

Gospel of the Kingdom

Part 1: Introduction

by William D. Ramey

The Gospel of the Kingdom was Jesus Christ's central message. He "went around in all Galilee while teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). If we do not understand the message's importance and to whom it was addressed, neither then will we understand the earnestness for His mission: "I MUST preach the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).

Jesus Christ incessantly taught about the Kingdom during His earthly ministry, both before and after His victorious resurrection from the dead. He reiterated what the Hebrew prophets had foretold and performed some of the anticipatory signs, miracles, and powers of it; but alas, the Jews remained under Roman rule. John the Baptist sought an answer shortly before his death to this seemingly irreconcilable situation. "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Jesus responded by alluding to selective prophecies from Isaiah that the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the Gospel is preached to the poor (Matthew 11:2-5; cf. Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). His answer was an attestation that He indeed is the Expected One, and that the Kingdom had come because of the undeniable works which accompanies it had partially occurred.

But where is this Kingdom? What we experience today certainly is not the apocalyptic Kingdom that the prophets had promised concerning the global revelation of God's righteousness, power, and glory. Nor is it what Jesus reported about what the prophets foretold concerning it. Was the Kingdom postponed because of unbelief? Were the prophets and Jesus simply wrong?

What is often "overlooked" is that in addition to the anticipated apocalyptic Kingdom, Jesus disclosed new truth concerning the SAME Kingdom that NEVER had been revealed to any of the prior prophets, including John the Baptist. Jesus taught in parabolic form that before its apocalyptic manifestation at the end of the age, the Kingdom had come in an unexpected form. The content of His explanation is found in the "the mysteries of the Kingdom" (Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8). These "mysteries" were unknown prior to their announcement, for no one could have known about them until revealed. Once Jesus revealed them to His disciples however, they were no longer mysteries to them, but further known truth concerning the SAME Kingdom.

Jesus' parables illustrate a central truth: the Kingdom exists today—the same Kingdom which is yet to appear with great power and glory that shall fill the earth. The identical Kingdom which will one day change the entire external order has begun without ostensibly transforming the old order. Whereas Satan's kingdom still stands, the Kingdom of God has invaded and delivers from the mastery of sin those who believe and persevere in the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The content of the mysteries further reveal that the Kingdom has come quietly and unobtrusively. It currently works among men, but its future splendor presently is unrecognizable because of the absence of its observable supremacy (cf. Luke 17:20-21). God never revealed the Kingdom's inaugural nature to His prophets, hence John the Baptist's urgent question and Jesus' meaning of His otherwise enigmatic statement to him, "Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me (Matthew 11:6). Furthermore, God's people can either accept His rule by faith as His subjects and willingly suffer while living a godly life during this evil generation, or amazingly they may reject it because of their evil hearts and forfeit the blessings of the future glorious Kingdom with further dire consequences at the time of their resurrection from the dead.

The Kingdom has come, but it has not come like a stone grinding an image to powder (Daniel 2:31-35, 44-45), nor destroying all wickedness (Isaiah 11:4) as depicted by the prophets. On the contrary, its inaugural nature is like a farmer unobtrusively sowing seed (Matthew 13:1-23), or like a seemingly insignificant seed of mustard (Matthew 13:31-32), or like a trivial amount of leaven in a big bowl of dough (Matthew 13:33-35). However, its unobtrusive and seemingly insignificant character is not to be despised. The Kingdom's unforeseen inaugural nature is as much the Kingdom as its prophetic and apocalyptic manifestation; for it is the SAME Kingdom! Thus, it is to be highly regarded as hidden treasure (Matthew 13:44) or as a costly pearl of unimaginable value (Matthew 13:45-46). And finally, even though the Kingdom has come in an unexpected manner as revealed by Jesus, God will surely judge His people's acceptance or rejection of the Gospel of the Kingdom as expressed in their behavior when its apocalyptic events occur at the end of this age (Matthew 13:36-43; 47-50).

Although Jesus' explanations are recorded concerning the mysteries of the Kingdom, it is only to those to whom it has been granted to understand them, and therefore it is only His people who can respond properly to them. To His disciples' inquiry why He spoke in parables, Jesus responded by saying,

¹¹"To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. ¹²For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. ¹³Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do

not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; ¹⁵FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.' ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. ¹⁷For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:11-17).

Once the significance of His teaching concerning the mysteries of the Kingdom is grasped, then Jesus' and the apostolic ethical teachings make perfect sense concerning the necessity for holy living. For example, God's people must root out sin from their lives to inherit the Kingdom's future blessings (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21). However, doing so may now cost one's earthly possessions (Mark 10:21), or friends or the affections of family or even their own life (Luke 14:26). To understand the mysteries, is to understand that the Kingdom exists NOW, and therefore one MUST submit to God's rule by behaving righteously, which is only accomplished by turning away from sinful desires and actions. The alternative choice for God's people is devastating (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Properly understanding the Gospel slowly revolutionizes one's thought patterns and conduct, for the Gospel of the Kingdom demands a changed life. This changed life produces a new vitality, focus, and direction. By God's enablement, both one's private and public lives gradually align to His demand for holiness. The Gospel is received by faith, and one's faith is expressed in obedience to the commands of our Lord and His apostles. O Lord, may our faith echo the scriptural teaching concerning sin and the identity of those who belong to Christ.

¹"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ²May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? ³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin" (Romans 6:1-7).

One of the often misunderstood verses of Scripture is John 8:32 in which Jesus states, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Withstanding how Jesus' words are usually misused, we should ask from the overall context of John's Gospel, "What is the truth that shall set us free from sin?"

³¹"So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' ³³They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, "You will become free"?' ³⁴Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'" (John 8:31-36).

"Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

The Gospel was largely rejected by God's people and their leaders throughout the centuries, so too it is rejected today. The false shepherds again and again mislead God's people with incorrect instruction. The ensuing result is that they seriously diminish or completely disregard the Gospel Jesus proclaimed, as well as the ultimate dreadful outcome when it is rejected. They mitigate the Gospel by piously saying that Jesus' ethical teachings SHOULD be followed, and not what now MUST be lived in preparation to inherit the Kingdom's blessings at their resurrection. Others even go so far as to argue that Paul's "Gospel of grace" is different than Jesus' Gospel and/or relegate it to "another dispensation"; or that the Gospel entails "inviting Jesus into your heart" or by reciting variations of "the sinner's prayer." How preposterous! However, this is the mournful state of affairs found in most of today's assemblies, whether Protestant or Catholic.

Regardless of denomination or affiliation, persuasive speakers and writers tragically herald in Jesus' Name another gospel from the pulpits, as well as in adult and children's Bible classes. They propagate it through Bible colleges, seminaries and doctrinal statements, and in their best-sellers, commentaries, newsletters, gospel tracts and songs. They trumpet it on the mission fields, street corners, conference and lecture circuits, gospel rallies, internet, television, and radio; and they proselytize by going door-to-door. Others blatantly claim to have seen visions, dreamt dreams, or received special revelation from God on golden plates to bolster their fraudulent gospel. Irrespective of media or persons involved, a common intertwined thread between their varied gospels is the unified dogma that their illusionary "immortal soul" ascends into heaven at death. Greater the fraud perpetrated and its repetition, the more gullible people are willing to believe a lie and rally to proliferate it.

It is little wonder then, that the hearts of God's people are desensitized to or worse yet, harden against the Gospel of the Kingdom and pending judgment at their resurrection, despite the repeated warnings of the prophets, Jesus, and His apostles. Only one Gospel is proclaimed from Genesis to Revelation by the One voice of God's servants. Only one Gospel directs God's people toward proper repentance and godly conduct. Only one Gospel leads God's people unto the narrow path of life at the resurrection. As Jesus solemnly forewarned after delivering the stringent ethical demands to enter the Kingdom, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are FEW who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

It is of utmost importance fully to realize that the Kingdom's power now comes quietly and without fire or brimstone raining from heaven. The Gospel's messenger can be disregarded, despised, or disposed at the hands of God's people--and all unjustly done in His Name. The Gospel's message can be rejected by harden hearts, it can be choked out, and even its life may sometimes seem to wither and die; nevertheless, it is the Gospel of the Kingdom. But make no mistake, when this same Kingdom is manifested at the end of the age, it will not come quietly and unobtrusively, but with overwhelming apocalyptic might at the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. He will search out all unrighteousness in His Kingdom and expel it without prejudice, including His people who disobeyed the Gospel. He will also justly reward those who now persevere and live faithfully in obedience to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

God inaugurated the greatness of the Kingdom in an unexpected humble manner. It came by way of a baby's birth in an insignificant nation, and in the even more inconsequential city of Bethlehem. It came by way of a meek Galilean man without any earthly credentials; who went throughout the cities of Palestine, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and delivering God's people from their bondage to sin and satanic powers, all the while not having a home to call His own. Yea, it came by way of Christ Jesus, the sinless One who taught above all else to seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness. The very same One despised and rejected as the Messiah of the Kingdom by His own people. After being disfigured beyond recognition because of repeated beatings to the face and body, He was crucified on a cross. Following His triumphal resurrection and ascension, the Gospel later came to God's people by Jesus' apostles and disciples as they went throughout the Roman Empire with the same message, risking great peril and death. Nothing has changed, for it still comes today by God's servants who take the same Gospel to His people and jeopardize their own lives for the Kingdom's sake.

In summary, the Kingdom belongs to the present as well as the future for God's people. Its unexpected emergence was announced by Jesus Christ as made clear in the "mysteries of the Kingdom"; its prophetic and apocalyptic expression

will be fully revealed and ruled by Him under His righteous scepter when He returns at the end of this age. Those who believe the Gospel prepare by repentance and die in regard to sin, with the result that they inherit the blessings of the Kingdom at their resurrection from the dead when Jesus returns. However as in the past, many of God's people reject His message and continue to live ungodly lives. These are the ones who believe in another gospel, which produces the fruit of ungodly thoughts and actions, and thus they consequently suffer the terrifying wrath of God.

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