

"The Coming of God's Kingdom"
Sermon Series *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* #4
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(Mk. 1:14-15)

Were you one of the people who got up very early on the morning of April 28, 2011, to see the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton? I remember thinking at the time that while they were a very handsome power couple, and his uniform and her dress were absolutely stunning, all that pomp and circumstance was a bit too much for me. And I found myself wondering if the Brits took this monarchy thing a little too seriously.

The fact of the matter is that kings and kingdoms don't play much of a role in American society. Our country was founded in part in reaction against the rule of a king, so there's a tendency for us to relegate kings and kingdoms to fairy tales, or at least to other countries with which we don't have all that much in common.

But Jesus told His disciples in the prayer He taught them that they should pray, "Thy kingdom come...." We would do well to reconsider these preconceptions about royalty, for if Christ is anything, He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And our responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ is to pray for and help usher in His royal reign.

There is a great deal of discussion today in scholarly circles about what exactly the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" really mean. All together these phrases appear 86 times in the gospels, and Jesus actually used the terms to mean somewhat different things at various times when He taught His disciples. Let's consider some of them this morning to gain a better understanding of what this petition in the Lord's Prayer is all about.

I. The Kingdom of God Is Not of This World.

One of the meanings Jesus gave to this phrase has to do with the fact that the kingdom of God is not of this world. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come," He pointed them to a reality beyond this world. Most of the Jews of Jesus' day were quite sure that the kingdom of God would involve an earthly empire, and many of them were hopeful that Jesus would be their Messiah who would re-establish the monarchy of Israel and overthrow their Roman oppressors. But Jesus said to Pilate, "*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place*" (Jn. 18:36). He pointed to a spiritual reality beyond this earth where He and His Father reigned in sovereign majesty.

A clear indication that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke is not of this world involves the values of the kingdom. For example, Jesus said that in the kingdom of God the last shall be first, the least will be the greatest, and the poor in spirit will be considered the richest of all. Jesus presented an inversion of the world's values when it came to the kingdom of God, and He turned the common way people thought about life upside down.

The Kingdom of God isn't an institution of physical composition. It is in fact other-worldly. God calls people to enter into His kingdom and to look beyond this world. While we experience problems and suffering from time to time here on earth, the great hope of God's people is that one day He will rescue us from every evil in this world and take us home to be with Him for all eternity. It is this hope which enables us to face our problems here and now, and even to face death itself. And we can rise above our circumstances to look in faith for a better world that is coming in the kingdom of God.

A year ago, I shared with you a picture of the last painting my brother Rob created just before he died of cancer last year. It's entitled "Facing Death Valley." It's a painting of my brother standing in Death Valley, California. The desert is expansive, and parched, and dry. But there is my brother, standing in the middle of the desert, wearing a long duster rain coat, and holding an umbrella over his head. It was my brother's way of saying, "No matter how desperate my situation may be, and no matter how difficult life is on earth, I have hope in the kingdom of God. A better day is coming, and the rain of God's love will fall on me one day."

The kingdom of God is not of this world, and it provides those of us who know Jesus hope and faith that even though life may be difficult, there is a better day coming when every tear we have ever shed, every pain we have ever known will be wiped away, and we shall be with Christ the King.

When Jesus hung on the cross of Calvary, one of the criminals who was executed next to Him said, "*Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*" And Jesus replied, "*Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise*" (Lk. 23:42-43). The kingdom of God is not of this world.

II. The Kingdom of God Is a Future Reality.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come," He also taught them to pray about the future reality of the kingdom, a time when God would create the new heavens and the new earth. Jesus hinted at the prophecies in the Old Testament which that predicted a time would come when "*...the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them* (Is. 11:6). This is what theologians call the apocalyptic or eschatological aspect of the kingdom of God.

When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are praying that good will finally triumph over evil, and we asking for God to establish His rule once and for all. Jesus promised His disciples that one day He would return to this earth again, but this time Christ wouldn’t come as the Suffering Servant to die on a cross. Rather, at His second coming Jesus would return as the conquering King. And this time He would come in glory and for judgment.

Jesus taught that the kingdom, which will come at the end of the age, has already come in some measure when He came to the earth the first time. But it will not be consummated until His second coming. Already the redemptive rule of God has invaded the realm of Satan to deliver us from the power of evil, but the work of redemption in conquering Satan is not yet complete.

The kingdom has come near, as Jesus said in our passage this morning, but the present order of things isn’t completely disrupted. However, one day a new and glorious order will be established in the new heavens and the new earth, and the kingdom with its transforming power will bring history as we know it to an end. The kingdom is already here to some extent, but it is not yet fully realized. It is already, but not yet. And in the meantime we wait for and we work for the kingdom of God to come in all its fullness.

Look at this diagram. It depicts this present age and the age to come, or the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. Already God’s kingdom has come near, it is among us as Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels, but it has not yet been fully consummated. That will come at a time in the future.

Let me give you an analogy which speaks of the way in which we wait for the kingdom to come in all its fullness. On December 6, 1865, just months after the ending of the Civil War, the 13th amendment to the Constitution outlawing slavery was ratified and became the law of the land. But that didn't mean that every state approved the ratification of the amendment.

Mississippi's state legislature, for example, was dominated by white people who were bitter over the defeat of the Confederacy, and they rejected the measure. 130 years passed before Mississippi took action, and by 1995 it was the only state in the Union which had not approved the ratification of the 13th amendment. Finally, on Thursday, February 16, 1995, the Mississippi Senate voted unanimously to outlaw slavery and approve the ratification of the 13th amendment to the Constitution.¹ (Can you believe it? 1995!)

Just as there was a delay in some states ratifying an end to slavery in the United States and bringing about justice and righteousness and equality, so there is now a delay in the kingdom of God coming in all its fullness. But one day, when Christ returns again in glory, His kingdom will come and the King will reign over all the world.

Revelation 7 says, “*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”*

That’s the future reality of the kingdom of God which World Communion Sunday foreshadows.

III. The Reign of the King in the Hearts of People Today.

There is a third aspect to the kingdom of God about which I want to talk today. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come," He wasn't only thinking of His kingdom being from another world, and He also wasn't just speaking about His Messianic kingdom that would come in the future. When Jesus spoke these words He was also teaching His followers to invite God to establish His reign in their hearts and lives right now. In praying this prayer, we're asking God to reign supremely and sovereignly in our personal lives as well as in the age to come. As someone has said, "When we pray 'Thy kingdom come,' we are saying, 'and Lord, begin with me.'"

There's a great deal at stake when we pray this prayer. Too many of us glibly plow through this petition of the Lord's Prayer, and the fact of the matter is that we are unwilling to surrender the control of our lives to God. We have no intention whatsoever of abdicating the throne of our hearts to the King of glory. In our thoughts and in our actions we demonstrate that we're no more willing to accept the rule of Christ than were those who shouted at His crucifixion, "We have no king but Caesar!"

From our earliest days as a child to the time we're adults, the world teaches us that we must be the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own soul – that we should determine our own destinies and arrange our own affairs. But until you and I come to the point where we yield the rule of our hearts and lives to Christ completely, we will never enjoy the peace, grace and abundance of God's kingdom. When I pray "Thy kingdom come," I am saying that I am willing to relinquish the rule of my own life and allow God by His indwelling Spirit to lead and guide me as I live my life every day.

I remember when I was in high school I came to the point where I knew I needed a Savior. I knew that I was a sinner, and I knew that I needed God's help. I was lonely and broken, despite the fact that on the outside my life was full of

friends and fun. But looking back I realize now that when I committed my life to Christ, in reality I held back and didn't make an intentional decision to place Him in the center around which I would order the way I lived. I became what I now call a "convenient Christian." I was a Christian when it was convenient for me.

Sure, I went to church and was active in my youth group. I even shared my faith with people from time to time. But I only did so when it was convenient for me, when I wanted to. Whenever there was a moment when I wanted to do something else which I knew was contrary to God's will, I still called the shots and did what I wanted to do. It wasn't until a friend challenged me about this that I came to realize that this kind of Christianity is no Christianity at all. He helped me to see that if Jesus wasn't Lord *of* all, He wasn't Lord *at* all. So I recommitted myself to following Christ, whatever the cost, and it made a huge difference.

Have you placed Christ on the throne of your life? Or are you a follower of Jesus only when it's convenient? Give Him the throne. That's where the King belongs.

IV. The Kingdom as Communities of Light.

Let me be quick to add that saying "yes!" to Jesus and allowing Him to be your King and Lord has tremendous implications not only for your personal life but also for the world around you. It isn't just an individual commitment that we make, because it involves all the followers of Jesus Christ collectively trying to bring the influence of God's kingdom to bear in human society. Author Philip Yancey describes the church as little communities of light in a world of darkness. Together we must stand for truth and justice, and we need to oppose evil wherever it raises its ugly head. This is the hard work of the kingdom in the "already but not yet" time in which we live.

How can we bring the reign of God to this world while we wait for the renewal of all things? What does living out the principles of the kingdom look like, not just in my own life but in all my relationships and in all my spheres of influence? I think the reign of God needs to be expressed in part by trying to address the problems which plague our community, our nation and our world. Racism, poverty, homelessness, pollution, inequality, the refugee crisis. God wants us to be engaged in making a difference in all these areas in order to impact the world for Christ.

Let me give you a small example of what I'm talking about. Last Monday I attended a lunch on racial reconciliation. Clay Cooke and Hardt Bing of our congregation were also there. It's a collection of pastors and church leaders here in Winston-Salem that got grew out of the Michael Jr. event we collectively sponsored a couple of years ago. And we get together once a month to explore what racial reconciliation might look like in the Christian community here in our

city. The events that happened in Charlotte last month were still fresh in everyone's mind and on everyone's heart, and the convener of our group invited us to speak and to share something if we wanted to.

Various people talked about this moment in our nation's history and the complexity of the problems we face. Everyone said we need to pray, and we need to repent. One black pastor shared about his own experience here in Winston-Salem. He told of going to the grocery store and standing in the checkout line while the clerk rang up his groceries. When he swiped his credit card, she asked to see his ID.

He said, "I didn't see you ask the customer before me for her ID."

The clerk replied, "It's store policy."

My friend said, "Then why didn't the previous customer have to abide by the store policy?"

The clerk repeated herself, "It's store policy."

Then my friend replied by saying, "Well, then I'm never shopping in this store again because of your inconsistent application of store policy." And he left his groceries on the counter.

Another black pastor told us about the anxiety he has whenever he's driving around town and sees a police car and wonders if he's going to make it home alive that night. The fear is real.

Listening to these friends, these brothers and sisters in Christ, I realized how different their experience is to mine in this city and the ways I have had blinders on when it comes to the daily struggles of being black in a white world. I realized that I'm not aware of what's happening right here in my own city. And I also realized that if I'm not part of the solution then I'm part of the problem. How does God want me to help bring change to my community so that the kingdom of God can come near to Winston-Salem and break down the walls of racism?

Conclusion.

When Jesus taught His disciples this simple but profound petition, "Thy kingdom come," He envisioned a great many things, I believe. He thought about the kingdom where He and His Father are which is not of this world. He thought about His own future kingdom at the end of the age. And He thought about the Holy Spirit coming to live in human hearts to make His holy habitation whenever people yield their lives to Him as Lord and King.

King Jesus is all (King Jesus is all)

My all in all (My all in all)

And I know that He'll answer (And I know that He'll answer)

Me when I call (Me when I call)

Walking by my side (Walking by my side)
I'm satisfied (I'm satisfied)
King Jesus is all
My all in all

The real question I must ask myself whenever I say this petition of the Prayer is, "Am I willing to relinquish the rule of my own life, and give up the governing of my own affairs? Am I willing to yield the throne of my life to Jesus the King and let Him take control?" In the request of this petition, I'm asking for the coming of the kingdom of God, in my life and in the world. I'm asking for a royal visit. May it be so with all of us today. Amen.

¹Taken from *Contemporary Illustrations*, ed. by Craig B. Larson, p. 131.