



GROWING IN GRACE

UNIT 3: WHAT IS JESUS' MISSION?

THE BIG IDEA: THE KINGDOM

OBJECTIVES

- To understand what the kingdom of God is.
- To see that the kingdom is a hidden, but present reality that we can enter now.
- To learn how to live within the tension of the “already”/“not yet” reality of the kingdom.
- To discover how to live under the gracious rule of Jesus.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ~ Matthew 6:33

We live perhaps in the most individualistic culture that has ever existed, and this has profoundly misshaped our understanding of the Christian life. Our lives are so centered on the self, that we tend to miss the corporate and even cosmic dimensions of the gospel. This, in turn, has truncated our understanding of the arena in which discipleship happens, often leading to a privatized faith and an exclusive focus on “me and my own spirituality.” Christians fail to appreciate that we are part of a much bigger narrative than our individual story and that we belong to a much bigger community that transcends time and place. How do we recover a fuller sense of the Christian life? We need to gain greater clarity on Jesus’ mission which was to usher in the kingdom of God.

The English word “kingdom” combines the words “king” and “domain.” It originally referred to “the king’s lands.” Of course, from a biblical perspective all of creation is the king’s land. The whole universe belongs to God who is the world’s true king. But perhaps it might be better to translate the word “kingdom” as the reign or rule of God. The emphasis is on God as he is active in his sovereign rule over all creation. When we understand the theme of the kingdom, it reveals the unfolding drama of the scriptures with greater depth and power.

God created the world to flourish under his gracious reign, but we have rebelled against his rule which has led to alienation and breakdown in every sphere of life, including our relationship to God (spiritual), to ourselves (psychological), to one another (social), and to the created world (physical). Thankfully God in his sovereign grace has not left us to our own devices, but has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine king, to restore his rule and to bring all things together under his kingship. Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom with his words, but also demonstrated its coming through his actions. Jesus himself was the proof that the kingdom had arrived. One day Jesus will return to consummate the work he began. He will put right everything that once went wrong. He will reclaim every aspect of creation and restore shalom, meaning universal peace, wholeness, and delight. On that day, “the kingdoms of this world” will become “the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15).

The gospel is cosmic in its scope. The scriptures make clear that God created people, places, and things. Human rebellion and sin have corrupted people, places, and things. But Jesus has promised to redeem

people, places, and things. As we recapture Jesus' vision for the kingdom, it widens and deepens our understanding and experience of the gospel. If Jesus has come not merely to rescue individuals from death but to restore the entire creation, then the gospel is not merely good news for me, it is good news for the world! The end for which God created the world will be realized through the work of Jesus Christ. We can only imagine what life will be like at that time, but we know that justice will reign and suffering will cease. God will restore all things and unite everything in Christ.

The cosmic scope of the gospel showcases the breadth of God's love for all of creation, but it also reveals the depth of God's love for the individual. It reaches all the way down to me. The same God who has set his sights on the restoration of the cosmos has set his love on you. The gospel is astonishingly expansive and intensely personal. It reveals that you are part of a much larger story which fills your life with even greater meaning and purpose. Jesus, the risen and reigning king, was crucified on a wooden cross and resurrected from a cold, dark tomb in order to raise you to a whole new mode of existence so that you might have life – and have it to the fullest (John 10:10).

Why did Jesus go through with this plan? It was not because you were so deserving or so lovable. No, while you were yet an enemy of God, focused on your own autonomy and self-rule and absolutely powerless to change your spiritual condition, Christ died for you in order to reconcile you to God (Romans 5:8-10). Jesus lived the life you should have lived, and died the death you deserved to die. He did it all so that you might experience the eternal kind of life that only he can offer. This is grace beyond degree, and it holds the power to change your life and to remake our world.

The kingship of Jesus holds together the personal and cosmic dimensions of the gospel, but it also introduces a tension. Jesus has launched the kingdom of God. It is already here, and therefore it can be entered and experienced now. But it has not yet arrived in its fullness, and therefore we must await its consummation. One day Jesus will come again in order to fully usher in the reign of God. As a result, we currently live in the time between Jesus' first and second coming – between what Jesus has done to inaugurate the kingdom and what Jesus has left to do to consummate it. We thus live in what some have called “the overlap of the ages.” The new age that God has promised has already begun because Jesus has inaugurated the reign of God. But the old age continues until that day when Jesus completes his kingdom work.

Some have likened our situation to living between D-Day and V-Day. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy. After D-Day there were many battles left to be fought and many lives left to be lost, but the decisive battle had been won. For those who had eyes to see, D-Day represented the beginning of the end of the war. However, it was not until V-Day, May 8, 1945 that the Nazis unconditionally surrendered their forces, and it was now evident to all that the war was finally over. In a similar way, the decisive battle over sin, evil, and death has already been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has disarmed the powers set against him (Colossians 2:15). Yet Jesus' victory over all the forces that oppose his rule will not be evident to all until the day Jesus returns.

Since the kingdom is both “already” here, but “not yet” fully realized, we experience the tension of living in the overlap of “the old age” and “the age to come.” The provisional nature of the kingdom places some stress on our lives, but it also fills us with a sense of repose. Human beings tend to oscillate between feelings of triumphalism (“I can do this!”) to despair (“I will never do this!”). But understanding the already/not yet reality of the kingdom provides us with poise because we have been given the clue to human history. In Jesus Christ, we know how the story ends. This enables us to resist both naivety on the one hand and cynicism on the other. The kingdom of God makes us realistic about the world in which we live, yet hopeful about the future God has promised.

For example, consider the perspective a Christian has on suffering if viewed through the lens of the kingdom of God. Many people ask: How could the kingdom of God be a present reality given how much suffering, pain, and injustice we witness in the world? The truth is that because the kingdom is already here, we know that God has the ability to intervene in any situation to bring healing, deliverance, and restoration. But the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness, and therefore suffering is real. Evil continues to rear its ugly head. Sometimes we suffer as a direct consequence of our own sin, but often times we suffer even though we haven't done anything wrong. In those moments, our suffering is the result of someone else's misdeeds or simply the consequence of living in a fallen world. Either way we should expect life to be filled with crushing disappointments and senseless tragedies. Anyone who promises you health and wealth in the name of Jesus is selling you something. Pain and suffering will not be eliminated until that day when Jesus ushers in a new heavens and a new earth and personally wipes the tears from our eyes (Revelation 21.1-4). But pain and suffering will be eliminated. The sure and certain hope of the resurrection of Jesus fills us with peace, which is why Jesus encourages us with these words: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16.33).

Or consider the perspective a Christian has on personal character. Since the kingdom of God is already here, real change is possible. Through the Spirit and the power of the gospel, we have confidence that anyone who places their trust in Jesus will be set free from the powers of evil and will be granted the liberty to struggle against indwelling sin and progressively become more like Christ. But since the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness, we acknowledge that there are no quick and easy fixes to our personal problems. Our growth in character may be gradual and slow, and we expect there to be setbacks, lapses, and moral failures. Why? Sin's dominion has been broken in the life of a Christian, but it will not be eradicated until the work that Jesus began in each of his followers is brought to completion (Philippians 1.6).

Finally, consider the perspective a Christian has on our social world. The kingdom of God is already here, and therefore we have been given a vision of the kind of world God intends for us – a world marked by the interconnected relationships of God, humans, and all of creation in a rich state of harmony and wholeness. The gospel reverses the values of the world with respect to power, wealth, status, and recognition and breaks down the dividing walls of race, class, and gender. In light of this vision, Christians can advance positive changes in the world by protecting children, caring for the destitute, freeing the enslaved, welcoming the stranger, improving working conditions, and defending the marginalized. We are convinced that God holds the power to change communities, institutions, and social situations and alter the course of human history. The kingdom of God, however, is not yet fully here, and therefore we know that selfishness, cruelty, violence, and oppression will continue. Christians understand how deeply sin is engrained in the human heart, and therefore followers of Jesus harbor no utopian illusions regarding the ability of any government, any political platform, or any social agenda to attain true peace. We acknowledge that we can perhaps improve society, but we can never perfect it. Our social world will not be perfected until Jesus makes all things new (Revelation 21.5).

The kingdom of God reveals the breadth and depth of the gospel and thus expands and fortifies our vision of the Christian life. For that reason, we need to take a closer look at the way in which Jesus conceived of his own mission.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you define a kingdom in your own terms? What does it mean to live in a kingdom?

2. How does the coming of God's kingdom bring good news not only for the individual, but also for the world?

3. In what ways has our individualistic culture impacted your understanding of the gospel, and how does Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God change that?

4. What does it mean to say that the kingdom is "already" here, but it has "not yet" arrived in its fullness?

5. How does the "already" and "not yet" reality of the kingdom of God help explain some of the tensions and struggles you experience in the Christian life?

SCRIPTURE STUDY: MATTHEW 4:23-25

²³And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Matthew tells us that when Jesus launched his ministry, he went throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel. Mark refers to "the gospel of God" (Mark 1.14) or "the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1.1), but Matthew calls it "the gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4.23). Jesus' whole life was dedicated to revealing and advancing the kingdom of God. It formed the heart of his teaching and served as the central theme of most of his parables. This is what Jesus' life was all about, but to many of us, the kingdom of God remains something of a mystery and plays little role in our conception of discipleship.

The Nature of the Kingdom - What It Is

Jesus did not go throughout the region of Galilee proclaiming: “If you believe the minimum required set of facts about me, you can be forgiven and go to heaven when you die.” No, he announced: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” When we hear the word “kingdom” we tend to think of something like a medieval kingdom that extends over a particular geographical region with clearly demarcated borders and a castle at its heart. But it is better to think of the kingdom of God in an active rather than spatial sense. The kingdom or kingship of God is the dynamic reign or rule of God.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” That is really two ways of saying the same thing. God’s kingdom is where God’s will is done. It’s where whatever he says – goes. When you understand that, you realize that everyone lives in a kingdom. The only question is which one – yours or God’s? John Calvin once wrote, “Everyone flatters himself and carries a kingdom in his breast,” meaning that every last one of us thinks we are better than we truly are. We assume we are the kings and queens of our own kingdoms. Your kingdom is where whatever you say – goes. It is where your will is done. But God’s kingdom is where whatever he says – goes. It is where his will is done.

When Jesus introduced the Lord’s Prayer, he was not suggesting a split-level view of the universe where the earth refers to the physical world “down here” and heaven refers to an ethereal world somewhere “up there” beyond the clouds. Heaven is not a far-off place within space-time matter, but rather it is a different dimension of reality altogether that overlaps and intersects with this one. Put crudely but simply, earth is human space; it is where human beings dwell. Heaven is God’s space; it is where God dwells. Of course, God is sovereign over all. Heaven and earth belong to him. Yet there are currently times and places where God allows things to run counter to his will. Right now, there are areas where God’s will is not done. That is why we pray that God’s kingdom will come and his will be done in our realm as it is in God’s realm. While heaven and earth may be disconnected from one another in some ways now, God has promised that one day he will bring them fully together and make a new creation.

When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come or that it has drawn near, he is not saying that one day in the distant future he will answer that prayer. Jesus is saying that he is answering that prayer now – even as we speak. God’s reality is invading this world. He is bringing God’s will to bear on human life. While God’s reign is not evident for all to see, the kingdom of God is nevertheless really here. It is presently available. The kingdom of God has arrived in the person of King Jesus. Jesus manifests the presence and power of God.

So how do we know the kingdom of God is here? The kingdom of God is wherever Jesus’ kingship is acknowledged, wherever evil is subdued, wherever his people are rescued, wherever his ways are followed. If that is true, then that means that the kingdom of God is not something that you must wait to experience until after you die. Rather, you can experience it now. When you enter into the kingdom of God, you enter into an entirely different kind of life, which Jesus calls “eternal,” “abundant,” or “life to the full.” A whole new way of life is now possible. We live in a God-soaked world if only we have the eyes to see it.

The Signs of the Kingdom – What It Looks Like

In order to see the kingdom in our midst, we need to learn to read the signs. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius both refer to Jesus, and the 1st century AD Jewish historian, Josephus, spoke of Jesus as a wise teacher and miracle worker who attracted a large following and was sentenced to death on a cross. Matthew’s gospel tells us much the same thing. Jesus was known for being able to heal all kinds of diseases and afflictions. As Jesus’ fame spread, people brought the sick, the afflicted, and the oppressed to him, and he healed them.

This, however, is where many of us as modern people have problems because we have trouble accepting

the idea of miracles that violate the laws of nature. For that reason, it is important to see that what Jesus is doing is not a violation of nature but a fulfillment of nature. Jesus does not perform stunts or magic tricks that are nothing more than arbitrary, theatrical, or meaningless interruptions of the universal order. Rather his actions are always purposeful and life-giving. He does not replace nature, he restores nature.

Suppose there really is a God who is responsible for this world and everything in it. What kinds of things would he do if he suddenly showed up? We would expect that wherever he sees brokenness, he would want to see it fixed. That's precisely what Jesus does. He heals. He restores. He renews. The purpose of the signs is to authenticate Jesus' claim to be God's unique Son, who has come to us despite our sin to reconcile us in relationship to God and to one another and to renew the world he loves.

Notice that Jesus' healings and miracles are signs, not only in the sense that they back-up Jesus' claims to be the world's rightful king because he can do what no one else can, but also because they provide us with a picture of the kind of renewal Jesus seeks to bring. These signs provide us with a snapshot of the future when Jesus brings the kingdom in all its fullness. They show us that Jesus' renewal is comprehensive in its scope: spiritual and physical, personal and cosmic. Jesus is in the business of not only saving souls, but also redeeming bodies. He is not merely rescuing individuals, he is renewing the world. Jesus is concerned with everything that prevents people from flourishing as he intends and so should we. We must be committed to evangelism and service. We must share our faith and our resources. We must resist idolatry and injustice.

The Demand of the Kingdom – What It Requires

What does the coming of the kingdom require of us? When Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has now drawn near, he places a demand upon us. Will we accept his kingship, or will we resist it?

In the 1938 film, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, starring Errol Flynn in the feature role, King Richard of England has been taken captive by Leopold of Austria. In the king's absence, Prince John plots and schemes in order to seize the throne for himself. He relies on corruption and injustice in order to increase his wealth and thus secure his hold on power. These are the conditions which lead Sir Robin of Locksley to become the bandit of Sherwood Forest. At one point in the film, Robin and his men fall upon a group of monks who are traveling through the forest. In the presence of the monks, Robin denounces King Richard for abandoning them and leaving the safety of England to outlaws like himself. Upon hearing this, one of the monks removes his cloak, revealing a crown on his head and a coat of arms on his chest. The man dressed as a monk is King Richard himself. The rightful king has returned, but he has come in disguise! Robin immediately realizes with whom he is speaking. He drops to his knees and simply says, "Sire." Richard is the true king and therefore he demands the allegiance of his subjects. Robin is an outlaw who resists the despotic forces of oppression, but in the presence of the real king he says, "My sword is yours, Sire, now and always."

And so it is for us. Jesus reveals that he is our true king who has returned to set the world right. But he has come in disguise, dressed in the robes of humility and weakness rather than power and strength, and therefore it is easy to miss his true identity. But once we recognize Jesus for who he truly is, then we must yield to him the allegiance of our lives. The only appropriate way to respond to Jesus' kingship is to drop to our knees, to surrender control, and to acknowledge that our lives are his, now and always.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Jesus' proclamation of "the gospel of the kingdom" broaden the scope of what Jesus has accomplished for us? In other words, how does this show us that Jesus' work is far more extensive and impactful than merely telling us how to "go to heaven when we die"?

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 13:44

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: MATTHEW 13:24-46

²⁴He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ ²⁸He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’

³¹He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³²It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

³⁴All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. ³⁵This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

*“I will open my mouth in parables;
I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”*

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴²and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

⁴⁴“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls,⁴⁶who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

This passage contains five “parables,” which are simply illustrations drawn from everyday life that are

intended to make a single point or perhaps a few select points. The first three parables are concerned with the growth of the kingdom, and the last two speak to the value of the kingdom. Note that Matthew, like other conscientious first-century writers, prefers to use the expression “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God” to avoid using the word “God,” but the two terms are synonymous.

1. In the first parable (verses 24-30), Jesus speaks of a man who sows good seed in a field. He later explains the parable to his disciples (verses 36-43). If the kingdom of God is a present reality, how does this parable account for the fact that some people who profess to be Christians conduct themselves in a manner that is so unlike Christ? How does this parable give genuine Christians hope as they struggle with sin from within and from without?
2. How does Jesus’ parable of the weeds among the wheat challenge the illusion of a “pure church”?
3. In the second parable (verses 31-32), Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed. How is the kingdom of God like a tiny seed? What does this parable suggest about the inauspicious beginnings of the kingdom of God?
4. How does the image of a seed speak to the extensive growth of the kingdom? What promise does the seed hold for the future?
5. In the third parable (verse 33), Jesus likens the kingdom of God to leaven that has been hidden in flour. How does the image of leaven speak to the intensive transformation wrought by the kingdom of God? How does Jesus confront the objection that the kingdom of God does not appear to be real because it is not obvious for all to see?
6. In what ways does the “hiddenness” of the kingdom affect your daily life as a follower of Jesus?

7. How do these three parables about kingdom growth speak to the intensive transformation wrought by God in his people, in the church, and in the world?

8. In the final two parables (verses 44-46), Jesus likens the kingdom to a treasure hidden in a field and to a pearl of great price. What do these two parables have in common?

9. Life in the kingdom is not about “doing more” or “trying harder.” It is about continual fresh discoveries of a reality that is worth more than anything you have encountered before. Why is life with Jesus now the greatest treasure you can find?

10. The man and the merchant in the last two parables gave up everything for the treasures they found. How should we respond to Jesus for bring us into the kingdom of God? What hinders you from such a response?

FURTHER READING: DALLAS WALLARD, *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY* (1997)

Having established a beachhead of divine life in an ordinary human existence, Jesus finally stepped into the public arena to expose his life publicly and to make it available to the world. Mark’s Gospel reports that “Jesus then came into Galilee announcing the good news from God. ‘All the preliminaries have been taken care of,’ he said, ‘and the rule of God is now accessible to everyone. Review your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable new opportunity’” (Mark 1.15).

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ deeds and words, the formulation repeatedly used is the well-known “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand” (Matthew 3.2; 4.17; 10.7). This is a call for us to reconsider how we have been approaching our life, in light of the fact that we now, in the presence of Jesus, have the option of living within the surrounding movements of God’s eternal purposes...

To gain a deeper understanding of our eternal kind of life in God’s present kingdom, we must be sure to understand what a kingdom is. Every last one of us has a ‘kingdom’ – or a ‘queendom,’ or a ‘government’ – a realm that is uniquely our own, where our choice determines what happens...We are made to ‘have dominion’ within an appropriate domain of reality. This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us and is the basis

of the destiny for which we were formed. We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God's great universe.

Our 'kingdom' is simply the range of our effective will. Whatever we genuinely have the say over is in our kingdom. And our having the say over something is precisely what places it within our kingdom. In creating human beings God made them to rule, to reign, to have dominion in a limited sphere. Only so can they be persons...The human job description (the 'creation covenant,' we might call it) found in chapter 1 of Genesis indicates that God assigned to us collectively the rule over all living things on earth, animal and plant. We are responsible before God for life on earth (Genesis 1.28-30)...

Now God's own "kingdom," or "rule," is the range of his effective will, where what he wants is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom.

The Old Testament book of Psalms comes to a joyous, breathtaking celebration of God's kingdom in Psalms 145-150. The picture there presented must be kept in mind whenever we try to understand his kingdom. Then we will not doubt that that kingdom has existed from the moment of creation and will never end (Psalm 145.13; Daniel 7.14). It cannot be "shaken" (Hebrews 12.27f.) and is totally good. It has never been in trouble and never will be. It is not something that human beings produce or, ultimately, can hinder. We do have an invitation to be a part of it, but if we refuse we only hurt ourselves...

Contrary to a popular idea, the kingdom of God is not primarily something that is "in the hearts of men." That kingdom may be there, and it may govern human beings through their faith and allegiance to Christ. At the present time it governs them only through their hearts, if at all. But his kingdom is not something confined to their hearts or to the "inner" world of human consciousness. It is not some matter of inner attitude or faith that might be totally disconnected from the public, behavioral, visible world...

Also, God did not start to bring his kingdom, the "kingdom of the heavens" as Jesus often called it, into existence through Jesus' presence on earth. All too frequently it is suggested that he did. But Jesus' own gospel of the kingdom was not that the kingdom was about to come, or had recently come, into existence. If we attend to what he actually said, it becomes clear that his gospel concerned only the new accessibility of the kingdom to humanity through himself...

So when Jesus directs us to pray, "Thy kingdom come," he does not mean we should pray for it to come into existence. Rather, we pray for it to take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded: "On earth as it is in heaven." With this prayer we are invoking it, as in faith we are acting it, into the real world of our existence.

Within his overarching dominion God has created us and has given each of us, like him, a range of will - beginning from our minds and bodies and extending outward...His intent is for us to learn to mesh our kingdom with the kingdoms of others. Love of neighbor, rightly understood, will make this happen. But we can only love adequately by taking as our primary aim the integration of our rule with God's. That is why love of neighbor is the second, not the first, commandment and why we are told to seek first the kingdom, or rule, of God...

We must reemphasize that in speaking of the kingdom of the heavens being "at hand," Jesus was not speaking of something that was about to happen but had not yet happened and might not. In the course of human events there are always plenty of things that are on the horizon of possibility but do not come about or that come about later. And there certainly is a dimension of still future realization of God's rule. But

the term *eggiken* – usually translated as “is at hand” or “has drawn nigh” in such passages as Matthew 3.2; 4.7; 10.7; Mark 1.15; Luke 10.9, 11 – is a verb form indicating a past and completed action. It is best translated simply “has come.”

The reality of God’s rule, and all of the instrumentalities it involves, is present in action and available with and through the person of Jesus. That is Jesus’ gospel. The obvious present reality of the kingdom is what provoked the responses we have just discussed. New Testament passages make plain that this kingdom is not something to be “accepted” now and enjoyed later, but something to be entered now (Matthew 5.20; 18.3; John 3.3, 5). It is something that already has flesh-and-blood citizens (John 18.36; Philippians 3.20) who have been transformed into it (Colossians 1.13) and are fellow workers in it (Colossians 4.11).

The apostle Paul on one occasion describes it simply as “righteousness and peace and joy” of a type that only occurs “through the energizing of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14.17). That it is not of, or not derived from, this world or “here” does not mean that it is not real or that it is not in this world (John 18.36). It is, as Jesus said, constantly in the midst of human life (Luke 17.21; cf. Deuteronomy 7.21). Indeed, it means that it is more real and more present than any human arrangement could ever possibly be...

One thing that may mislead us about the meaning of “at hand” in Jesus’ basic message is the fact that other “kingdoms” are still present on earth along with the kingdom of the heavens. They too are “at hand.” That is the human condition. Persons other than God, such as you or I, are still allowed on earth to have a “say” that is contrary to his will. A kingdom of darkness is here, certainly, and the kingdoms of many individuals who are still “trying to run their own show.”

All of this God still permits. And the lack of human unity in intelligent love under God not only leaves us at the mercy of man-made disasters, such as wars, famine, and oppression, but also prevents our dealing successfully with many so-called natural evils, such as disease, scarcity, and weather-related disasters. So, along with the “already here” there obviously remains a “not yet” aspect with regard to God’s present rule on earth...

Right beside and among the kingdoms that are not God’s stands his kingdom, always “at hand.” It is that of Jesus and his heavenly Father. It can be ours as well. The door is open, and life in that kingdom is real. Even now “the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6.3). True, few see it. The earth is not yet “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” But that too one day shall be (Hebrews 2.14)...

The kingdom of God is...right beside us. It is indeed The Kingdom Among Us. You can reach it from your heart with your mouth – through even a shaky and stumbling confidence and confession that Jesus is the death-conquering Master of all (Romans 10.9). To be sure, that kingdom has been here as long as we humans have been here, and longer. But it has been available to us through simple confidence in Jesus, the Anointed, only from the time he became a public figure. It is a kingdom that, in the person of Jesus, welcomes us just as we are, just where we are, and makes it possible for us to translate our “ordinary” life into an eternal one. It is so available that everyone who from the center of his or her being calls upon Jesus as Master of the Universe and Prince of Life will be heard and will be delivered into the eternal kind of life.