

STUDY 8

Jesus and the Teaching of the Kingdom

Grant Thorpe

When Jesus began his ministry, he announced, as John had before him, that the kingdom of God was at hand. There is no teaching of Jesus that does not grow from this basic announcement. The kingdom had ‘come upon’ his hearers (Matt. 12:28).¹ Later, Jesus sent 70 disciples to announce the nearness of the kingdom and to heal those who were sick (Luke 10:9–12). Those who rejected the message were to be regarded as outside of the true people of Israel. The kingdom was a present reality with which people had to deal. Jesus noted that the Pharisees would not enter the kingdom and prevented others from doing so (Matt. 23:13).

The proximity of the kingdom did not indicate an immediate change in circumstances for Israel, and did not anticipate that Israel would rally behind their Messiah and be obedient to the way of the Lord. It simply and powerfully indicated that the King was present and that the day of fulfilment of God’s promises had begun. People who encountered Jesus or his apostles were either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of this reality. This idea of ‘reign’ is the prevailing meaning of ‘kingdom’ in both Old and New Testaments, rather than the idea of ‘realm’.

The teaching Jesus gave had its immediate usefulness to the apostles but, clearly, it also had the Church in mind, so, while taking notice of the settings of his teachings, we should expect to be guided by them in our mission because, we may say, the kingdom is ‘at hand’ for ourselves also, and as the gospel is preached, the kingdom may well ‘come upon’ those to whom we speak. The good news of the kingdom now focuses on the saving deeds of God in Christ—his cross and resurrection and ascension as Lord—and all this, spoken in the power of the Spirit, but the basic message of Jesus remains, that our God reigns and that his Son is Lord. The same phrase ‘proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom’ is used of both Jesus and those who preached the gospel he created (e.g. Matt. 9:35; Acts 8:12), so we will find the teaching of Jesus indispensable in understanding our own situation and mission.

It is important that our study does not move from the joy and the assurance of this. It is easy to think that teaching is something we can understand if we are intelligent. Rather, the things of the kingdom are hidden from those who think themselves wise, and are revealed to those who put their trust in God. It was people of the latter kind

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New American Standard Bible.

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in Israel who recognised Jesus as Messiah, and people of the same spirit now, who acknowledge Jesus as Lord and may be said to be 'in' the kingdom.

What this basic announcement of the presence of the kingdom meant is brought out by the works and words of Jesus. Popular views were abroad in Jesus' day, as they are now, but the Gospels show us what is meant by the reigning of God's King in their midst, as also, the progress and revelation of that reign or kingdom.

CHRIST'S PRESENCE DETERMINES THE TEACHING

If the King was present in Israel, then he was certainly no titular head! He was at work and God was at work with him, authenticating his authority. Jesus demonstrated his superiority over all other powers and revealed the freedom available to sons of the kingdom. But then, his teachings were needed, to explain this action and to call people to participate in the kingdom. Commandments were also needed to direct the working out of his affairs.

It is important to connect the teaching with the presence of Jesus himself. There is no 'kingdom of God', having a certain ethic, or a particular structure, or working on a central principle, apart from the immediate presence of Christ. Though he taught a way of life under 'Your Father', he had no philosophy to leave the world that would be dynamic apart from himself and his victory.

This point can be seen in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said that from now on, the blessed people would be the poor in spirit, the mourners and the meek, and even those who were persecuted, but he identified these people as those who would suffer 'on my account' (Matt. 5:11). So, it is Jesus who stands at the heart of the blessing that comes to sons of the kingdom. It is 'on [his] account' that they are poor or mourning or meek and seek for righteousness.

Then, he says he has come to fulfill the law and prophets (Matt. 5:17) and that our righteousness will need to be better than that prescribed by the scribes and Pharisees. But it is he who will lead us into that righteousness.

Jesus repeatedly contrasts his teaching with the current teaching of the scribes and Pharisees: 'But I say to you . . .' occurs six times in chapter 5. This, together with his warnings and directives, place him at the centre of his teaching. The only way to build securely is to build on what he says.

The simplicity of the teaching of Jesus may be seen as deceiving. It may tempt us to believe that we could have thought it up ourselves, or that it is so simple that we could do it readily. For example, Jesus said that doing to others what you wish they would do for you is the whole of the law and prophets. Can we then dispense with anything more complicated than a so-called 'golden rule' and see the kingdom come? The tepidity and sordidness of our little lives soon reveals that we need more than a precept if we are to live in this manner. We need a Redeemer who will put such an idea into action! Many will become disillusioned if this is only taught as an ethic. It is Jesus who awakens hope that such a life is possible and Jesus who makes it good!

We could say that if Jesus were not present, there would be no new teaching to offer. The kingdom was near because the King was present and everything would proceed because of his reign. The times and seasons of this remained to be revealed, even after his resurrection, but the kingdom was to be proclaimed. Common people recognised the centrality of Jesus to his message. His new teaching came with a new

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authority (Mark 1:22, 27). This authority was evident in an exorcism, but was equally evident in his teaching.

It must have become obvious fairly quickly that not everyone accepted Jesus or his teaching. He explained this rejection in terms first given to Isaiah: ‘The heart of this people has become dull’ (Matt. 13:15; cf. John 12:37–41). We could ask, ‘Dull to what?’ In this case, the people are dull to the fact that the glory (Jesus being the glory or outshining) of ‘the Lord, high and lifted up’ is among them. There was more at stake than the acceptance or rejection of a teaching.

Very much later in his ministry, Jesus taught that a seed will not grow without first being buried (John 12:23–26). It would be an abuse of his teaching, besides being impossible, to say that this is a self-operating principle. He is talking about his being glorified (for his death and in his rising) and about us following him.

In our own situation, conceptions abound as to what God’s reign will produce, as they always have. However, the church’s task is not to set out an agenda to be fulfilled but to announce the reign of the King, who, himself, will fulfill the whole law of God and every promise of the Father. There is no kingdom other than the immediate reign of Christ, and no true word of the kingdom that is not Christ speaking. We should also add that there is no word of Christ that does not effect what it was sent to accomplish.

THE TEACHING PROCLAIMS ‘YOUR FATHER’ AND UNDERMINES CULTURAL HYPOCRISY

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus tells us who will inherit the kingdom of God (5:3, 10) and who are its great men (5:19). He teaches us to pray for the kingdom to come (6:10) and to make it the object of our life, rather than simply preserving our life in this world (6:33).

However, the most recurring phrase in the Sermon on the Mount is ‘your Father’, eleven times in all. In this, Jesus shows Israel what they already have available to them as sons of the kingdom. Perhaps he has in mind the prophet’s cry, ‘O LORD, you are our Father’ (Isa. 63:16; 64:8). The Lord would recognise his people Israel even when they had become unrecognisable to the fathers of Israel. His election would find a way through their sins. Perhaps Jesus is saying to them, ‘Even yet, God is your Father. You can cry to him and he will make you salt and light in the world again.’

The kingdom of God is the kingdom of the Father, as Jesus makes clear in later parables (Matt. 13:43; 25:34) and at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:29). It is the Father’s kingdom we pray may come (Luke 11:2). ‘your Father’, he says, ‘has gladly chosen to give you the kingdom’ (Luke 12:32) and Jesus appoints us a kingdom as his Father appointed him a kingdom (Luke 22:29)—clearly, not a different kingdom!

If it is the Son who reigns and takes the enemies captive, it is the Father whose fullness we receive. So, returning to the Sermon, Jesus calls on Israel to come to the Father in poverty, mourning, meekness and hunger, with mercy, purity and peaceableness. They would then be salt and light because people would look at them and see the fullness of the Father’s goodness in them and glorify him (Matt. 5:16; also Isa. 26:12).

Israel had created many cultural ghettos in which to hide from the meaning of God’s commands, but Jesus called them to recognise their Father as the gracious ruler

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over good and bad alike and to copy him by praying for those who abused them, and so, live as sons of their Father, or sons of the kingdom (Matt. 5:45, 48; also v. 9).

Israel had also crafted a piety of their own, using the worship that had been given to them, a religious practice designed to gain an immediate reward of public acclaim. The 'reward' of the Father was forgotten and, along with it, all the joy of serving him (Matt. 6:1, 4, 6, 18). The word 'reward' cannot be construed as a payment for services rendered but is used by way of contrast with Israel's current practice. In effect, Jesus says, 'All that the Father has to give you out of his fullness is waiting for you. Be eager to receive that!'

Unacknowledged guilt and idols had hidden from Israel the truth of what the Father would freely give, and they were living as Gentiles, seeking (as an object of their life) what they would eat and wear. However, under Christ's reign, trust in the Father would be restored. 'Pray to the Father because he knows your needs before you ask' (Matt. 6:8–9, 26, 32; 7:11).

Only after proclaiming God as their Father does he refer to 'my Father' (7:21). The kingdom would consist of those who did the will of his Father, just as he did. The claim concerning God as 'my Father' occurs many other times in Matthew (13 times) but his first concern is to awaken Israel to their existing relationship with God.

Another notable feature of the Sermon is the phrases such as, 'You have heard, but I say to you . . .' or 'Beware . . .' and 'Do not . . .' and particularly, 'Beware of false prophets . . .' He showed that the claim to have God as Lord had no content apart from doing the will of 'My Father'. In order for the kingdom to be understood, he had to expose the cultural ghettos in which they hid from the God who had made them his people.

THE WORD CREATES THE 'SONS OF THE KINGDOM'

Matthew 13 includes seven parables of the kingdom, but they are sequential rather than parallel in their meaning. That is, there is no use for the latter parables if the first one is not understood (so Mark 4:13). First, there are hearers of the word of the kingdom. By this word, they understand that the King of the kingdom has come. Apart from this, there is no further possibility of being enlightened as regards the kingdom.

In the second parable, these hearers are the seed. They are the sons of the kingdom whom the Son of Man plants in the Father's world. Surprisingly, no secondary action is needed to secure the kingdom against the threat of enemy over-planting. Moving on to the next parable, concerning the growth of a grain of mustard seed, we see that the apparent insignificance of the birth of such a kingdom (because it relies on the uncertain prospect of people hearing a word) belies its ultimate significance as a roosting place for nations. It does not operate according to the principles of Babylon (cf. Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 4:12).

The yeast in the flour image, in a similar way, tells the church that its impact does not need to be visible to be effective in the ultimate and true history of the world. Then Jesus explains (regarding the second parable) how the coming of the King will reveal a field in which sons of the kingdom shine in the glory of their Father! At this point, Jesus calls for all who have ears to hear.

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The latter parables tell us about the incomparable value of the kingdom and the joy of finding it—a finding that depends on the word being heard—and, about the solemnity of being one who does not heed the word of the kingdom.

To understand these parables is a gift. The disciples who understood were at the dawn of a new day heralded and longed for by the prophets. This would have helped them enormously to understand the largely negative response of the crowds to the teaching of Jesus at this time, but also, would have aided them in understanding the power of God in establishing his kingdom among them through the presence of his King. They asked for the meaning of the first and second parables and were given the explanations, but when the seventh parable was concluded, he asked if they had understood. They understood that the teaching of Jesus was the revelation of the King himself and his saving reign. They now had understanding of all that he had said.

Returning to the parable of the sower, we note that emphasis is given to there being different soils and results. It is needful to know that people hear the word of the kingdom in different ways and that this leads to different results. However, the point of telling the story is not that Jesus or the disciples should select the best soils, or improve them. Jesus is liberal with his sowing. He has confidence in the word of the kingdom and calls on all to hear it. We may say that the ‘pointy end’ of all kingdom action is the preaching of the word of the kingdom. Where this is not happening, there will not be any understanding of anything else regarding the kingdom.

True teachers of the kingdom would be those who took the old things of the prophets and taught them in the new light of the presence of the King of the kingdom.

Not surprisingly, the teaching of Jesus became part of the intrusiveness of Christ into territory taken over by Satan. Frequently, his teaching stirred up animosity and, as the teaching continued, so the opposition to him increased. In the Gospel of Matthew, opposition moved from questioning (9:11) to false accusation (9:34; 12:24), to taking the kingdom by violence (11:12), to accusing and seeking to destroy him (12:10, 14), to asking for proofs (12:38; 16:1), being offended (13:57), to pressing the claims of their own ‘kingdom’ (12:2; 15:1) and to killing him (17:23). In all of this, it was his teaching and his parables that got under their skin (21:45–46), but then, Jesus, who silenced them by his teaching (22:46).

THE KINGDOM PEOPLE ARE THOSE WHO HEAR

This point has largely been apparent in what has been said, but it needs to be clarified that Israel was being redefined by the coming and teaching of Jesus. The parables of the kingdom have been preceded by Jesus saying that his mother and brothers are the hearers of his word, his disciples (Matt. 12:47–50). In other words, these people are doing the will of his Father and are his family. With statements such as these, Jesus gathered the community of true Israel to himself.

There is no community of God other than the one under the reign of his Son, that is, the one that hears his word. Jesus said that many would come from other nations and be in fellowship with Abraham as people of the kingdom, while those who presumed that a heritage of belonging was enough would miss out (Matt. 8:11–12). Those included would include prostitutes and tax collectors (Matt. 21:31), whoever produced the fruits of the kingdom (v. 43), words that are reminiscent of the parable of the sower.

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THE TEACHING OF THE KINGDOM DRAWS US TO THE GRACE OF THE FATHER

The kingdom of God is like a king wanting to settle accounts with his slaves. This, at first, does not sound hopeful. Slaves don't have rights and settling accounts may be rough. But Jesus is making a distinction between the kind of 'kingdom' disciples might have in mind (where forgiveness could extend to seven times) and the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:21–35). Forgiveness is extended to someone, not only hopelessly indebted but also hopelessly out of touch with their true situation. He thinks he can pay his way out of his trouble. Then, he thinks he has rights to 'justice' for someone under him whose situation is trifling by comparison. In such a manner, Christ opens up to us how little we understand the grace of God. Our heavenly Father, whom we may think is nothing but kindness, is merciless with the merciless. The reign of God in Christ is mercy, but it is a reign of mercy. Nothing will remain that is not flowing from and expressive of the Father's mercy.

Then, the kingdom is also like a property managed on the basis of generosity (Matt. 20:1–16). The parable is sandwiched between statements to the effect that people's perceptions as to who is first and last will be reversed by God's judgement. This tells us how continually surprising the kingdom of God is. The first think they are first because they have deserved something. They are last because they don't acknowledge the freedom or generosity of God. The last are first because they have plainly not deserved anything but know the King for who he is and what he has done. The converted and dying thief on his cross is the classic example of a last who is first. His understanding of the reign of Christ is amazing, and he has a 'first place' entry into the kingdom.

This awakening to grace cannot be realised by the disciples apart from the cross. Jesus begins to explain his coming death, but the disciples are more concerned with their status in the kingdom (Matt. 20:17–28). Kingdom places are in the Father's hands and, we may observe, not earnable! The practical question appropriate to the kingdom of grace is, 'are they able to drink the cup he is about to drink?' The kingdom consists not in status but in laying down one's life for others. This is what it will be in its genesis as the King suffers for his people. But it will also be the nature of the whole kingdom in its outworking. The disciples will indeed drink his cup of suffering as they, knowing the grace of the Father and his reign, suffer in the business of proclaiming the kingdom.

A KINGDOM FOR NOW AND TO COME

Jesus, and the letters of the apostles, lead us to expect a glorious fulfilment of all God's promises. The Son of Man will gather out of his kingdom every cause of offence, and then, 'the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matt. 13:43). Jesus teaches us to pray for the kingdom to 'come' and also speaks about entering the kingdom on 'that day', meaning the day of judgement (Matt. 7:21–22; also 18:3; 19:23f.; 23:13). The kingdom cannot be understood apart from Christ's coming again to secure all that he was and is about among his people (Matt. 26:64).

However, the reality of Christ's reign is the reality in which we live. We need help to understand the ambiguities of our present situation and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles is given for our encouragement.

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John the Baptist understood the kingdom's coming to mean a baptism in the Spirit and a consuming of God's enemies (Matt. 3:11–12). It appears that he could not understand the actions of Jesus and made enquiry about whether another would come as Messiah (Matt. 11:3). This vacillation does not seem to be consistent with one who would not be 'shaken by the wind' (Matt. 11:7), but highlights the difficulty of saying that the kingdom is 'at hand'. Jesus sent the enquirers back to John with the report of what he was doing and a blessing for those who did not take offence at him. Clearly, the kingdom is in the hands of the Father and his appointed King, and much that happens, or doesn't happen, will not be explained.

Jesus said that the kingdom 'is among you' (Luke 17:21), but then told a parable because some thought the kingdom would come immediately (Luke 19:11–27). A nobleman left his property in the hands of others while departing to receive a kingdom. His citizens did not want him to reign over them but he left certain property in the hands of ten servants to 'engage in business' until he returned. The parable demonstrates that the kingdom is always the Lord's though the general citizenry is against him. It shows that our actions do not secure the kingdom (that is settled in 'a far country') but that we will be entrusted with further responsibility according to our actions here. Clearly, the Lord's concern for us is that we believe in his reign, and administer what is his in a manner for which we will be commended on the last day. The fact of the general population not wanting his reign is not to be our concern.

After the resurrection, the disciples ask if the coming of the Spirit will be the time for the kingdom to be restored to Israel. This was a reasonable connection to make, but they needed to be clear that the reign of God in the present would have them preaching the gospel to the whole world. The matter of 'times' and 'seasons' for fulfilment of all God's purpose was not to be part of their kingdom operation.

We know that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, and we have been transferred to the kingdom of the Son of the Father's love (Col. 1:13). We have righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) and this, together with the preaching of the gospel, is the present action of the kingdom. Already, the powers of the age to come are dynamically present (Heb. 6:5). However, there are sufferings through which we must pass into the kingdom (Acts 14:22). Already, we 'have come to . . . the city of the living God' (Heb. 12:22), but we 'will receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken', and so, should show gratitude and serve God with reverence and awe (v. 28).