

The Kingdom of God – Session 5

The Kingdom in the Present and in the Future

Let's begin by looking at the words of Jesus when he was being questioned by the Pharisees: "20 ¶ Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.'" (Luke 17:20-21 NIV)

So is the kingdom of God a future reality to be hoped for or a present reality to experience now? The answer is neither exclusively, its not one or the other but a both and. So, it's partly present and partly future. Many of its blessings are here now, but equally many are not. We can avail ourselves of some of its power now, but not all of it. Jesus won the decisive battle against sin and Satan on the cross, but the war is not yet over. Sin and Satan are still around in this world. Sin must be fought and Satan must be resisted. Sickness must be prayed over and groaned under (Romans 8:23) and death must be endured until the glorious second coming in power of our Lord Jesus.

I've given you the essential answer already, but this morning I want give you the scriptural basis for what I've been saying, and to elaborate on these answers, because I believe that a firm understanding of all this is essential to help us to hold to a strong faith in times of difficulty and trial. So, lets look at the scriptures that show the kingdom of God to be both present and future.

The Kingdom of God as Present

The verses from Luke 17 that we began with are a clear statement that Christ's incarnation on this earth 2,000 years ago are the coming of the kingdom. I believe that Jesus said these things largely to correct what was then a common misunderstanding. It was generally believed that the Messiah would overthrow the power of Rome and re-establish the kingdom of Israel as an earthly kingdom. Here Jesus is saying that the coming of the kingdom of God (which was essentially what the coming of the Messiah represented) was not going to be like that. It wasn't going to come with observable signs like the overthrow of Rome. He's saying that the kingdom of God was both 'within them' and 'in their midst' (as the RSV would translate the end of verse 21). He's saying the kingdom of God was there because he was there, that he was the arrival of the kingdom even though he wasn't going to overthrow the Romans or set up an earthly kingdom at that time.

Jesus began his public ministry, immediately after his baptism, with an affirmation that the time for the kingdom had come:

"14 ¶ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15 NIV)

We find another clear statement of the kingdom of God as present in Matthew chapter 12: "22 ¶ Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. 23 All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." 25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every

city or household divided against itself will not stand. 26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? 27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. 28 But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house. 30 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." (Matthew 12:22-30 NIV)

Here the Pharisees are accusing Jesus of performing his miraculous healings by the power of Satan (Beelzebub was a common name for Satan in those days). What a blasphemy to accuse Jesus of working in the power of Satan. Jesus responds that if Satan were really helping him to drive out demons then Satan's kingdom would be fatally divided against itself and could not stand. Jesus has a very different interpretation of his miracles. He says: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (verse 28). When Jesus does battle with Satan by the Spirit of God, and begins to plunder that strong man's house – that's Satan's kingdom – (verse 29) freeing people from Satan's bondage, then the powers of the kingdom are at work and the kingdom is already present.

The Kingdom of God as Future

Let's begin by looking at some scripture from Luke 19:

"11 ¶ While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. 12 He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. 13 So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' 14 "But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' 15 "He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. 16 "The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 17 "'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' 18 "The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' 19 "His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' 20 "Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. 21 I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' 22 "His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? 23 Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?' 24 "Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' 25 "'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!'" 26 "He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. 27 But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be a king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.'" 28 ¶ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." (Luke 19:11-28 NIV)

Jesus was near Jerusalem, and no doubt the crowd thought he was about to make a move on the centre of political and religious power and overthrow Rome and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. We've already looked at that issue. But, Jesus told a parable that made it clear that the coming of the kingdom would be a long time in the future – verses 12-28. In verse 12 Jesus makes it clear that before the kingdom is established he's going away to be appointed

king and that he'll then return to take up the rule of his kingdom. Note that Jesus says that his subjects hated him (verse 14) – the Pharisees certainly hated Jesus. Jesus then moves on to the last judgement, he rewards his servants according to what they have done with what they have been given. Everything we have comes from God, but we must make the best of what we've been given. At this time Jesus will also judge those who are enemies of the kingdom (verse 27).

Other parables make it clear that the kingdom of God will probably be slow in its consummation and that we shall never know that time, the hour of Christ's second coming, in advance. Look at Matthew chapter 25:

“1 ¶ "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' 7 "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 9 "'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' 10 "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' 12 "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' 13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:1-13 NIV)

Here Christ is the bridegroom and verse 5 tells us that he'll be a long time in coming for the second time and the hour of this coming unknown. But we're called on to be ready and waiting when he does come. Let's not suffer the fate of the unready.

At first sight, the opening words of the story in verse 1 are similar to some earlier parables in this gospel. But whereas those earlier parables told us that the kingdom of heaven “*is like*” a man who sowed seed or a king who wanted to settle accounts; here we are told that the kingdom of heaven *will* be like ten virgins who took their lamps. That's because this parable is telling us not about how things are now but how they will be at the second coming of Christ. So this parable is telling us about the end times. This reference to the future is reinforced by the first three words of verse 1 “At that time..” The virgins' role in meeting and escorting the bridegroom reminds us of the image of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

These virgins would have been young unmarried girls, friends of either the bride or the bridegroom and were apparently supposed to escort the bridegroom in a torchlight procession to his house. Under Jewish wedding customs there would have been a set day, but not a set time when the bridegroom would arrive at the bride's home to take her to his home for the wedding feast, because the wedding procession would always wind back and forth through the village. So those who were to welcome the bridegroom had to be patient – just as we must patiently wait for the second coming of Christ. This is wonderful imagery reminding us that at the second coming we will be escorted to our place in God's house and we wait patiently for that day.

We are then told in verse 2 that half of the girls are silly, whilst the other half are sensible. The Greek words used here for “foolish” and “wise” are the same as those used in the parable

about the house builders, one of whom built on rock and the other on sand. Although these words apparently denote practical common sense they are really referring to spiritual wisdom.

The passage then goes on to describe the difference between the foolish and the wise in verses 3 and 4. The so called “lamps” were hollow cups or saucers, with a round receptacle for the wick, which was fed with pitch or oil. On occasions like this they were fastened to a long wooden pole, and borne aloft in the procession. The jars held the oil which was used to refill the cup or saucer. A lamp without a jar of oil would rapidly become as useless as a modern flashlight without a battery. In the same way we Christians need to be regularly refilled with the oil of the spirit of Christ, otherwise we will become useless.

Let’s move on to the coming of the bridegroom in verses 5 and 6. These verses give the impression that the girls thought they knew when the bridegroom would arrive, and had not reckoned on the delay. A torchlight procession would of course be after dark, but might be expected to be before the middle of the night. The parable illustrates both the fact that the time of Christ’s second coming is unknown, and also that it may not be as soon as people might expect. After all, in chapter 24 of Matthews gospel, Jesus told us that even he did not know the day or the hour of this second coming. Additionally, the parable tells us of the sudden, unexpected nature of this coming because it came in the middle of the night, the time when people are at their least alert. The shout at midnight is like the voice of the archangel and the trump of God which will accompany the second coming of Christ. But the story has a really surprising element here – both the sensible and foolish girls have fallen asleep by the time the bridegroom comes. All were equally disappointed by the delay, all fell asleep, and all were equally taken by surprise by the eventual shout.

Now, in verses 7-9, we see what happened to the different kinds of girls. We don’t know whether the lamps had been lit when the girls first set out, but if so they would not have stayed burning while they slept; even a well filled torch would not burn for much more than half an hour without trimming and adjustment. So the sensible girls now had to refill and light their torches, while the attempts of the silly girls to light their torches were of course futile.

The phrase “our lamps are going out” suggests that as the foolish girls lighted the wicks of their lamps they immediately went out again, having no more oil to keep them burning. The response of the sensible girls to the foolish girls natural request for a share of the oil may sound selfish, actually the statement is even firmer in the Greek, but we need to remember that this is a parable about being spiritually prepared and the hard-nosed realism of the sensible girls invites us to remember that spiritual preparedness is not something that others can provide for us. Each one of us needs our own oil, each one us needs to be spiritually prepared in our own hearts. Let us not be Christians who merely look good but lack the oil of true faith within us.

When the bridegroom comes the feast begins as we see in verses 10-12. The wedding banquet was the high point of a wedding and could last for a week or more – to miss that was to miss everything. Here the wedding banquet represents the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, just as the feast in the parable told at the beginning of Matthew chapter 22 did. As with that earlier feast only those who are ready can enjoy it. Again the exclusion of the foolish girls seems harsh and out of line with Jewish hospitality – although it was the custom at great feasts to close the doors when all the guests were assembled. But this has become,

like so many of the other parables, a story of insiders and outsiders, of the saved and the lost, and the closing of the door symbolizes that final division at the last judgment. If Matthew this time refrains from speaking of “the darkness outside” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” - as he did in connection with the other earlier parables about feasts, - he has made the same point unmistakably clear in the pathetic picture of the silly girls futilely calling outside a closed door. Here the Greek indicates that the door was shut so as to stay shut. We shall be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not prepared.

The bridegrooms dismissive words “I don’t know you” have the force of the judicial verdict at the final judgment. Let’s not be in the position where Christ says **that** to **us** as we stand before the judgement seat.

The point of the parable is simply that spiritual readiness, whatever form it takes, is not something that can be achieved by a last-minute adjustment. It depends on long-term provision, and if that has been made, the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready – just as the wise girls slept and didn’t suffer for it.

The words of verse 13:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:13 NIV)

are a general reminder of the need to remain alert for, and above all to be prepared for, the second coming of Christ. Because we don’t know when he’s coming. It may be tomorrow or it may be in thousands of years. But, God warns each one of us to be ready for that day, not to rely on others to prepare for us and not to play Russian Roulette with our eternal lives. The only way to be ready for that day is to be ready all the time. The foolish virgins took no precautionary steps saying I’ll go to the store tomorrow, there is plenty of time and look what happened to them. Of course, we may well experience death before the time of the second coming arrives, but again we need to be ready or we shall also be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not ready at that time.

The Mystery of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is also to some extent a mystery (AV) or a secret as the NIV puts it. Matthew records Jesus’s words about that in chapter 13 of his gospel:

“10 The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” 11 He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ 16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:10-17 NIV)

So, in verse 11 Jesus says to his disciples “To you it has been given to know the secrets (or mysteries) of the kingdom of heaven”. Just a few verses later Jesus says: “But blessed are

your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” Jesus is saying to them you are seeing the fulfilment of things the prophets longed to see. Gods kingdom has come, but there is a mystery. Not everyone recognises what has come as God’s kingdom, because its not what they were expecting. The kingdom is here but what is here and the way its here is a mystery.

All the parables of Matthew 13 tell us about the mystery of the kingdom. We’ve already looked at some of them, but I’m going to look at some of them again now from this new perspective.

Let’s look again at the parable of the wheat and the weeds:

“24 ¶ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also appeared. 27 "The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ 28 "‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. "The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ 29 "‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-30 NIV)

and its interpretation:

“36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.” (Matthew 13:36-40 NIV)

This is part of the mystery of the kingdom, that it will exist for some time with the righteous (the sons of the kingdom of verse 38) and the evil (the sons of the evil one again verse 38) side by side until the second coming of Christ. This was not what the disciples would have expected. They would have expected that the kingdom would have come with total power to destroy the wicked immediately and to vindicate the righteous. Yet Jesus says the kingdom of God has arrived. There is a partial fulfilment, but the full and complete consummation awaits the second coming of the son of man, the second coming of Christ.

Let’s move on to look at the parable of the fishing net:

“47 "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:47-50 NIV)

Here the mystery of the kingdom is that as then net – the power of the kingdom – draws men into its sway, it draws both good and bad. Only when the net is drawn up on the shore at the end of the age will the good and bad fish be separated.

You must appreciate that the separation which is described here is not between those fish which didn't get caught in the net of the kingdom and those which did. That's not the point of this parable. The net, the kingdom, draws both good and bad and both kinds are swept into it. The separation is between the two kinds of people who are swept into the kingdom. The good are kept and the others are cast into the fire.

So, the mystery of the kingdom is that those who come under its sway are a mixed bag. Some are true disciples and some are hypocrites. There has been a fulfilment of the kingdom, but there has not been consummation. This is the mystery of the kingdom and it leads to two results, one an encouragement the other a warning.

Thus the kingdom now is limited in its scope and its effects. Beware of assuming that all who are swept into the power of God's kingdom are the children of the kingdom. The power of the kingdom gathers many into its net that will be cast out in the end because they loved healing and not holiness; they loved power and not purity; they loved wonders and not the will of God.

Finally the encouragement: the kingdom has really arrived. Unprecedented fulfilment of God's purposes are in the offing. The king has come. The King has dealt with sin once and for all in his sacrifice of self. Christ the king sits at his Father's right hand and now reigns until all his enemies are under his feet. The king's righteousness is now already ours by faith. The king's spirit is already dwelling in us. The king's holiness is already being produced in us. The king's joy and peace have already been given to us. The king's victory over Satan is already ours as we use the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. The king's gifts of his spirit are already available for our ministry.

Let us all lead our Christian lives with a full understanding of the meaning of the mystery of God's kingdom – the now and the not yet, With a full knowledge of those elements of the kingdom which are already with us and an awareness of what awaits the final consummation at Christ's second coming, we avail ourselves of what is and wait patiently with endurance for what is to come. So, now with a sober awareness of the mystery of the kingdom – present yet future, fulfilled but not consummated – let us go on to seek the kingdom first – to discover all we yet should be for the salvation of lost sinners and the glory of Christ or Lord, Christ the ultimate King.

Questions

1. Is the kingdom of God a future reality to be hoped for or a present reality to experience now?
2. Why did the people of Jesus's day commonly fail to understand the nature of the kingdom?
3. Why do Jesus's subjects hate him, rather like the king's subjects in Luke 19?
4. Why do you think God doesn't let us know the time of the second coming?
5. Why must we be ready for this second coming?
6. Why is the kingdom of God a mystery?