

Oct. 18, 2020
The Kingdom of God (1)
Keys to the Kingdom
1 Peter 2:1-9
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From this Sunday on we are going to talk about the kingdom of God. The kingdom from the parables in Matthew is what the kingdom is like and what the kingdom of heaven is compared to. Jesus said the kingdom was like a pearl of great price, like leaven in a lump of dough, like a treasure hidden in a field, and like seeds planted in different soils. He said that heaven was compared to a land owner, hiring throughout the day, a king throwing a wedding party, a dragnet cast into the sea, and a mustard seed. What's the kingdom of heaven like for you? What do you know about the kingdom of God?

In Exodus 19, God spoke to Moses and promised to build a great kingdom, a holy nation, and a nation of priests, if Moses and the Israel people followed His commandments. It was conditional. But, as we know from history and from scripture, the Israelites did not keep God's commandments. God was forced to step in with judgment. For 700 years the Jews plunged downward until God gave them over to the Assyrians and to the Babylonians who took them away to exile. Even when they returned to Jerusalem from exile, they were a nation in a land that gets occupied by the Persians, then by the Greeks, and then finally by the Romans. So, even when they came back from exile, they had about 400 years of continued occupation and then tacked onto that was a period of silence in the Biblical text. No more prophets showed up for Israel.

Now, think about putting yourself in that situation for a moment. What would it be like if we lived without our basic freedoms as a people and a nation for 700 years? You know the Philippines was occupied by Spain for 120 years, then by the US for 45 years, and by Japan for 3 years during the World War II. Korea was occupied by Japan for 35 years. India was occupied by the British for 89 years, and other countries in Asia and Africa were occupied by European countries. What compromises might we make? What hatred might be developed in us? In what way would we seek to separate ourselves from people who don't respect our God and cultures that are not like ours? In what way would we seek to separate ourselves from them in order to preserve our way of life?

This was the culture of Israel when Jesus showed up. They were ready for a warrior king who would kick the Romans out and set up God's kingdom. Obviously, Jesus didn't fit that mold at all. No political power, no military power, and no great resume from the finest rabbinical schools like the IVY schools today. However, this traveling teacher drew larger and larger crowds. He showed up on the scene right after John the Baptist was arrested and after He had gone through His personal time of temptation by Satan in the desert. He showed up in a small fishing village in Capernaum and began to announce the central message of His ministry. *"Repent and believe, for the kingdom of God is at hand."* (Matthew 3:2) Then crowds began to form around Him as He began to preach and did some pretty miraculous things. Jesus did not just teach by repeating the teachings of others. He taught with authority and creativity.

In his book, "The Challenge of Jesus," N.T. Wright says, when Jesus announced the kingdom in the parables, the stories He told were functioned like dramatic plays in search of actors. His hearers were invited to audition for the parts in the kingdom. They had been eager for God's drama to be staged and were waiting to find out what they would have to do when He did so. These actors were to be His ambassadors and His priests in the new kingdom and thus reestablish it. That's us. We are designed to be His ambassadors and His priests in this new reestablished kingdom.

Now, this newly formed kingdom could seek to take power and exert its influences there in Israel and Palestine in a number of ways. In the 1st century the Jews had sought to establish the kingdom in three pretty distinct ways when the Messiah came and Jesus showed up. The first way to set up the kingdom on earth was the quietest, or the religious separatist option. They wanted to separate themselves as much as possible from the wicked world, develop a religious system that insulated them from the godless culture around them, and waited for God to do whatever it was that God was going to do. Not only did they remove themselves from the pagan culture surrounding them, they removed themselves even from the Jewish culture and went out and lived in caves and waited for the Messiah to show up. So, that is the first option, the separatist option. The second way was the compromise route. They built for themselves fortresses and palaces, got along with their political bosses, and hoped that in some way God would validate it. And then the third way was the Zealot option. They wanted to revolt against the Romans, sharpen their swords and make themselves holy to fight a holy war. They believed God would give them victory someday.

These three ways are largely in effect today, inside Christianity. First, as Christians, we know it is easy to surround ourselves with all things Christian – Christian radio, Christian television stations, Christian music, Christian yellow pages, and Christian books, both fiction and nonfiction. We spend all our time with our friends from church. So, it is very possible to insulate ourselves from the world around us and let God do whatever it is that God is going to do. We see this in the extreme, such as certain Amish communities or Mennonite communities. Secondly, we want to make the world our buddy. We do our jobs well, build a comfortable life, don't offend anyone with their faith, try to get along and hope that being nice will somehow make a difference. Thirdly, we try to build the kingdom through the force of politics – winning in the courts or demanding our rights. We see this in certain political action committees, and groups that use the courts to fight for Christian legal rights.

Which is the one where you would typically go? When Jesus set up His kingdom He chose a fourth way. Jesus set up His kingdom through internally changing individuals with His resurrected life so that His changed people would live righteously; they would begin to change the world around them with love. In other words, it was an upside-down and inside out revolution. In his book "The Living Body," Richard Halverson emphasizes the churches to live out internal transformation. He says, "The true meaning of a churches influence is what is happening when the buildings are empty, the programs idle, and the people scattered throughout their communities and metropolitan areas in the world." In other words, the real influence of the church is not what happens when the church is visible in its building, the real influence occurs when the church is invisible, when it is in dispersion.

In the Old Testament, living in God's kingdom was to keep the whole law. The law was outside the people and over people. And it was always reminding them that they were falling short, so it was always condemning them. In the New Testament, the ethics by which we live in God's kingdom are through the transformations that happen when we live the Sermon on the Mount and in the parables, which starts internally and is powered by the Holy Spirit and the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. That's why we can rejoice in today's text, 1Peter 2:9. We are a chosen people. We are a royal priesthood. It's already there and it is not conditional on us. This is the amazing life we have in God's kingdom as His subjects.

In Luke 12:32 Jesus says, "*Fear not little flock, for it is your father's pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" This is about the nature of God. It is about the kind of heart that God has. Giving us the kingdom is what makes God glad and what He delights to do, not merely about what He will do. The kingdom of God is what He loves to give us. "*Fear not little flock, for it is the father's pleasure to give you this kingdom.*" God is acting here in freedom. God is acting out of His deepest delight. God's joy, His desire, His want and wish and hope and pleasure and gladness and delight are to give this kingdom to His people. The next several Sundays we will dive deeper in to this amazing topic on the kingdom.

