

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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Date: 12-11-2023

Scripture: Matthew 4:12-25

I googled on the internet to find out what are the common teachings of Jesus. What are those important teachings of Jesus? There were a lot of answers, but to my surprise, Byju's answer came up first. But of course, I ignored that and decided to choose a Christian perspective, and went to a site called the KJV store. This is what they had.

A five-point teachings of Jesus summary (thekjvstore.com)

- Selflessly loving your neighbors,
- Loving your enemies,
- Forgiving others,
- Serving others,
- Having faith.

They go on to say that these 5 teachings of Jesus will improve your life and help us to have better inner peace and improve our relationships with those around us.

What do you think? Good enough? Something more?

That question elicited a set of responses, and they do have it right in terms of the teachings. They are things which Jesus did teach. But that's not the most important stuff around. So, if I were to rephrase that question a little differently, to say: What are the important parts of Jesus' teaching that set His teaching apart from that of other teachers, your responses would be a little different. You would say: Oh, but yes, there's this whole dimension of who He is. A regular teacher does not have the perspective that Jesus brings of what He did for you and me. That's part of His teaching.

So, even as I was looking at that, and while teaching Sunday school, there was this whole area of the Lord's Prayer that we were working with. One of those statements is: May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are saying that God's will be done on earth; in a sense, God's kingdom. I found that Matthew's gospel has this whole phrase "The kingdom of God" referenced about 50 times. That's more than one and a half times per chapter, Matthew's gospel being 28 chapters. The other gospels also talk about that. This is important. In fact, That is pretty much the first thing that Jesus took up when He started teaching. In ch. 3, John the Baptist introduces it by saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is here." That's obviously what John has been prepared for – to tell people to prepare the way for His role.

Matthew 4:12-24

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying:

¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles:

¹⁶ The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death
Light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

¹⁸ And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.

²¹ 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. He called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

²³ And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. ²⁴ Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. ²⁵ Great multitudes followed Him—from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan."

To summarize:

- Why He is here? He's here to give this message: Repent for the kingdom of God is here.
- How does He go about it? He goes about inviting fishermen. He is not out there in the city, in Jerusalem, making military alliances or political alliances or even religious alliances. He's calling people who are tradespeople, people who are working with their hands. What struck me was what is recorded here. They immediately left. Both these pairs of brothers – Jesus called and they immediately left. The imperative of Jesus calling. Just imagine me sitting in my office. Jesus calls me – shut down the laptop and walk away? Is that what I would do having just heard about Him? But they do that.
- What else does He do? He is teaching the people who are following Him. How is He making this kingdom happen? By calling people and teaching them, using parables.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY KINGDOM?

When we talk about a kingdom or ruling, we are talking about absolute rulers. We don't have too many of those nowadays. Most of the kingdoms are now republics or democracies or autocratic, whatever. There are a few still remaining – kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or kingdom of Jordan, or Brunei's Sultan, and of course, the modern equivalent, the dictator like in North Korea. These people have absolute power to do anything in their kingdom. You read about what happens in North Korea, and one is horrified at what goes on there in today's time. So, these people have absolute dominion over their kingdom. And in a way, we also do. In our own way, we have our own kingdoms. Pretty much from the time a child is growing up, they exert their will. We all do it in certain domains. We put our will, saying "This is what I want to do," and that becomes our kingdom.

Let's look at this whole area of power and kingship and dominion; it's not to be confused with the actual kingdom per se, a physical or a geographical reality, but the right or authority to rule over. Where does this first make its entry in the Bible? You've heard Pastor say quite often that if you want to understand a word better, see where it occurs in the Bible first. So I looked, and found that thought coming in Genesis ch. 1 itself. If you were expecting it has to do with a king or God, no. It has to do with man.

Genesis 1: 26-28

“²⁶ Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Now, this is a reality. The word of God says that He has given us that dominion. When God created other parts of creation, He turned to the universe that He created and spoke to the universe. Whereas when it came to man, He didn't speak to the universe and create man. He looked to Himself – in His own image, He created man. Scientists will try to confuse the matter by saying that the DNA percentage man and animals is very small, etc. But the Word of God is very clear. We are made in God's image; no one else, only human beings. And that makes us unique and special. He makes us for that purpose – to have dominion over all of these things.

Now let's see the whole aspect of the kingdom unfolding through the Old Testament till the time of Jesus. A quick survey.

We know what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve wanted to make their own choice. They wanted to be able to define what was good and evil, what was right and wrong. And they landed up doing that, in a sense, becoming mini-gods. And they were banished from Eden. But God, who so lovingly created Adam and Eve, was not done with them. So, He puts in place something to redeem that.

And the couple He chose for that was Abraham and Sarah. Through them, as a model, He wanted to bring the whole world back to Him. So, He started taking care of them. And even as they increased in number, we see that they land up becoming slaves in the land of Egypt.

Now, God wasn't done there as yet. He prepared a man, Moses, to get them out of the trouble they were in. Moses helps redeem them against Pharaoh. And immediately after this, when they are rescued, that's the first time in the Bible that this whole concept of God reigning over us appears. We read the Song of the Sea, which Moses and Miriam sang. Exodus 15:1-18. I'll just read the last verse: “The Lord reigns forever and ever.” That's the first documented time in the bible where we see that the Lord is reigning. We first saw man reigning on God's behalf; now we see God is reigning over man.

Let's take the story line further. He says that He will make a rescued slave population like a city set on a hill, like a light on a hill. And that's what He does in terms of taking the people of Israel into the Promised Land, and all that happens after that. but these people, pretty much like us, are stubborn. They have a lot to do with the culture around them. So, after some time, they start saying that like the people around them, they want a king. They have been, till date, taken care of by God. We saw how God raised up Moses. Similarly, there were other people who were raised up by God from time to time – Samson, Samuel – whenever the need arose, God raised up people.

Now, these people are saying: No, we don't want that. We want somebody whom we can hang onto. And that's why they go to get themselves a king. And God gives in. He tells Samuel, who tries to convince the people: Are you sure you want to do this? Kings will impose taxes, they will take your sons and daughters to be servants, and so on. But the people say: yes, we're good with all of that. So

God says, "Okay. Go ahead. I'll give you a king." And we know how that story unfolds, starting with Saul onwards.

Moving ahead, the people of Israel have been taken into exile again. We see a lot of things happening in terms of their identity. Their whole understanding of themselves as a people is changing, moving on where they come back. They come back, but this time there is no self-governance. By the time of Jesus, they are an occupied territory. They are occupied by the Romans. And it's unmistakable – the very presence of foreign soldiers throughout the region. There was a feeling of discomfort.

And that is the context that Jesus comes into. Even at that time, the Jews were very serious about praying for a Messiah. Tradition tells us that they were supposed to meet in groups of a minimum of ten people to pray for the Messiah. And that's the way they did it. It's called a 'minyan'. They continued to dream of a political Messiah who would come.

And here comes Jesus. He ticks the box when it comes to all the prophecies: Naphtali, Zebulun, the place where He is, Capernaum, all of that. Every box is getting ticked. But what is He doing? He is doing something very different.

Let's see what He talks about the kingdom of God. We'll look at it from scripture from a few different areas.

Luke 17:20-21 ²⁰ Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; ²¹ nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

What did they ask Him? "When will it come?" But He is answering a different question – Where will it come? Hold this thought – "In you, in each one of you."

Luke 13:18-21 ¹⁸ Then He said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches." ²⁰ And again He said, "To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like leaven (or yeast), which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened (or risen)."

He gives examples of what it is. If He had described it, they wouldn't have understood. But He gives it in words that they could understand. And these are words that we also can understand. We've all seen mustard seeds. Such a small seed, but it grows into a tree 25ft across. You may not have seen the tree, but you have definitely seen the seed. That is something that we can relate to. And similarly He is talking about yeast. A small pinch of yeast is all that is needed. Those who bake bread, know that. A small pinch going into a batch of dough and the dough rises. These are words that we can relate to.

How is that relevant to the kingdom? He says a few things that we see here.

1. The kingdom of God is happening quietly.
2. The kingdom of God is happening progressively.
3. The kingdom of God is happening inevitably.

A seed is placed; it grows. It takes time, no doubt. A pinch of yeast is placed in the dough and the dough rises. It just happens. And that is what Jesus is saying about the kingdom of God. It is happening inevitably. If the Word is placed, if the teaching is placed in our heart, if we start living that way, the kingdom of God is happening in and through us.

Let us look at a few more areas.

Daniel 2. For context, it is the place where Daniel talks about the vision and explains the vision to the king. v.44 *"This kingdom (he's talking about the eternal kingdom of God) destroys human governments and it lasts forever."* That is what we see here. That is another attribute of this kingdom of God.

Acts 1:4-8

"⁴ And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; ⁵ for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."⁶ Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. ⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Their question – "Will You restore the kingdom at this moment?" It was a question asking for position. We already know that the sons of Zebedee sent their mom to meet Jesus and ask, "Can my sons sit with you on the left and right? A question of position. And this is probably what these disciples were looking at. Having been with Him for 3 years, they were continuing in that same way. They were expecting something different. But Jesus' response is not about when. Once again, He doesn't talk about the when, but about the 'how'. He says, "You will receive power." We normally associate power with position, but Jesus does not give us position. He gives power that is transforming power.

What exactly is power? Power is the capacity to affect change. When humans exercise power, it normally turns to force. Whereas when it is God's power in us, it is no longer force. It is transformative power. The power that can transform, the power that can build, the power that makes these things that Jesus was talking about which like a mustard seed growing into a 25ft tree, or a pinch of yeast leavening a batch of dough. For people like you and me, ordinary people, to go and be transformers in the society that we live. This is exactly what He is talking about, saying that you and I can be transformers in that place where we are placed. And that is really what He talks about – being people of the kingdom of God, individually and collectively.

You might say that this whole thing about power and transformation – how does it tie up to the big picture? What we read in the papers in terms of the political situations and all those things, they seem much bigger than the kind of transformation that we are seeing or we can experience with the kind of individual-based transformation that happens. Shouldn't there be a top-down or a big bang kind of transformation?

Let me give you God's perspective on that. Isaiah 40:15 says, *Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales.*" So the nations, whether it is India, populous nation, China, America, Europe, whatever, all these nations are but a drop in a bucket. And they're counted as small dust on the scales. They are not the actual things being weighed; they're counted as fluff on the side. The actual things being weighed on that scale are us. v. 17 says, *"All nations before Him are as nothing. And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless."*

At one point in time, it used to bother me a lot saying that the Christian population in India at the time of Independence was 2.3%. today, at the last census it is 2.4%. Are we ever going to make a difference? And the answer is here. It says that God does not care about the nations per se, but He

cares about the nations in the light of the people from every nation and tribe and language who are part of His family. And He brings us to take shelter in the branches that He provides. All this is a result of who Jesus is and what He has done. Not what we get from Him, but what He has done for us.

Let's look a little into the future. We see this whole aspect of the kingdom – the kingdom of God, the kingdom of man, us being that part of the kingdom which God is using. Let's see the end of that arc which sort of ends for us in Revelation. One of the most brilliant pieces of music is Handel's Messiah. And the peak of that is the Hallelujah Chorus. In that, there is one verse from Revelation 11:15 "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

We see again that same theme, kingdom descending to the earth. Already here, we have this kingdom of God, and we see the larger part of that which is the kingdom of God becoming the kingdom of the earth. All this is so grand, so huge. What's my part in that? What's your part in that? Each one of us is given that mandate. Each one of us has that within us to be like those fishermen called by Jesus two thousand years back.

We are also called, we are also equipped. We have been given that teaching. He has taught us. You and I have been taught so much. We have been given power. We are equipped to go and be that mustard seed, that pinch of yeast that makes a difference.

The early Christians 200 years back, were hounded into catacombs in Rome. There are writings on the walls there that seem to convey the question: Will we make it through? Are we making a difference? But today, 2000 years later, you and I are sitting here; we are consuming this truth because they held on. They made a difference. You can make a difference. Am I equipped? Do I have it within me? I remember that phrase of Corey Ten Boom. She was a Dutch Jew who was taken to the concentration camps. When she questioned whether she had the strength to go through whatever she had to go through, she was told, "When the time is right, you will get that strength. You will be able to handle it." And she did, and she survived. She became an evangelist and wrote many books.

Each one of us is given that assurance. So along with the power, the fact that whenever we step out to do God's work, He provides whatever we need, whether it is words that we need to speak, whether we are called to pray for healing somebody, He provides the healing. It is not something that I can manufacture. I don't have the words of wisdom to share with somebody. God gives those words of wisdom. And He can give those words of wisdom to any one of us. All He requires is for me to recognize that He has called me to be that mustard seed. All He wants for me is to be that yeast, to be willing to be placed in that batch of dough in that cultural context, in that school, in that college, in that office, in that marketplace situation. You know where you are.

God calls us, each one of us, He equips us. He wants us to have this whole kingdom perspective. The things that He does are way beyond the biggest vocation that you can think of, the biggest dream that you can think of. It's way beyond that. God's purposes are inevitably so. Otherwise, you can't imagine people traveling across the globe, coming into India, opening up some small setup and that becoming a huge institution like CMC Vellore, or something like that. Just because of one person's obedience. And each one of us is called by God to get a kingdom perspective. The kingdom of God is here.

Amen.
