

30. Pressing Into the Kingdom

In what may be the least apprehended instruction about the kingdom of God, Jesus said, “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.” (Lk. 16:16) That we might remedy the lack of apprehension of this instruction, let us consider again exactly what the kingdom of God is:

- That realm of human existence where Christ literally and actually rules and reigns as King. This realm is not a physical place but rather a spiritual condition unlike anything this world, with its systems, kingdoms philosophies and science, can imagine, let alone concoct or manufacture. (1 Cor. 2:14, etc.)
- “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17)
- “The kingdom of God is not in word but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20)
- Christ’s kingdom is not of this deceptive and deceived world but a realm of truth. (Jn. 18:36-37)

Jesus’ instruction clearly tells us that John the Baptist stands as the dividing line between “the law and the prophets” and “the kingdom of God.” In one layer of this instruction we can see how Christ came to rescue Judaism from the hyper-traditionalism of the Pharisees and the scribes (“lawyers”), the men learned in the Scriptures. “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.” (Lk. 11:52) In this same vein Jesus said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God before they would. (Mt. 21:31-32) The Pharisees and scribes, the leaders of Israel, envious that Jesus was gaining so many followers, plotted against and executed Him. (Jn. 6:14-15, 7:31, 8:30, 11:48, 12:42, Mt. 21:46, 27:18) But *many*, with the personal presence of the Messiah-King, *many* were pressing into the kingdom of God, even though in a few short months, when the Jews succeeded in their plot to kill Jesus, all the sheep of the flock would be scattered (Mt. 26:31) until they were gathered into what Luke would call the ekklesia after the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. (Acts 2:47)

But Jesus more specifically said that John the Baptist was the line between “the kingdom of God” and “the law and the prophets” and not the aberrations of the scribes and Pharisees. God had said, “Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:5-6) We know that Israel’s history is a contorted mixture of obedience and disobedience (much like “church” history) but we should notice that some of what was said in the law and prophets was also reiterated in God’s new covenant with spiritual Israel that is composed of all believing Jews and Gentiles (1 Pet. 2:5, 9, Rom. 9:6-8), a covenant in which God says, “I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them.” (Heb. 10:16) Jesus still says, “My sheep hear My voice...” (Jn. 10:27) and “If anyone loves Me, he will obey My word... He who does not love Me does not obey My words...” (Jn. 14:23-24) Though there are significant changes between “the law and the prophets” and “the kingdom of God,” obedience to God is still the primary requirement.

Of the significant changes we could list, there would be the change of mediator, the High Priest in the order of Melchizedek (not Levi – Heb. 7:11) who was Himself the sacrificial Lamb, the propitiation for our sin. (1 Jn. 2:2) But perhaps the most significant change, at least from the standpoint of each individual human being, was that one did not need to be born a Jew, nor even become a Jewish proselyte nor even follow the outward ceremonial aspects of the law. (Eph. 2:11-16) One need only repent and believe and obey. (Mk. 1:15, Heb. 5:9, etc.) Whereas under the law and the prophets one needed only to outwardly keep the commandments and agree with the law's requirements, in the kingdom one is required to examine and surrender his heart attitudes (Mt. 5:20 and following) and press into the realities of a righteous life in His kingdom.

This change is designed to produce men and women who can be truly described as a special treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy people who as God's sons and daughters would bear His likeness and shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Tit. 2:14, 2 Cor. 6:18, Mt. 13:43) But the "church" has done the same thing with God's new covenant that the Pharisees did with the old and has created aberrations of the true way of following Christ and God. Whole "theologies" have been concocted to remove the individual's responsibility to actually obey God so that any effort or exertion of the will is labeled "self effort to be saved" and a "gospel of works." And should anyone experience twinges of conscience that their lives are not what they should be, the professional "theologians" or their carnal followers (see 1 Cor. 3:4) are quick to reassure them that because of some previous "decision" or spiritual experience that, of course, they are still saved. No matter how disobedient or self-centered one's life actually is, these deceivers maintain, "once saved, always saved"!

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." (Mt. 7:21) Doing the will of God, at times, requires great effort and great exertion of will, not powered by the strength of the flesh but by the Spirit and power (grace) of God. (Phlp. 4:13) It is significant, therefore, that Jesus described the kingdom of God as something that those who were entering were "pressing into." (Lk. 16:16)

Paul wrote, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phlp. 3:12-14) This is the same Paul who, after being stoned and left for dead, exhorted the believers in that area to continue in the faith, saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:19, 22)

Peter wrote, "But also for this very reason [because God has given us exceedingly great promises through which we may be partakers of the divine nature], giving all diligence, [you] add to your faith goodness, to goodness knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is short-sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling

and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:4-11)

And to the Laodicean believers who were so certain that they were spiritually rich, wealthy and in need of nothing but in reality were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, Jesus said, “I counsel you to *buy from Me* gold refined in the fire that you may be rich; and [*buy from Me*] white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and [you] anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” (Rev. 3:17-18)

From these passages we can see that the kingdom of God – that realm where Christ is actively and literally obeyed – will not come into our midst without our direct cooperation with the Spirit of God. We can pray all we want, we can “believe” and have all the “faith” we can muster and we can “wait on God” to demonstrate our “perseverance and endurance” until we are confused, frustrated or even angry at God because He didn’t perform as we expected or demanded. But if we refuse or neglect to obey God’s commands – whether written or spiritually spoken, whether given generally for all or given specifically to a particular individual – we are losing our clear-sightedness, becoming short-sighted and even blind and are in the process of forgetting that we were purged from our sins. (2 Pet. 1:9) This departure from obedience to the King – whether accomplished by willful disobedience and rebellion or by negligence and carelessness – the result is the same and this condition is prevalent in many “churches.”

If we would be secure in His kingdom we must continue to grow. Peter wrote, “You therefore, beloved, since you know beforehand [that those who are not taught by the Spirit of Christ and who are double-minded and unstable twist and distort the Scriptures to their own destruction and that of those who follow after them], beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but [instead of being destroyed with them] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:16-18)

As we approach the question of what the will of God is that we must do to press into His kingdom, we must instantly recognize that we are not to compile a list of “Christian” laws. Rather, we need to hear the King and obey His commands. (Heb. 12:25, etc.) This is the personal interaction for which He created and called each individual – only those who respond in obedience to His leading will be chosen to remain with Christ and God for eternity. (Mt. 22:14) There simply is no list of “do-s and don’t-s” by which we can know that we are doing God’s will – there is a Head who is to be listened to, followed and obeyed.

Thus there may be nothing more dangerous to the well-being of our spirit and soul than to adhere to some standard (of life, religion, “theology,” possessions, etc.) that is in reality in conflict with the will of God. Though the false gospel of health, wealth and prosperity is popular at many “churches,” there simply is no basis on which to say that the poor are being judged by God (see Jas. 2:5) or that the wealthy are being blessed by God. (see Jas. 5:1-3, 1 Tim. 6:9, Mt. 13:22) The believer who is sick is not necessarily in sin though, like both Jacob and Job, may simply need to learn a deeper lesson in true righteousness. The standards of middle-class churchianity simply must not be confused with the will of God and the ways of His kingdom. We cannot look at some outward appearances of piety or religion, using standards that come ultimately from the world or Satan, to make a righteous judgment. (Jn. 7:24) Any “righteousness” or “holiness” that is judged by mere outward appearances (relying on some

worldly or carnal standard) is sure to be a mere form of godliness that prevents the power of God from flowing through the life and conforming the individual to the likeness of Christ. From those who match this description we are to withdraw and turn away from. (2 Tim. 3:5)

To press into the kingdom of God, then, is to move toward ever-greater conformity to the will of God and the likeness of Christ. Any activity, no matter how spiritual, religious or seemingly righteous that activity may be, that does not conform to God's will or cause us to more resemble Christ is a carnal activity that is really at enmity against God. (Rom. 8:7) Endless sermonizing and routine "church" attendance come into this category. Even "Bible study" that does not bring one into submission to the Spirit of truth and produce genuine spiritual fruit is simply the gaining of knowledge that puffs the learner up (1 Cor. 8:1) and the vanity that keeps the student from ever coming to any real knowledge of the truth. (2 Tim. 3:7) Any "good" thing (at least in our own opinion) that is not practiced in obedience to God is sin (Rom. 14:23) and, if left uncorrected, will lead its practitioner off the road that leads to life and back onto the road that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13-14)

The one who wants to be certain that he is being saved should work out his salvation "with fear and trembling" (Phlp. 2:12) – not in fear that God is not willing or able to save but that *I* will not have been willing to obediently put some part of my flesh to death and thereby I resume my rightful place among the recipients of God's wrath (Col. 3:5-6), fearing that I may place more value on my own desires and lusts than I value the will of God or than I value His glory. The life of a true believer and follower of Christ is that of overcoming sin, self and Satan by the power (grace) of Christ and God. One who is not involved in that struggle should not deceive himself into thinking he is being saved.

But neither should one who is involved in that struggle fall into dismay or despair by believing the accusations of the devil. The presence of even seemingly small amounts of genuine spiritual fruit, of willful choices to obey God, of conformity to the attitudes and desires of Christ should not be discounted – just as a temporary failure to overcome some particular work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21) should not be given unrealistic weight. The way to eternal life involves a gate and a path – being on that path, however imperfectly or feebly, is all the proof we need to know that we are being saved. To question whether He who began the good work will be faithful to complete His work (Phlp. 1:6) is simply an act of unbelief or to fall prey to the enemy's deceptions as he uses any means available to keep us from pressing into the kingdom of God.

But perhaps the deepest depravity of fallen man is that we will turn to any person or any thing to keep from being required to personally interact with God. We, like the Israelites, will send "Moses up the mountain" to meet with God and we will sincerely promise to faithfully obey whatever this man says that God has said. (Ex. 20:19) We will pursue any "it," even the things of God that we find desirable, but we do not pursue holy God in His entirety and for Himself alone. All our desires and pursuits of God are at least tainted with selfish or ulterior motives. We will embrace a doctrine at the expense of the rightly-divided, whole truth and counsel of God. (2 Tim. 2:15, Jn. 16:13, Acts 20:27) We will claim all the promises of the Bible (often without noticing that our wicked lives completely disqualify us from receiving what God has legitimately promised – and that those promises legitimately found in the Scriptures are quite often very different from what we claim!) We will pray a particular prayer (even repetitively – see Mt. 6:7) or settle into a routine of a particular kind of prayer or engage in any practice that makes us feel "holy," "spiritual" or "religious" and mistake our warm fuzzy feelings for enjoying God's approval and presence.

We need to ask ourselves in *what* have we believed. If our answer is not in *Whom* have we believed, then just *what* are we following? A man? A lie? A demonic spirit? Our own self-exalting flesh? If we are not worshipping – that is, living our lives in submission and obedience to – Christ and God in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:24), then we simply are not worshipping Him but rather exalting our self and serving the kingdom of death and darkness rather than Christ’s kingdom of life and light.

Let he who has ears hear.

Chapter 29: Whose Kingdom Is It Anyway

<http://paidionbooks.org/girard/tgotk/29wkia.pdf>

Chapter 31: The Kingdom Is the Key

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