

# Understanding the Kingdom

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## Introduction.

- A. To most of you, it is probably a mystery where I get ideas for sermons. This sermon, however, won't be much of a mystery. If you remember, last Wednesday evening in Bible class, we got into a discussion about what the kingdom of heaven that is mentioned so often in Scripture is. I hope to wind up that discussion tonight.
- B. To understand why this is so important, though, we need to look not just at the importance the Bible puts on the kingdom of God, but at some of the ways that the kingdom is misrepresented in the world around us. Among the most noteworthy of these representations is the false doctrine of premillennialism. Premillennialists believe that when Jesus came to earth the first time, His crucifixion wasn't the result of the plan of God. Instead, it was the result of a colossal mix-up. Jesus, these people say, was supposed to have been accepted as an earthly king by the Jews back in AD 30, but the Jews killed Him instead. The church then was put in place not as part of God's eternal purpose, but as Plan B after Jesus was mistakenly crucified. Premillennialists look forward to the time when Jesus will come back and get it right the second time. They think He then will reign as King on the earth for a thousand years before the Day of Judgment comes. That's where the word "premillennialism" comes from: "pre," meaning before, and "millennium," meaning a thousand years.
- C. It sounds bizarre, but premillennialism is extremely popular today. This false doctrine shows up in everything from the "Left Behind" series of books to the writings of Hal Lindsay, and its effects reach into every area of Christian belief. We don't have time today to delve into all the intricacies of premillennialism, but we are going to look at one key mistake: their idea of the kingdom. Because the premillennialists look forward to an earthly kingdom ruled by Christ, they say, indeed, are logically forced to say, that God's kingdom has not yet come. As a result, a wonderful way to teach them is to explain the true nature of the kingdom. This means that the kingdom is something we need to grasp, both for their sakes and for our own. Let's devote some time this evening, then, to understanding the kingdom.

## I. The Kingdom's Nature.

- A. As the first step of this understanding, we need to understand what the kingdom's nature is, and for this, we have to look at the word "kingdom" itself. According to p. 344 of *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, "kingdom" is translated from the Greek word *basileia*, which is "primarily an abstract noun, denoting 'sovereignty, royal power, dominion,' . . . then, by metonymy, a concrete noun, denoting the territory or people over whom a king rules. It is used especially of the kingdom of God and Christ."
  1. Once we get through translating *Vine's* into English, here's the point: When we think of "kingdom," we normally think of some massive chunk of real estate that's all colored the same color on a map and is ruled by a king. In Greek, though, "kingdom" means something different. The Greek word for "kingdom" mainly refers to the power and authority that a king has to rule. Biblically speaking, a king's kingdom is the right that he has to control others and tell them what to do. That's the first part.
  2. Then, Vine says something about "metonymy." That's not a word we hear a whole lot, but it's something we hear all the time. Basically, metonymy is when a word is used to describe some other concept that is closely related to it. Here's an example: When we flip on the news and hear a correspondent say that the White House issued a statement today about the war in Iraq, we know that the literal building didn't get up and start talking. Instead, the reporter is telling us that those who are closely associated with the White House—the President and others who work there—have issued a statement. That's metonymy. In the case of "kingdom," because a king's land and subjects are closely related to his right to rule, the Bible uses "kingdom" to describe the things that God rules. Biblically speaking, that's what "kingdom" means.
- B. Now that we know what "kingdom" means, we can figure out what the kingdom of God is. It is God's authority, God's power, God's right to rule. This, of course, is unlimited. God has always ruled everything and always will. Consider what David says of God's kingdom in Psalm 145:11-13. Even in David's time, a thousand years before Christ, godly men considered God's dominion to be present and eternal. Generally, then, it is not, and never has been, possible for God's kingdom to come or to begin. God's kingdom predates the world.

## II. The Kingdom In:

- A. In addition to this general use of the word "kingdom," though, it is also used in a more specific way in the New Testament. Scripturally speaking, although it is everywhere and over everything, it appears in several forms.
- B. The first of these that we're going to look at is the way that "kingdom" is used to describe **THE CHURCH**.
  1. In the New Testament, this first shows up during the ministry of Jesus. Consider, for instance, the words of our Lord in Mark 9:1. It would not have been entirely clear to Jesus' listeners on that day what was about to happen, but they would have known this: first, that the authority of God was going to be

- manifested in a special way; second, that this would be announced through miracles; and third, that it would happen in the lifetime of some of Jesus' hearers.
2. All of this becomes much clearer in the book of Acts. Look at the conversation of Acts 1:6-8. The apostles want to know when the kingdom is going to come. Jesus tells them they can't know exactly when, but they themselves will be the ones who will receive the power that announces its coming. We know how this worked out. The apostles received this kingdom-proclaiming power on the day of Pentecost, which is the day when the church was established. The special manifestation of divine authority was the church.
  3. Today, the church continues to represent God's kingdom in a special way. Paul reveals this in Colossians 1:13. When we are saved, God rescues us from the domain of darkness and transfers us to the kingdom of Jesus. That is to say, God takes us from the authority of Satan and puts us under the authority of Jesus instead. We become part of a group of people that is under Jesus' special dominion, and Paul names this group in Colossians 1:18. It's the church. Jesus already has His kingdom, and we're it.
- C. However, although the church is one of the ways that God's authority makes itself known, it is not the only one. There are a number of passages where we can't just substitute "church" for "kingdom" and still have the passage make sense. One such passage is Luke 17:20-21. We've already talked about how the church showed up in a spectacular way, but here, Jesus is describing the coming of the kingdom in a way that can't be seen at all. This can't be talking about the church. Similarly, Luke 11:19-20 shows Jesus telling the Pharisees that the kingdom of God HAS come upon them. Has, past tense. This happened years before the day of Pentecost, but the dominion of God had already made itself known to the Pharisees in some way.
  - D. One of the ways that the kingdom appeared then and continues to appear today is through **GOD'S COMMANDS**. We see an example of "kingdom" used in this way in Matthew 6:31-33. Jesus here instructs His disciples not to worry about their physical needs, but to seek God's kingdom first. We know what this means, and it's not an instruction to seek the church. Instead, it's an instruction to seek God's authority first, to emphasize obeying His commands in our lives. If we do that, God will see that we're provided for. In the same way, Jesus tells us how we should listen to God in Luke 18:15-17. We need to receive the kingdom of God like little children. Once again, this isn't talking about the church. It's not even possible to receive the church. Instead, it's talking about the way we respond to God's laws. Do we obey, or do we argue?
  - E. Even beyond the church and God's commandments, though, there's a third main way that "kingdom" is used in the New Testament. It's used to describe the manifestation of God's authority in **HEAVEN**. Heaven is also rightly described as the kingdom of God. We see Jesus Himself using "kingdom" in this way in Matthew 25:31, 34. Matthew 25:31 sets the scene. This passage describes what will happen on the Day of Judgment, when Jesus is seated on His throne, judging the nations. On that day, He will tell the righteous to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. This isn't talking about the church, and it isn't talking about obeying God, either. By the day of judgment, we will either have obeyed God or not. Instead, this passage is using "kingdom" to describe the reward of the saints: eternity with God in heaven. Along the same lines, look at the way Paul uses "kingdom" in 2 Timothy 4:6, 18. We get the information we need to understand 4:18 from 4:6. As is evident from 4:6, Paul expects to be killed soon. His life on earth is coming to an end. However, 4:18 says that Paul still expects Jesus to bring him safely to His heavenly kingdom. Paul is expressing his faith that even though he's going to die soon, Jesus is going to get him to heaven.
  - F. Even though the church, God's commands, and heaven are three distinct ways that "kingdom" is used in the New Testament, we need to be careful not to try to force-fit every use of the word "kingdom" into one of those three categories. Sometimes, the Bible will use "kingdom" more generally, so that all three meanings fit.
  - G. An excellent example of this is the verse that started this all, Matthew 6:9-10. Let's ask ourselves: what exactly is Jesus teaching His disciples to pray for here?
    1. Does Jesus' prayer, as repeated by His disciples then, include the coming of the church? Certainly; after all, the church hadn't come yet. Can we pray for the coming of the church now? No! The church has already come, and there is no Scriptural reason to look forward to some earthly kingdom of Christ.
    2. Does Jesus' prayer ask for the kingdom to come in the lives of the lost around them, so that they would recognize God's authority and obey it? Absolutely. Jesus came to encourage all men to submit to the rulership of God. Can we pray for the kingdom to come in that way today? Sure. Untold numbers of people have received the kingdom as a little child, but there are billions who have not.
    3. Finally, does Jesus' prayer ask for the day when God's sovereignty over heaven will be revealed, and He will call His children to live with Him? It certainly does. That was something the disciples of Jesus could pray for then, and it's something we can pray for now. 1 Corinthians 16 reveals Paul's eagerness to see that day, and we should share it. All of us should pray for the coming of God's kingdom in that way.

**Conclusion.** From all of these things, it is obvious that God's kingdom should have a central role in our lives. All of us should seek it in His church, in obeying His commands, and in living so that we can live again with Him in heaven. Where do you stand? Are you devoting your life to seeking His kingdom? If not, now is the time to begin.