

The Kingdom of Heaven

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Introduction.

In the Bible, there are some passages of Scripture that have been so misused by false teachers that even though they are true, we cringe just a little bit when someone brings them up. One of these passages is the prayer of Jesus found in Matthew 6, which is commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer”. In context, Jesus is actually teaching His disciples not to engage in recited, meaningless prayers, but for some reason, people have taken His prayer and turned it into a recited, meaningless prayer itself. I’ve heard it in contexts from funerals to football games, and it makes me wince every time.

Of course, I’m not the only Christian to have that reaction, and over the years, churches of Christ have done a lot of teaching against using the Lord’s Prayer as a formula. Much of this teaching has centered on the phrase “Your kingdom come.” The argument goes that because the kingdom came with the church, Jesus’ prayer for the kingdom to come was fulfilled in the church, so it’s not a prayer we can pray anymore.

Before I go on, let me hasten to say that I agree with the ultimate result. We should not be using the Lord’s Prayer as a little ritual that we recite together. That would be a distortion of everything that the New Testament teaches us about prayer. Nowhere in Scripture are we ever taught to engage in thoughtless, formulaic repetition and call it prayer.

However, we can’t get to that result by critiquing the Lord’s Prayer because the kingdom already came in the church. Scripturally speaking, “kingdom” does not always mean “church”. It is used in a much broader sense in the word than that. In fact, the phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are used so broadly that we can only define that kingdom as “the dominion or rule of God”. There are senses in which that dominion or rule has already come, but there are senses in which it hasn’t. Let’s explore this idea as we consider the kingdom of heaven.

Uses of “Kingdom”

Within this range, the word “kingdom” is used dozens of times in Scripture, and in all these references, it is used in several different ways. The first way is one that we’re all familiar with, when the phrase “the kingdom of God” is used to refer to **THE CHURCH**. Look at Mark 9:1. In this text, Jesus anticipates the coming of the kingdom as a future event. He says that it will come with power, which in Biblical usage, often means that it will be accompanied by miracles, and it is going to take place before at least some of his audience dies. When we put all of this together, we have little trouble recognizing that Jesus is prophesying the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost. That day would come two or three years from when Jesus spoke, it would be accompanied by miracles, and some of Jesus’ audience would be primary participants. Here, the phrase “the kingdom of God” refers to the church.

However, even though the Bible does use “kingdom” to refer to the church, that is far from the only thing it can mean. In fact, Jesus uses the word “kingdom” to point to God’s people under the Law of Moses, **THE JEWISH NATION**. Consider with me Matthew 8:11-12. This passage discusses a group called “the sons of the kingdom”. This cannot be talking about members of the Lord’s church, because these sons are going to be cast out of the kingdom. Instead, this passage describes the Jews who rejected Christ and so would end up being rejected by God. If these rebellious Jews are the sons of the kingdom, then the kingdom Jesus mentions must be the physical Israel.

Nor is this the only time in Scripture when “the kingdom of heaven” refers to something other than the church. That phrase is also used to describe **THE MINISTRY OF JESUS**. Look at our Lord’s words in Matthew 12:28. Notice that this is in mid-ministry. Jesus hasn’t died on the cross yet. The church hasn’t been established yet. However, despite this early timing, Jesus tells His audience that the kingdom of God already HAS come upon them. In other words, Jesus thought and taught that during His ministry, in some way, the kingdom was already in existence.

We see Jesus once again treating the kingdom as already existing in Matthew 11:11-12. Once again, this passage cannot be about the church. This is before the church was founded, yet Jesus is talking about how the kingdom of heaven is already suffering violence. This process began when John the Baptist ceased to preach, the moment at which we know Jesus began His own ministry. Jesus, then, is equating His ministry with the kingdom of God.

Jesus also makes reference to the kingdom of God coming in **THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM**. This is apparent from Luke 21:20, 29-31. Almost all of Luke 21 is about the destruction of Jerusalem, and that is certainly true with all the verses cited here. In the same context where Jesus talks about the desolation of Jerusalem being near, He talks about the coming of God’s kingdom being near. All the signs that accompanied the siege and downfall of that city were the signs that Christians were to see as the evidence of the kingdom of heaven. Once more, the timing is all wrong for this to be about the church. The church was founded on the day of Pentecost in about AD 30. These prophecies of Jesus were fulfilled in AD 70, nearly 40 years after that day. “Kingdom” is talking about something other than the church.

Another concrete concept that the Bible describes by saying “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” is **HEAVEN ITSELF**. Jesus Himself uses those phrases in this way in Mark 9:45, 47. Notice the parallels between these two verses. Here, Jesus is talking about leaving behind some body part, though not literally. If we don’t leave that body part behind, we will be cast into the fire, which all of us recognize as referring to the torments of hell. If we do leave the body part behind, we will end up somewhere variously described as “life” or “the kingdom of God”. Clearly, both of those things are pointing to the same concept. Equally clearly, they are pointing to the opposite of hell, which is heaven. What we see from this verse, then, is that the phrase “the kingdom of God” is about heaven, not the church.

A variant of this kingdom language is also used to refer to heaven in 2 Timothy 4:18. Once more, the church cannot be the subject under discussion here. By this point in his career, Paul has been a Christian for decades. There is no sense in which God is going to bring him into the church, because he is already a part of the church. Instead, what Paul is plainly referring to is the way that when His life is over, God is going to bring him into heaven.

Finally, in a more nebulous way, the Bible uses kingdom language to describe **THE RULE OF GOD IN THE HEART**. This is evident from the conclusion of the story of the rich young ruler, as reported in Matthew 19:22-23. Here, the rich young ruler has just turned away from being a disciple of Jesus because Jesus has told him he has to sell his possessions to do so. When Jesus says that it’s hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, He’s referring specifically to this event. According to Jesus, what has just happened is that the rich young ruler’s love of money has kept him from entering the kingdom. Once more, this can’t be about the church. The ruler wasn’t trying to get into the church, and the church didn’t exist yet. Instead, he was trying to enter the kingdom by letting God rule in his life and heart. He failed in that attempt because his money already filled his heart and left no room there for God.

We also see “kingdom” being used in this way in Luke 17:20-21. This is another place where we can’t replace “kingdom” with “church” without doing violence to the text. Here, Jesus says that the kingdom won’t come with signs to be observed. The church did come with signs to be observed. That’s the point of the prophecy in Joel that Peter cites in Acts 2. Jesus says that you can’t say “Look! here it is!” of the kingdom. However, when the church met together in the grounds of the temple, it was plainly visible. Finally, the text says that the kingdom of God is within us, whereas the church is an external assembly of people. This isn’t about the church. It’s about us giving our hearts to God.

In sum, brethren, the idea that the church and the kingdom are always the same thing cannot be supported by Scripture. There are literally dozens of times in the New Testament when “kingdom” phrases do not refer to the church. “Kingdom” can mean nothing more specific than “dominion or rule”. In Biblical terms, there is not just one way the kingdom can come. There are several. Some of them have happened, but some of them haven’t. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we want that kingdom to come in all of its aspects. It is perfectly legitimate, for example, to pray for the kingdom to come in the hearts of unbelievers. Such a prayer would be an appeal to God that He help those who currently rebel against His authority to submit themselves to His will. Then the kingdom would come in them.

However, it’s the judgment of the elders here, with which I agree, that we should not pray for the kingdom to come in our public prayers in the assembly. There are other ways to pray for sinners to obey the Lord or for the Lord to return, and couching those prayers in kingdom language is likely to create as much confusion and disagreement as benefit. In our public prayers, we must say not only what is correct, but also, as much as is possible with us, what makes for peace.

Our Lesson.

In addition to shaping the way we understand the Lord’s Prayer, this discussions also has lessons for us about how we should establish doctrine generally. First, this should teach us to **BASE OUR BELIEFS ON THE WORD**. Bible-class teachers fill a crucial role in our spiritual lives, but simply because a Bible-class teacher says something doesn’t make it true. Commentaries can sometimes be useful study aids, but just because a commentary says something doesn’t make it true either. Instead, the only way we can uncover truth is by constantly returning to the inspired word of God.

Second, this should teach us to **BE CAREFUL NOT TO OVER-SIMPLIFY**. It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of assuming that the Bible means the same thing every time it uses the same word or phrase. Sometimes, that’s true, but sometimes, it isn’t, and if we make that assumption when it’s not warranted, it gets us into all kinds of trouble. Instead, we have to use the context of that word to figure out what its true meaning is. In this particular case, although it might be convenient to assume that “kingdom” always means “church”, the Scripture doesn’t bear that out. Talking about multiple aspects and comings of the kingdom is awfully complex, but that’s how the Bible uses the word.

Finally, we must **AVOID OVERREACTION TO FALSE DOCTRINE**. As I said earlier, I can understand why brethren in the past taught against the Lord’s Prayer they way they did. When we deal with false teaching, there’s always the temptation to make every argument we can against it. However, raising up one bad teaching in response to another is never the answer. If we get the idea that “kingdom” always means “church”, that actually leaves us vulnerable to other false teachings. Instead, we should always put our focus on what the Bible says instead of on what the false teachers say and teach it rather than teach against them. The truth of the word is always enough to answer falsehood.