanzania, Africa, and South America—not in America. With all the stuff we have in our country, with all the freedoms we have, are any of us really willing to allow Jesus to truly reign and rule in us?

The question for us at Messiah is whether we are willing to commit ourselves to being a kingdom building church, or whether we rather want to simply be a comfortable place where we easily say Jesus is Lord yet where we pretty much do our own thing? Are any of us really willing to grow in God's Word and in his mission so that we are passionate about sharing Jesus' life-transforming love with others?

As we enter into this new program year at Messiah the question is whether we are willing to commit our whole lives to Jesus and his kingdom? Jesus said, *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well."*

Are we willing to allow Jesus to reign in us, and in our church, in such a powerful way that we trust him to lead us and bring his miraculous power into our hearts? The truth is that God can do even greater things; he can change and renew a whole community when the church and his people put God as number one.

Matthew believed that the only hope for this world filled with sin and darkness was if God's kingdom would come in and through Christ's church. That truth, of course, is the same today. My friends, the hope of our world is that we will go and make disciples of all nations; that God's kingdom, priorities and love might be lived out in the lives of all who proclaim that they are his disciples and followers.

May we pray each day, *"Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen."*