

stepping into the kingdom

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Scripture Passage Matthew 5:20, 6:10, 33; Acts 1:3, 19:8

If you asked many people, some Christians, some not, what was the central message of Jesus, what did he come to teach us, I think the most common answer would be he came to tell us to love one another.

Someone might even quote John 13:34.

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Then the practical challenge to us.

❖ This is how all people will know that you are my disciples in that you love one another

That sound so good, and is pretty hard to challenge. What could be wrong with that? How can you disagree with that? Love was certainly a major aspect of the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

But if we read the message of Jesus carefully, I hope to convince you that this is not his primary message. Jesus had a harder message that was to cut deeper into the hearts of people. The primary message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God.

Let me give you a few verses to seek to convince you that this was in fact the principal message of Jesus.

Matthew 5 I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 6 In The Lord's Prayer,

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:33

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...

Many of the parables of Jesus are parables of the kingdom. He said again and again, the kingdom of heaven is like....

Jesus talked about the necessity of being born again to see the kingdom of God. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again...

Then as we move out beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Acts 1:3 Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God.

Acts 19:8 Paul in Ephesus, it says, he argued persuasively about the kingdom of God.

Colossians 1:13 He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his son whom he loves.

Our conclusion must be that the kingdom of God was the most important thing Jesus came to declare, and that this message was echoed in the NT.

To put it bluntly, If we do not think and live in terms of the kingdom of God, we are out of step with the teaching of Jesus.

From VCBC Vision statement: **We envision a community of faith where all members are brought into connection with God and one another in a way that reflects the presence and power of the Kingdom of God.**

LET'S START BY DEFINING THE KINGDOM

What is the kingdom of God?

Prior to about 1890 in North America, there was a greater kingdom consciousness or kingdom thinking than there is now.

The kingdom is the fusion of three main ideas, a trilogy of thought.

1. **Social action:** faith at work. Christians had an active kingdom mindset which bore fruit in many social ministries and cultural reform. Much of the social reform was driven by Christians: abolition of slavery, education, child labour laws, end of exploitation of children.
2. **Evangelistic zeal:** calling people to Christ
3. **Prophetic hope:** looking ahead to coming of Jesus.

Then in the 1900's, this cohesive understanding of the kingdom began to disintegrate, a polarization set in and a vital biblical balance was lost.

Those who were concerned about social action secularized the meaning of the kingdom, separated it from its evangelistic emphasis, and defined the Gospel primary in terms of social

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action, issues of justice. They went in one direction

In reaction, evangelicals spiritualized the message of the kingdom, seeing it almost exclusively in terms of personal salvation. They went in another direction.

Others looked ahead to seeing the kingdom that was to come in prophetic hope. The kingdom became only a future reality. But the result was that the meaning of the kingdom was fragmented. Justice became separated from the gospel. The present became separated from the future.

I sense that we are starting to see some recovery of this trinity of the kingdom. Social action to the homeless, the gospel, and prophetic hope, coming together again.

BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS THE KINGDOM?

My working definition:

The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God over every aspect of the life of believers prior to his complete reign over the cosmos.

The kingdom is not a place, rather it is the rule of God over his people. The kingdom is a reality wherever God is invited to come in and rule.

It is both present and also future. It is here now and it is still to come. It is embryonic, and also to be completed.

It is both earthly and heavenly.

It is hidden and it is visible.

It is physical and it is spiritual.

It is both individual and also communal.

It is as physical as the dust on Jesus feet, and as invisible as the wind blowing through his hair. It is as costly as the crucifixion. And it is as heavenly as Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father.

The task of the church is to demonstrate and live out the dynamic truth of the kingdom. To declare the message of the kingdom. To call people into the kingdom. To nurture kingdom consciousness. To train Christians for kingdom living.

We are called to be sons and daughters of the kingdom because we are sons and daughters of the king. The question is more than, do you

believe in Jesus. The question is, is the kingdom in you and are you living the kingdom?

Personal salvation is at the centre of the kingdom but the kingdom also calls people to think about the poor, about the environment, about injustice because all of this and more are part of the dominion of the King!

The church, Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church, is to be the kingdom community intended by God to be a living organic microcosm of what the kingdom reality is all about until the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.

HOW DOES THE KINGDOM WORK?

Jesus says, the kingdom is like leaven or yeast. It silently permeates the dough, infecting everything. It is like stumbling through life and finding it in a field, or going on a search for the greatest treasure you could ever imagine. Finding it, and then selling everything you have to buy it. It is like the most magnificent banquet you could ever imagine but some people actually throw their invitation away and don't bother to come.

The kingdom does not demand some triumphal entrance like the Oscars. It does not need a red carpet. It does not come brandishing a sword, rather the kingdom arrives in the form of a baby. Luke 1:33 (the Nativity) says, his kingdom shall last forever. The kingdom comes carrying a towel and a basin. It gains its power over us by service. The kingdom does not rape us to force its way on us, rather it waits to be invited. It does not yell in our ears. It quietly speaks to our hearts.

It calls for a radical change in us at the very root and core of who we are. The kingdom is not willing to co-exist with any rival power. The kingdom quietly demands all or nothing!

Our starting place must be what I call **KINGDOM CONSCIOUSNESS OR KINGDOM THINKING.**

Two TV personalities intrigue me in their approach to people and their problems. One is Judge Judy. The other is Dr. Phil, a very popular TV psychologist. I think one of the things that has led to Dr. Phil's success is that he is not afraid to speak straight to people. People share their stories with him before millions. He is unafraid to tell people that bad choices lead to bad results. He challenges them with the changes they need

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to make. Judge Judy is not afraid to tell people what she thinks of their situation. She does not accept their excuses as reasons for misbehaviour.

These modern day secular prophets remind us that the invitation to enter the kingdom is preceded by the word **REPENT**.

Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Mark 1:15

Biblical repentance starts with a radical change of mind.

I realize that this is not popular in our culture. People want to feel good even in the face of their failure, so bringing people to face the reality of their sins is not popular and may not win friends. People get annoyed at that and they tell you that you are meddling.

But only the conviction of sin and the desire for a changed heart leads to Christ.

It has nothing to do with whether the preacher yells or not. It has nothing to do with hearing about fire and brimstone. It has everything to do with listening to the voice of God that speaks to our heart. We need an inside job and only God works from the inside.

Repentance is where we see things they really are. We stop pretending. We stop making excuses. We give up our stubbornness and stupidity. We stop putting our energy into excuses and we put our energy into changing.

Repentance is where we see ourselves as we really are. We realize that we are sinners together. And now we can start the process of changing. Our humanity is no longer denied, instead it is transformed.

Paul Tournier in *Guilt and grace*, our sense of sin lacks depth.

For repentance to do its job and accomplish its work in us, repentance will need to become specific. We will have to label sins for what they are. Unless we take this courageous but necessary step, sins will remain anonymous and secret within us. Just as the animals were named in the garden, so sins need to be named so that the power of the blood of the cross can come against them. We cannot defeat what we cannot or will not name.

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We need to repent of the way in which our personal lives are saturated with our culture. In so many ways Christians are hardly different from non-Christians.

When our minds are shaped and saturated by our culture, they are not free for the kingdom.

When our money is tied up, it is not free for the kingdom. When our time is tied up, it is not free for the kingdom. When our ambition is tied up, it is not free for the kingdom.

We need to repent of the way in which the church uses secular power and tactics to try to advance its work. The kingdom will not be advanced by such tactics or politics and power. We so often fail to see that the only way we can fight the battle and win the war of the kingdom is through the spiritual forces of love, light, truth, righteousness.

The central battleground between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan is in the hearts and minds of people. This is where the clash of wills takes place. This is where the battle is won or lost.

So the kingdom of God is ushered in with the command. Repent. It starts with nothing less than a radical change of mind.

This kind of repentance does not leave us spiritually maimed or psychologically wallowing in sin. Rather it is the healing force that changes our lives.

Repentance enables us to experience God's grace afresh in our lives. The more we realize our sinfulness, the more we can be caught up in the height and depth of God's forgiving grace for us. There is nothing we have to do but stand and let it pour over us, washing us.

So when we stop pretending and repent, we can be changed in the deepest part of our lives and changed in the innermost art of our being.

KINGDOM THINKING STIMULATES A RADICAL CHANGE OF LIFESTYLE.

Repentance must become action. It is not enough to say we will change. Our new lifestyle must reflect the words. The change in words is followed by a change in action or lifestyle.

Notice as John the Baptist comes preaching his message of repentance. Luke 3:8, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. We often think about

the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace. Here is another kind of spiritual fruit that comes before this: the fruit of repentance.

Then in Luke 3:10-14, 3 groups of people ask for some practical advice as to what this means.

They each ask, what shall we do?

Verse 10 ordinary people, just meet ordinary needs. No need for committees. No big programs. Just do it.

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

Verse 12 tax-gatherers, who often made their living by cheating and extorting. Be honest.

12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

Verse 14 soldiers, who were able to exert power and abuse people – be fair.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-- be content with your pay."

The kingdom of God is ruthlessly demanding and intensely practical. It speaks to us where the rubber hits the road. It calls for a radical and relevant change in lifestyle.

It works like yeast and influences every part. Every fiber of our being, influencing decisions, changing the direction of our lives. There is no part of us that is beyond the influence of the kingdom.

A kingdom challenge. If you are doing something or involved with something, a relationship, an activity, that in all honesty you know contradicts the kingdom, think about this seriously. You will not know any more of God's will or direction for any other part of your life, until you deal with that.

The reason is, everything we know from God and about God comes from his revelation. His unfolding of himself to us. Why should God unfold more to us if we are unwilling to allow his kingdom to make the necessary change in us.

THE KINGDOM CALLS FOR A RADICAL RE-INTEGRATION IN OUR LIVES.

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When people find that their lives are in chaos and turmoil, the common response to them is that they need to find balance. So they cry out for help in their chaos. They are often told that their life is out of balance and they need to address this.

(Diagram 1: the normal view of the balanced life.)

That is certainly better than living in chaos but it is not good enough. It does not take us far enough. It is not a kingdom approach to living. There is no divine centre in this kind of balanced life. The seduction is that we can actually have different values in each of these segments of our lives.

(Diagram 2: a kingdom lifestyle.)

The kingdom is now at the centre. This makes a radically integrated life in which the central power and activity kingdom influences everything.

Everything is now inter-connected and integrated into the reality of the kingdom.

This means that a kingdom view of life encompasses and includes the stewardship of all our resources: money, time, house, ambition. The kingdom encompasses and embraces art, education, philosophy, family, money. All of these are a projection of human work. And all of them must come under the lordship of Christ and the kingdom.

This is kingdom thinking at work in us!

What a radical way to live.

In the final analysis, the kingdom is not about a place. It is not a future dream. The kingdom is about a person called Jesus. It is about falling in love with him so that we want to live in a way that pleases him.

As I said earlier, the central battleground between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan is in the hearts and minds of people. This is where the clash of wills takes place. This is where the battle is won or lost.

One evening, Jesus knelt in the garden and prayed. **Father, not my will but your will be done.** That is a kingdom prayer.

Jesus was fighting a kingdom battle in his mind at that moment, and he yielded his life to the dominion of God.

Jesus went to the cross, not because he lost the battle in his mind and will and gave up, but rather because he won the battle in the garden. He submitted to the kingdom of God.

Remember the question that people asked in Luke 3 when confronted with this message of repentance. So what shall we do?

I think for every one of us there is at least one area in our lives in which we know. We know within ourselves that we are not yielding as we should to the word of the kingdom and to the reign of God. It may be finances, a relationship, something in sexual desire, some wrong addiction which means we are trying to find meaning for our lives apart from God.

This is our battle ground. This is where we need to come and join Jesus in the garden. Kneel alongside him and we pray with him. **Father, not my will but your will be done.**

When we come to that point, we find ourselves praying with Jesus. Father, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth, in me as it is done in heaven.