

“The Kingdom of Jesus”
Matthew: The Way of Jesus
Downtown & Lexington
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If you had to summarize Jesus’ whole message in one sentence, how would you do it? That might sound like a pretty hard thing to do.

- Maybe the first thing to pop into your mind is love. He came to share God’s love and help us love others.
- Maybe you think of the Golden Rule. ‘Do to others, as you would have them do to you.’
- Maybe you’d say, neither one of those, he came to tell us how to go to heaven when we die.

This is a worthwhile question to consider, because often how we answer it affects how we think about and relate to Jesus, as well as what we believe he’s up to in the world. So, for example,

- if we think Jesus’ primary message was about right living. We’ll tend to think that Jesus was basically a moral teacher who came to give us new and better commands to follow.
- If love is our answer, we may think he’s just something of a counselor sent to help us learn to love ourselves a bit more and get along with others.
- If you think he’s just about getting us to heaven when we die, you might wonder why He bothered to talk about so many other things.

We’re starting a new series today studying Jesus’ most famous set of teachings recorded in Matthew’s biography of his life - *the Sermon on the Mount*.

And while all of those things are certainly true - Jesus did come to tell us the right way to live, He did come to share with us God’s love and to live with radical love, and he absolutely came that we might believe in Him and go to heaven when we die... that is not actually how Matthew, or the other gospel writers for that matter, introduce us to and summarize his message.

We’re going to pick up a few verses before the Sermon on the Mount at the start of Jesus’ public ministry that sets everything else Jesus says and does in context.

Matthew 4:12–22

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: And he recites from Isaiah “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” [Emphasis added]

And there it is: Matthew's summary of Jesus' ministry: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Contrary to popular opinion, the central message of Jesus wasn't simply morality, or love, or how to go to heaven when you die. It was "**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven** (or the Kingdom of God - he uses those terms interchangeably) **is at hand**."

More than anything else, the thing that Jesus talks about the most is this thing called "the Kingdom". In fact, he talks about it roughly 126 times throughout the four gospels. 55 in Matthew alone.

Dutch Theologian **Herman Bavink** puts it, "For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was the purpose of all of his activity, the main content and central idea of his teaching, whose essence, expansion, development, and fulfillment were presented by him in the most variegated way, with and without parables. Moving outward from his own person, he established this Kingdom in the hearts of his disciples."¹

The primary thing Jesus was about was the Kingdom of God. Jesus came preaching the good news of the Kingdom. It was the thing He lived and breathed. Everything else He said and did flows out from this central purpose and message.

But, what does that mean exactly? What is Jesus talking about? Because the idea of "kingdom" doesn't really compute with our modern American sensibilities.

Words always carry "scripts" or "images" that they provoke in your mind. For example, if I say "house" that fires off a whole bunch of ideas and pictures in your head. You think of wood and vinyl siding, a fence, maybe a play set in the backyard. You probably don't think about grass huts, but some in other parts of the world do.

All words do this, including "kingdom." For us, it tends to bring to mind the U.K. and King George, or the Crown on Netflix or high school homecomings and proms. But that's about as far as it goes. But, those images are pretty far removed from the ideas this would set off in the world of Matthew's original Jewish audience.

If you'd indulge me, I want to walk you through the images it would set off for them, so that you can see the impact of what Jesus is saying...

The very first place we see the concept of God's Kingdom in the Scriptures is page 1. Genesis 1. The 1st story of the Bible depicts God as a royal artist. A creative wise being who is sovereign over all and powerful enough to breathe and speak a world of order and beauty out of darkness and nothing.

God is creating and ruling and what he wants to do fundamentally through creation is share. He wants to share ownership of the world He made. And the creatures he made to share in his rule were humans... In Genesis 1:26-27, it says, "that he made humanity in His image and he gave them dominion..." What is

¹ Bavink, Herman. *The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good*.

“dominion” except the language of a kingdom? So he made them like himself and shared with them his rule.

If you know how the story goes, He places mankind in a garden - referred to as the Garden of Eden. And, for the record, that it is not like the thing in your backyard where you try to grow tomatoes...

In the era when this is being passed down “gardens” weren’t something ordinary people kept for a hobby. A garden was reserved for royalty. Think of the ancient hanging gardens of Babylon. It is where rulers and the ruling class carried about their business. When Genesis says, he put mankind into a garden, it’s saying God put humanity in a place and position of co-regency with Him over creation - an honored and esteemed role to live and rule in harmony with Him over his world.

Part of the point is we don’t just live in this world, but we remake it everywhere we go. We are meant to be royal stewards of God’s Kingdom in His world.

And so in this first little blip, the opening narrative of the Bible places us into this idea of a Kingdom. The creator God exercising His good rule and reign, along with his special creation of mankind, over the world he made.

Everything as it should be. It’s something the Bible describes in Hebrew as “shalom” and it’s a word that translates as peace, but it’s more than just the absence of conflict - it’s a completeness, a wholeness.

It’s hard for me to even paint this picture for us - but it’s this state where all of their needs were supplied for. No anxiety or fear. Where there was no relational conflict or disunity. No gnawing senses of insecurity or competition with one another - this what the Bible means when it says, “they were naked and unashamed.” A place of acceptance - by God and each other. No oppression, no war... no sickness, no death, no disease. No injustice, no lying, or stealing or cheating. No disregard for life. A state where humanity and creation thrive with the God who made them.

I have never read anyone who has put it better than **Cornelius Platinga** who wrote:

Cornelius Platinga

Shalom is ...the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight...Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be...the full flourishing of human life in all aspects, as God intended it to be.²

This is life in the initial Kingdom of the Bible - life under God’s good rule and reign.

² Platinga, Cornelius. *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin*. p.10

However, instead of sharing in the rule and reign, our first grandparents defected and sought to create their own kingdom, they distrust God and seek to make our own rules and decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. And that first act of rebellion fragmented the created order. Mankind was removed from the Garden. “Shalom” broke and with it our relationship to God, each other, and the world.

And this becomes the central plotline of the Bible. What is God going to do about this?

And the answer, that the rest of the OT covers is that he sets in motion a plan to restore his Kingdom, his shalom, his good rule and reign in the world.

So the first thing he does about it is he singles out one family through grace to form as a new people - to shape as an alternate kingdom or a contrast community to this world. To reveal *to* them and *through* them what it means to truly be human in a way that lives by faith and doesn't try to redefine right and wrong for ourselves, but according to God's good wisdom.

This is the story of Abraham and the patriarchs.

And like we talked about last week, this family gets huge and winds up enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And Pharaoh is basically the walking embodiment of everything wrong with humanity's rebellious kingdom. He's a power-hungry murderous king. He's redefined good and evil such that he's justified killing innocent babies in the name of building huge storehouses and cities. So he's grinding the family of Abraham to the dust.

And what does God do? He raises up Moses and confronts Pharaoh saying, “you can't do this in God's world. You need to humble yourself, stop the oppression, and set these people free.” And Pharaoh says no and basically gets into the octagon with the Almighty... and who wins? The one who created all things.

And the whole story is dramatic and intense and honestly quite scary because it's the embodiment of the conflict of God's rule and reign versus man's. And this is the moment where God is first called a King.

Then the people of Israel enter into a covenant with God where they promise to show the world what He is like and what it looks like for Him to rule and reign, and what do they do?

They fail. They become like little pharaohs themselves.

And this is how the story keeps going with some bright spots here and there of kings who did something of a good job representing the Kingdom, but who ultimately failed ultimately revealing Israel's need for a better king... and it all results in God's people once again, distrusting God, doing their own thing and being carted off into exile under the ruling thumb of other kingdoms - Assyria, Babylon...and eventually Rome by the time of Jesus...

And this is the story for the rest of the Old Testament...and it just ends with a giant ellipsis... or question mark... leaving us asking, “What's gonna happen now? What is God gonna do next?”

Yet you have these prophets, like Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel & Isaiah, who say that one day God is going to come and fix this. One day God is going to send a forever King to make things right. Who says things like...

Isaiah 9:1–2, 6-7

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace [that is “shalom”] Of the increase of his government and of peace [again “shalom”] there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

If you’ve been following along, you know this is the one Matthew quotes right before he introduces us to Jesus’ message. Here Isaiah is prophesying of a future King, in Hebrew called the Messiah - the one who would reign on God’s throne forever - the one who will bring joy to those in anguish - not just for the Jew, but for the nations, for the Gentile... who put an end to war and oppression, sorrow and grief. The one who will rule with perfect justice and righteousness.

The one who, as Isaiah writes elsewhere, “will bind up the brokenhearted and set the captive free” who “wipe away every tear and swallow up sin and death forever.” The one who will restore the peace that was lost between God and man, and reunite the whole world into the shalom of God.

Essentially, the one who will make right everything that sin has made wrong.

And if it’s not clear by now, the point that Matthew and Jesus are making in verse 17 is that the culmination of the Biblical story, really the culmination of human history, is here. Jesus is the one. Who ultimately through his life, death and resurrection conquered the kingdoms of sin and death to pave the way for the Kingdom of heaven to come to Earth - for you, to me and humanity... and then to the rest of creation.

This is why his ministry is filled with all of those miracles and healings and casting out demons. It’s all meant to show us that the Kingdom is here - the oppressed really are being set free, the blind are recovering their sight... what sin had made wrong, Jesus has come to make right.

This is why Matthew as well as the other gospel writers, take intentional measures to show you that Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem and his crucifixion were something of an upside-down coronation ceremony...

- Where he’s given a crown, yet not of gold, but of thorns,
- He’s given royal robes, yet not of fine linen, but lashes,
- He was raised up for all eyes to see - not on a throne, but a cross.

Because it was in these moments, the writers want us to understand that the forever good rule and reign of God is being inaugurated. When the debt of sin was paid, when the kingdoms of man and darkness and evil were overcome, and where through His resurrection He definitively declares the victory and put into motion the restoration of all things. That even death itself is done.

That will eventually culminate in the vision of Revelation 20 that describes God on the throne, and Heaven and Earth coming together, in the new capital of the New Jerusalem built around that old tree of life in the middle of the original Garden where every tear is wiped away, and sin and death are no more.

This is the message of Jesus.

You see...

- While Jesus did come teaching where the good life is really found, He didn't primarily come to give us tips on how to have a more comfortable, easy life.
- While Jesus did come teaching what righteousness really looks like, He didn't come to just give a bunch of new rules to obey.
- While Jesus did teach that love - love for God and love for others - is paramount to life with Him and *the* defining characteristic of His people, He didn't come to just help us get along...

Jesus came proclaiming good news - that a Kingdom has arrived and the King is here. And the main thrust of everything else he says is inviting each and every one of us to receive this Kingdom... to by grace through faith come, learn, and experience life as citizens of His shalom. .

That's the good news. That's Jesus' message.

But this is also why there is another part of this summary statement. Jesus did not just say "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" but "*Repent*, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Now, "repent" is another word that conjures up all kinds of scripts and images for us. If you're anything like me, those images are typically negative. My mind immediately goes to the guy yelling at people to turn or burn.

But, the Greek word used here is "metanoia" and it translates "to think differently after." It's the idea that things, specifically, I, must change now based on what I know.

Repentance is a change of mind that changes your life. It's "I now know something and things can never be the same." Something has happened that demands a response. I have to stop what I'm thinking, or believing or doing because something has happened that is forcing me to reevaluate everything -- how I think about myself, the world, God - my values, my priorities... all of it.

This is probably a terrible example, but it makes me think of the 1999 cinematic masterpiece, "The Matrix." Where a young hacker named Neo has been drifting through his life with a gnawing sense that there is something more out there. When he meets a crew led by a mysterious man named Morpheus who tells him that his suspicions are right, everything he thinks he knows is untrue. And everything he

spends his life on is a waste... and he presents him with a decision... take the red pill or the blue. You can wake up and live in reality, or go back to sleep, waste your life, and end up in destruction - the choice is yours, but from this moment on there's no going back.

And Jesus says, in similar fashion, that entering the Kingdom means taking the proverbial red pill.

Theologian and Biblical Scholar Jonathan Pennington says it this way, "Jesus' kingdom vision is designed to resocialize us - deconstruct our values and reconstruct them in new kingdom-oriented and God-directed ways that are often very counter-cultural and unnatural."³

In layman's terms, entering into the Kingdom means having Jesus turn your life upside down from the inside out. This is what he has come to do. His teachings, primarily the Sermon on the Mount, have a primary purpose to form us into a different kind of people -- a kingdom people.

If you want to be a Christian - if you want to follow Jesus - that 100% means receiving his grace for your sin, and it also means being reshaped by that very grace into a different type of person - it means a deconstruction of old loves, old habits, old judgments, old lives and old kingdoms - and having them turned upside down to be reformed or recreated in the likeness of God.

This is exactly how Jesus' early disciples understood him. Look at vs 18...

Matthew 4:18-22

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

The details of this call to discipleship are immensely meaningful, and we've talked about them elsewhere, but one of the things to note is that Matthew seems to deliberately write this so that we're struck by Jesus' abruptness. These men are fishermen, with their dad, in the boat, doing the family business. And Jesus calls to them, "you and you come follow me" and it's like he keeps walking and these guys have to catch up.

He essentially forces them into a decision about what their life is going to be about.

They are either going to have to say, "No, I'm going to continue to do my thing. I'm going to keep my life the way it is." or they're going to have to drop everything and follow Him - to trust him, to go with him, to learn from him, and be about what He's about.

³ Pennington, Jonathan T. *The Kingdom of God*, The Village Church Resources Lecture. 1/26/2018 <https://youtu.be/h7Add4wAzoE>

It is a picture of repentance. A picture of this dramatic reorientation of everything. The leaving behind of an old way of life to take on Jesus' vision for a whole new way of being. Essentially, to trust him and to come and learn from Him the way of the Kingdom.

And what I want for you to understand today and as we spend time with Jesus and His teachings for the next few months is that in the same way that He waltzes into these fisherman's lives and forces a decision upon them, He is going to waltz into your life and do the same.

And we will have the same option - red pill or blue. Follow in faith, or go on about our own way. Everything to stay the same or everything to change. The Kingdom of God or one of our own making.

And let me be straight with you, you do have Kingdom. You might not call it that, you might not think about it in those terms, but you do. A set of values you live by. A set of goals I orient around. Things I pursue, things I avoid... a way of living and being.

The question is - is it Jesus and His Kingdom... or one of your own?

For many of us, in general, our approach to life and Christianity can be one where we're the protagonist and God is here to help.

But make no mistake, Jesus has not come to be an add-on to anyone's life. He's come to be King. The metaphor of the kingdom makes it crystal clear that the call of the gospel is a call to allegiance. It's a call to drop everything else and follow Him - to trust that He is who He says He is, to care about what He cares about it, to live as He desires us to live, to think and believe and do according to His way not our own.

And that means, we have to repent... we have to change our way of thinking. We have to wake up to the reality that we have joined our first grandparents in establishing our own Kingdom, that we in some respects are like Pharaoh - hostile to God's authority in our lives - that we have either been too unaware or too negligent to see all that God has been doing around us - in order to live in the grace-filled, life-giving Kingdom Jesus has come to bring.

And when we do, we actually become the stewards of His Kingdom we were made to be. Because this not something that we just do once, but something we do over and over and over again.

As Martin Luther has famously said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance." Or if you prefer: Dogs bark. Ducks quack. Christians repent. It's just what we do. It's our daily posture. It's our primary habit.

Every single day, we have a choice to repent - to bring our lives to the table and reorganize them around the Kingdom that it might break into our hearts and our world. For example,

- Every time you remember your forgiveness in Christ and then extend that to someone who sinned against you, someone you might classify as an enemy... you've made earth more like heaven and the Kingdom is breaking through.
- Every time you choose to chat with your neighbor over the comfort of vegging out... that's repentance and affirms their dignity... you're living as a citizen of the Kingdom and it's breaking through.
- Every time you choose faith over fear and anxiety... that's the kingdom breaking in.
- Every morning I wake up and repent of my apathy and laziness- think differently about what my time is for and where comfort is found - and I sit with God for just a few minutes to get my mind and heart around his grace and patience towards me such that later on I'm a bit more patient and kind and forgiving to my children... that's the kingdom breaking in.
- Every time you stand up for someone who has no voice, every time you serve, when you refuse to hold bitterness... when you take the courage to speak ... when you give sacrificially... all because of who Jesus and what's come to do, that's the Kingdom is breaking through...

And that's what our journey over the next few months is going to be all about, that's what we are being invited into - repenting and embracing Jesus' vision for Kingdom life - learning to trust and follow the way of Jesus - or in short, learning to live the way of the Kingdom. **Pray**