

Defining God's Kingdom

Mark 2:23-3:6

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What comes to mind for you when you hear the phrase "Kingdom of God"? Some people's minds go to the ancient Crusades, as portrayed in a 2005 movie titled "Kingdom of Heaven." The Crusades were a series of wars in which Christians in Europe sought to vanquish Muslims and Jews and reclaim Jerusalem and the Holy Land for Christianity. In our own day, we hear some politicians and Christian voters talk about electing the right people into office so we can reestablish our nation's godly heritage and bring God's kingdom to the United States.

A number of years ago, a man greeted me at the door after a worship service that concluded with the song "King of Heaven" and asked, "Why can't we Christians just come together and bring God's kingdom to earth?" I wasn't sure how to answer the question, so I said, "Let's meet for lunch and talk about that." In the meantime, the person's question caused me to reexamine the song's lyrics:

"King Of Heaven"

Jesus, let Your kingdom come here

Let Your will be done here in us

Jesus, there is no one greater

You alone are Savior

Show the world Your love

King of Heaven, come down

King of Heaven, come now

Let Your glory reign, shining like the day

King of Heaven come

King of Heaven, rise up

Who can stand against us?

You are strong to save

In Your mighty name

King of Heaven, come

We are children of Your mercy

Rescued for Your glory

We cry, Jesus,

Set our hearts towards You

Every eye would see You lifted high

Following our lunch meeting, I realized my understanding of the meaning of that song and the nature of God's kingdom was very different than that person's interpretation. While I focused on phrases like "Show the world your love" and "We are children of your mercy, rescued for your glory," the triumphant phrase, "King of Heaven, rise up, who can stand against us; you are strong to save in your mighty name," was foremost on this person's mind.

Last Sunday, I focused on Jesus' proclamation, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Throughout his teaching and ministry, Jesus talked extensively about the kingdom of God. He emphasized this theme because his coming marked the dawn of a new era, but He also spoke repeatedly about the kingdom of God, because the nature of God's kingdom was so widely misunderstood.

People in Jesus' day, not unlike widespread sentiment in our own day, were looking for God to come and establish his kingdom on earth with great fanfare and power. First century Jews were looking for a military figure—a Messiah who would conquer Rome and occupy the throne as a godly leader. They were anticipating God's people being elevated from oppressed servants to a place of privilege and status. Throughout his ministry, Jesus boldly confronted the confusion surrounding who the Messiah was and what the kingdom of God looked like.

This morning, I want us to focus on a segment from Mark's gospel that stretches from the end of chapter 1 through the first part of chapter 3. Within those 40 verses, we see six different events where Jesus confronted people's understanding of who He was as Messiah and what the kingdom of God actually was. In these verses, Jesus...

- Healed a man with leprosy and instructed him to keep his healing quiet, because people weren't ready yet to accept who Jesus was
- Forgave and healed a paralyzed man and was then accused of blaspheming by the teachers of the law
- Called Levi (better known to us as Matthew) to be his disciple and then attended a party at Matthew's house, where He was criticized for eating with sinners and tax collectors
- Explained why his disciples weren't fasting after the Pharisees complained and asked why other religious people fasted but his disciples didn't

- Defended his disciples against the Pharisees' complaint that they were breaking the Sabbath rules on harvesting by plucking heads of grain and eating them
- Healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, causing the Pharisees and Herodians to become so angry that they began to plot how they might kill Jesus.

In each case, Jesus didn't just defy convention; He gave his audience glimpses of what the kingdom of God was really about.

Since it's impossible for me to explain 40 verses and look at six different events in Jesus' life without preaching for two to three hours, I'm going to focus on the last 12 verses of this passage, which detail two events in Jesus' early ministry. Both of these accounts center on the Sabbath, the centerpiece of the Jewish Law. Jewish religious leaders invested much of their time and energy on keeping the Sabbath, studying the nuances of Sabbath-keeping and teaching and doing what they could to ensure that other Jews faithfully kept the Sabbath. It was no accident that when He wanted to confront misunderstanding surrounding the nature of the kingdom of God, Jesus challenged the religious leaders' understanding of Sabbath by blatantly violating Sabbath law. Follow along as I read Mark 2:23–3:6:

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. – Mark 2:23-3:6

It’s difficult to read the Gospels and not come away with the impression that Jesus was a rebel. He frequently tweaked the religious leaders with his words and his actions, even when conflict could have been avoided. Jesus was a rebel, but he wasn’t a rebel without a cause. He consistently poked and prodded the religious leaders and his audience, because He wanted to give them a fresh understanding of who He was and what the kingdom of God was about.

In the first instance, as Jesus and his disciples walked through a grainfield on the Sabbath, the disciples picked heads of grain and ate them. The Pharisees came to Jesus and complained that his disciples were breaking the Sabbath. Reading that, we tend to think the religious leaders were just being petty, but they were immersed in a system that rigorously kept the Law. By the time of Jesus, the detailed layers of rules that had grown up around Sabbath keeping had evolved into absurdity. Thirty-nine categories, with multiple rules under each category, were established to ensure that God’s holy day was faithfully kept. There were rules about how far one could walk from their home, because if a person went too far it was considered work. There was a rule against dragging a chair across a dirt floor, because the trench it dug was considered “plowing.” Observing the day of rest had become extremely wearisome.

Jesus answered the Pharisees’ critique of his disciples by pointing to the example of David in the Old Testament. David was revered by Jews as a “man after God’s heart,” and yet when he was hungry, he and his men ate consecrated bread normally reserved only for priests. Then Jesus went on to speak words that put the entire Law God had given his people into context. In verses 27 and 28 of Mark 2, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28).

That statement is straight forward and probably doesn't strike us as being controversial, but it was radical. In saying that Sabbath was made for people, not vice versa, Jesus reminded the Jewish leaders that God's priority was his love for people, not an obsession with them keeping his rules. In their fixation on keeping God's Law, the Jewish leaders focused so much on rules, rituals, and regulations that they had lost sight of the priority: people's relationship with God. And Jesus continued his confrontation of these leaders with his words, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." In other words, Jesus told them he was the Messiah, the Son of God, and He was the one who interpreted the Law.

Jesus continued his emphasis on the priority of people and their relationship with God in the next event: his healing of the man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. As we read of the interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders in the Gospels, it appears these guys spent much their time following Jesus around, watching and waiting for him to do something wrong. At times it seems they arranged circumstances to trap Him or to try and trip Him up. Listen to how Mark chapter 3 begins:

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. – Mark 3:1–2

The religious leaders were looking to accuse Jesus, so they went into the synagogue, not to worship but to see if Jesus would heal a man with a shriveled hand. The text doesn't make this explicit, but the man with the shriveled hand likely was placed in the synagogue as a plant. Why else would the religious leaders come and watch to see what Jesus would do? How did they know that the man with the deformed hand would be there?

Jesus takes their bait. He didn't go off to the side in a remote corner and discreetly heal this man. He wanted to make a point to the religious leaders and to the worshipers that day. He told the man to stand up in front of everyone, and then He asked everyone, "What is the law concerning Sabbath? Is it to do good or to do evil?" The religious leaders refused to answer because they knew Jesus had them tied up in knots—and the audience wouldn't answer because they didn't want to be criticized by the religious leaders—so everyone was silent.

We're told that Jesus was angry and deeply distressed by their stubbornness, and He commanded the man, "Stretch out your hand." The man stretched out his hand and he was completely healed.

In the Gospel of Matthew's account of this healing, Jesus spoke these words to crowd before healing the man:

"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." – Matthew 12:11–12

Jesus said to them, "Your Sabbath laws allow you to pull your livestock out of a pit if it falls into it on the Sabbath, but it won't allow you to heal a person with an infirmity... that's a problem. The heart of the Sabbath is to do good, not to harm people or to fail to help them." We see it clearly in these verses, and throughout his ministry of teaching and preaching and healing and doing miracles, Jesus demonstrated that the priority of the kingdom of God is people and their relationship with God—not rules, rituals, regulations and anything else that might hinder people entering a relationship with God and experiencing his love.

Let's turn our focus to today and the implications of Jesus' Lordship and the kingdom of God coming near to us. The needs of people all around us are as great, if not greater, than they've ever been. We don't have to look far to see people who are struggling emotionally, physically, relationally, financially, and spiritually. In fact, many of us struggle in those ways. In the face of all that need, Jesus' Church is confronted with one of two options. First, we can ignore the needs all around us by sticking our heads in the sand like an ostrich. We can focus our time, energy and resources on ourselves and on our people. We can seek to build larger buildings, develop more extensive programs, collect more people who are part of our church, and ultimately build our own empire. We can determine that the kingdom of God is essentially about us and what happens inside the walls of our church building and within our network of friends and acquaintances. That can be an attractive response, and it's one that is easy for us to fall into.

Our second option is to believe and act like the kingdom of God is about the people God loves—all people. In Luke 19, after Jesus initiated a conversation with the despised tax collector Zacchaeus and then declared that salvation had come to his home, Jesus clearly stated his mission with these words: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Churches and followers of Jesus who embrace the needs of people around them outside of their church building ask the question, “How can we partner with Jesus in meeting the needs of people all around us, not just the needs of those within our church?” This external focus on meeting the needs of people God loves doesn’t preclude us from meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters within the church—the Bible is clear about our responsibility to care for people of faith—but it means that our attention moves beyond ourselves and followers of Jesus we’re in relationship with to the profound needs within our neighborhoods, communities, schools, places of work, and ultimately, in our world.

A quick study of almost any era in history will provide examples of churches and followers of Jesus who have defined their mission field as the world around them and have been used by God to profoundly impact their world. Others have limited their focus to caring for themselves and their people and have confined their focus to the four walls of their church building, seemingly oblivious to the depth of intense need all around them.

If you’ve been connected with our church family for any period of time, you know what my heart and the heart of our staff and leadership is here at McBIC. We want to see our church family grow as disciples of Jesus and thrive in our relationships with each other and with Him, **and** we want to embrace Jesus’ mission to seek and to save hurting and broken people around us—people Jesus described as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

My challenge for each of us this morning, on a personal level and for us as a church family, is to embrace Jesus’ view of the kingdom of God, to prioritize loving and caring for people, and pointing them to a relationship with God over rules, rituals and religion—stuff that is so easy for us to become consumed with. When Jesus wanted to demonstrate what the kingdom of God looked like, He was very intentional about placing a priority on people instead of religion. He angered the religious establishment, but sinners were drawn to relationship with

Him. My heart for my life, for yours and for us as a church family is that people would be attracted to and connected with God through our lives. God, let your kingdom come!

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us,

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,

forever and ever. AMEN.