

# The Kingdom of God Is at Hand

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With this proclamation (Mt. 3:2, etc.), Jesus ushered in a new phase in the work of redemption that God had purposed before the creation of the world, a phase that would include the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord of Glory, the Prince of Life (see 1 Cor. 2:7-8, Acts 3:15), and that would usher in what many have come to call the “church age.” To grasp the scope of deception that is upon many of the people of Christ, one needs only to recognize that Jesus proclaimed the *kingdom* of God but it is the “church” (Greek, *ekklesia* [1577]) that came into being. While this observation indeed contains “buzz words” or “jargon” that can be easily misconstrued, it yet remains true that this observation contains what is perhaps *the* key insight the people of Christ need in this time and season of deception. (Mt. 24:4, 2 Ths. 2:9-10)

Consider that the Greek word *ekklesia* is found in only *one* gospel, occurring only *three* times in *two* verses. (Mt. 16:18, 18:17) On this scant base, some “theologians” have made ridiculous statements that “the church” is therefore a dominant theme in Matthew’s gospel! Further, there is no evidence anywhere that Jesus ever spoke any Greek. Perhaps He knew a few simple words and phrases but as one sent only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24), Greek studies would not have been very high in His priorities. (also see Jn. 7:15) When Jesus said these two sayings as recorded in Matthew, He almost certainly spoke them in Aramaic and probably used a word that would be more accurately translated as “temple,” a picture Paul later used as well. (1 Cor. 3:16-17, etc.)

But it is *Matthew* (unless we want to assign it to some very early copyist, a theory for which there is no proof) who inserted *ekklesia* into Christ’s teachings here – just as it is Paul, Luke, the writer of Hebrews, James and John who, *in their letters* (“epistles”) and not in their gospels, made moderate or even limited usage of the word *ekklesia* – a word which appears only some 112 times in the Greek New Testament from Acts to Revelation. We do not, however, need to presume or invent any sinister or conspiratorial motive behind this insertion. *Ekklesia* indeed contains many parallel insights and is a beautiful, although incomplete, picture of what Christ is building in His people. And because “*ekklesia*” (which would devolve into “church”) was a word which would be subject to change and thus deception, perhaps Christ simply avoided it entirely, leaving it to His followers to bring the word into usage. However it came into usage, the *ekklesia* is the *people* called out of this world’s darkness, transferred or conveyed into the kingdom of light so as to attend to the affairs and needs of Christ’s kingdom. (Col. 1:13) The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is actually and literally obeyed as King, Lord and Master. From these two definitions it is easy to see how they overlap, consisting of the same people and yet having very distinct emphases. And we are also able to see how our obedience to God is the very means by which the kingdom of God comes into our lives. (Mt. 6:10)

But we do find sinister and conspiratorial motives when we move beyond the writings of the original apostles and move into the “church age.” Bishops (like Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian, etc.) rose from the ranks of the elders, corrupted the gospel by re-defining *ekklesia* to be that visible, hierarchical authority structure rested upon the bishops and centralized in Rome and declared that salvation could not be had apart from it. This was in contrast to the idea that the *ekklesia* was the spiritual, invisible, contemporary expression of the eternal kingdom of God centered upon Christ alone – and thus they drew followers after themselves (precisely as Paul had prophesied they would – Acts 20:30) because they believed themselves to be the frontline defense of the teachings of the apostles. Schisms and sects arose over issues that, from a

spiritual perspective, seem trivial and almost non-sensical and perhaps even irrational. By simply shifting the focus from *Him* to *us*, making the “ekklesia” or “church” of more importance than even the kingdom and King-ship of Christ, the people of the second century abandoned their first love, Christ, and replaced Him with “Christian” laws, philosophies and rules. (Rev. 2:4-5) The Catholic sect grew to world domination and persecuted, oppressed and even executed those who challenged their authority and power, redefining “heretic” (of which they themselves were the consummate expression of the original Greek meaning – see *haireisis* [139]) from “one who forms a party by choosing to gather around a person or idea” to “one who teaches falsehoods.” The sixteenth century brought reformation and relative liberty for many, but *ekklesia* (now most often translated into English as “church”) still retained its priests, hierarchical authority structures and paganish temples – all renamed, of course, but still patterned after the world, especially the Roman empire. Few could see that “church” had become vastly different from the original concept of *ekklesia* - those who could do so were ostracized and chased away or even killed, labeled as “schismatics” and “heretics” by those intent on preserving their own schism and heresy!

When Jesus spoke of the sign of His return at the end of the age, He said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Mt. 24:4 – emphasis added) There is in this prophecy a sense that the gospel of the kingdom will have been so corrupted that by this time it will be almost unrecognizable and will seem almost like an entirely different gospel. Indeed, the gospel of the kingdom is vastly different from the “gospel” most often preached, verbally or by practice, by the “church.” The “church’s” “gospel” centers around a man or what some men are doing – “Come hear this man preach” or “Come, see what this group of people are doing” and “If you like what you hear and see, you may participate as much or as little as you like, doing whatever you want to *for* God,” forgetting entirely that “without Me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15:5) The gospel of the kingdom centers around Christ, who He is and what He has done – “The King has come. He has bought and redeemed you with His own blood. Now repent, be changed and bear fruit worthy of Him.” (Heb. 5:9, 1 Cor. 6:20, Acts 17:30, Rom. 7:4, etc.)

### **The Kingdom**

Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) Here we find both what the kingdom is and what it is not. As Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight...” (Jn. 18:36) If Christ’s kingdom were something of this world, it would be in competition with the kingdoms of this world for temporal power. If Christ’s kingdom were something of this world, the kind of foods we eat and drink would have special significance to God. That so many who claim to follow Christ are caught up in political activism or in bondage to dietary rules shows how far short of Christ’s kingdom they have come.

The three primary characteristics Paul gives here of the kingdom are righteousness, peace and joy – accomplished *in* the Holy Spirit. In another place Paul writes, “For the kingdom of God is not in mere talk but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20) The kingdom of Christ and God is not found where men *talk* about righteousness, peace and joy – the kingdom is found where men *practice* righteousness, peace and joy by the power of the Spirit of God. We are specifically commanded to withdraw from those “Christians” who have a mere form of godliness but none of the real power. (2 Tim. 3:5)

Thus we can see that righteousness is not a set of laws (compiled from either the Old or New Testament) that we perform so as to be right before God. Righteousness is simply what God says is right. Paul wrote, “For what fellowship [commonality, unity] has righteousness with lawlessness?” (2 Cor. 6:14) In this contrast we see the inherent enmity between God and man. Righteousness can be summed up as what is right in God’s eyes whereas lawlessness is what is right in a man’s own eyes. (Jdgs. 21:25) Lawlessness is the primary characteristic of our relativistic times because the very idea that there is an exterior source by which men should order their life and conduct is ridiculed and condemned. (also see Mt. 24:12) God, however, still *requires* men to have a righteousness that exceeds even that of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees to even enter His kingdom. (Mt. 5:20) This righteousness is not our own – Christ Jesus is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) and God still requires us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh...” (Rom. 13:14)

When Jesus was still with His disciples, He promised that the Holy Spirit would come and “teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” Then He said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (Jn. 14:26-27) Similarly, Paul wrote that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus,” that is, *if* we would obediently refuse to be anxious but instead pray and, with thanksgiving, make our requests to God. Then Paul goes on to list the things about which we should be thinking – things that are true, noble just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, praiseworthy. (Phlp. 4:6-8) In this way we begin to train ourselves in the discipline of “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:5) Peace, the peace of God and Christ Jesus, simply attends those whose minds are genuinely within the kingdom of God, that realm where Christ is literally and truly obeyed. It is from the peace we have with God (because our sins and enmity against God is no longer held against us – Eph. 1:7, Col. 2:13-14, etc.) and the inward peace that accompanies life by the Spirit (Rom. 8:6) that we can, as much as it depends upon us, be at peace with all men. (Rom. 12:18) It is in this way that we can proclaim – with or without words – the gospel of the kingdom of the Prince of peace.

When we study out the idea of joy in the New Testament, we find that joy is not found in one’s self, it does not come from self, nor is it about self. The joy the writers of the New Testament spoke of was *Christ’s* joy given through His Spirit and experienced by abiding in Him and in His love. (Jn. 15:10-11) This joy is not connected in any way with the outward circumstances of one’s life. Indeed, Christ spoke the most about joy the night before He went to the cross (Jn. 16:20-22, etc.) and in that we can see that it really was “for the joy that was set before Him [that He] endured the cross, despising its shame...” (Heb. 12:2) Joy is about looking beyond the circumstances and seeing the outcome as God sees it and then pressing on to attain to His will. The joy of Christ is found by seeking first the kingdom of God (Lk. 12:32), expending one’s time, energy and resources toward the same goal as Christ had (the redemption, restoration and maturing of the sons of God – Jn. 10:15, Eph. 1:7-10, Rom. 8:18-21, etc.) and then resting in the love and comfort we receive from the Father and Son by His Spirit. (Gal. 5:22-23) In this way Christ’s priestly prayer – “that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves” (Jn. 17:13) – is brought into being. Some have encapsulated these priorities into an easily remembered acronym - *J*esus, *O*thers, *Y*ou.

### **Not of This World**

Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you speaking for yourself on this, or did others tell you this about Me?”

Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?”

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a King then?”

Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born and for this cause I have come into the world, but that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, “I find no fault in Him at all.” (Jn. 18:33-38)

Of the many insights we could draw out from this account, let us focus on three:

- Pilate did not particularly see Jesus as a threat to the Roman empire and government. Pilate clearly saw that Jesus was something more than some wild-eyed, fanatical mystic – if that was all Pilate saw in Jesus, he would not have resisted the Jews in their desire to execute yet another claimant to royalty who just might have enough followers to disrupt the smooth flow of governing over the already too-troublesome Jews of Palestine. But Jesus, by proclaiming to be king in the realm of truth, posed no visible threat Pilate could see to the Roman empire that day. Indeed, Christ – who taught “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s” (Mt. 22:21) and whose followers would instruct careful obedience to the governments of this world (Rom. 13:1-4, 1 Pet. 2:13-14, 17) – poses no threat to the orderly restraint of evil that is in this world. It is only when evil takes the reins of government and demands of its citizens things contrary to God’s requirements or when the men who claim to follow Christ forget that they serve only a spiritual kingdom that there is any conflict. (also see Gal. 5:23)

- Jesus’ kingdom is simply *not* a kingdom of this world (Jn. 18:36) but of another realm entirely. His is a kingdom measured in terms of obedience to righteousness and holiness and discerned by abilities given to us only by the Holy Spirit of God. It is not measured by miles or kilometers or defined by lines drawn on a map. His laws are written on His subjects’ hearts and their obedience demonstrates that His kingdom has come. (Heb. 8:10) Those who must have their religious laws and creeds written down on paper and who obey these at the expense of their obedience to what God wrote in their heart are serving the kingdom of darkness and not Christ’s kingdom of light. (Lk. 6:46)

- Jesus is not the King of the Jews of the first century but rather the King of Truth. “*Everyone*,” Jesus said to Pilate, “who is of the truth hears My voice.” (Jn. 18:37) John would later write, “They [the false prophets speaking in and by the demonic spirit of antichrist] are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (1 Jn. 4:5-6) Paul’s experiences in the book of Acts show repeatedly that some Jews and many Gentiles, known to history as the “God-fearers,” were prepared to receive the truth of Jesus. (Acts 17:4, 12, etc.) Jesus still says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn. 10:27) and Paul’s warning still stands: Deception holds power over those who are perishing “because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.” (2 Ths. 2:10) Truth is an integral part of Christ’s kingdom and those who refuse to walk in the light of truth – as did Pilate – will reap the consequences even as the purposes of God’s kingdom are fulfilled.

Jesus said, “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn. 3:19-21)

Paul wrote, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Eph. 5:8-11)

Though Jesus proclaimed that His kingdom of light was at hand, men slept (Mt. 13:25, 25:5) and the devil constructed a counterfeit of the ekklesia that was based on outwardly visible man-centered authority structures and man-made temples – those things which the kingdom of God is *not!* – and planted his children, the tares, among the wheat, “the sons of the kingdom.” (Mt. 13:38) And God, in order to gain a mature harvest of wheat, allowed this to be so. (Mt. 13:30) Thus darkness has, throughout the “church” age, hindered the wheat from growing to maturity but as the wheat return to their heritage and place as sons of the kingdom, that realm where Christ is truly obeyed, “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt. 13:43)

### **Citizens**

Paul clearly told us that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phlp. 3:20), that realm *not* of this world. It is important to know what *kind* of people constitute this heavenly kingdom because people who differ from the following descriptions do not belong to God’s kingdom – no matter how many of the “right” words they use!

- Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 5:3) Those who recognize their moral and spiritual poverty, and thus their need for the mercy and grace and power of God, are those who are in His kingdom.

- Jesus also said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 5:10) Peter wrote that the Gentiles (those of pantheistic or paganistic or worldly religious ideas) “think it strange” when we who seek the righteousness of God “do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation” and thus they speak and do evil things against the true followers of Christ and God. (1 Pet. 4:4) Jesus prophesied that we “will be hated by *all* nations [people-groups] for My name’s sake.” (Mt. 24:9) and Paul *promised* that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12) To these recipients of worldly and demonic hatred belongs the kingdom of Christ and God.

- Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 19:14) Jesus even said, “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 18:4) Humility, the ability to accurately recognize and evaluate one’s own lowly qualities and characteristics is a core requirement for citizens of the kingdom of God.

- James wrote, “Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (Jas. 2:5) When John the Baptist sought confirmation that Jesus was the true Messiah and that he wasn’t sacrificing his life in prison for nothing, one of the confirmations Jesus listed was “the poor have the gospel preached to them,” a fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. (Mt. 11:5, Isa. 61:1) And Paul wrote, “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things...the weak things...and the base things of the world and the things which are despised...and the things which are not...that no flesh should glory in His presence.” (1 Cor. 1:26-29) As Jesus said to the Pharisees, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Mt. 9:13) The kingdom of God is not available to the deserving - *there are none who deserve His kingdom!* (Rom. 3:10) – it is available for those who recognize their enmity against God and their righteous deserving of an eternity in hell and cry out for mercy and grace.

In contrast to the citizens of the kingdom of God, the citizens of this world, those who are excluded from God’s kingdom, are described in the following terms:

- “Do you not know,” Paul wrote, “that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-10)

- “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions,

jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19-21)

- Jesus said to John, “The cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (Rev. 21:8)

It is not to be supposed that the kingdom of God is some self-righteous snobs’ club like the “church” has so often devolved into. The kingdom of God is populated with the humble recipients of God’s forgiveness, grace and mercy. As Paul wrote after describing the people who would not inherit the kingdom of God – “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were set apart, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:11) Those of us who were held deep in the wickedness of this world before receiving God’s grace know the depths of love God has lavished on us and know that, having been forgiven much, we must love much. Those who, as is true at far too many “churches,” have not really received God’s forgiveness and who still practice many of the sins that disqualify them for the kingdom of God, “the same loves little.” (Lk. 7:47)

Nor is it to be supposed that we can attain to the fullness of what it means to be a son of God in this life. Paul wrote, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.” (1 Cor. 15:50) And Paul wrote, “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” (Rom. 8:19-23)

There is more to being a son of God than we can even imagine and this is one more reason we should take great care that we “Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or godless person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.” (Heb. 12:14-17)

Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of God, but he who *does* the will of My Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21) When the wheat has fully matured, “The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather *out of His kingdom* all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness [what is right in their own eyes]... Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt. 13:41, 43) The wheat, the sons *of the kingdom* (Mt. 13:38), will radiate the light of Christ’s kingdom in the midst of the darkness of this world. The tares, the carnal, lawless, fallen-away “church,” will have been removed and the way of following Christ and God will again be seen to require us to enter into the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3, 5, Acts 14:22) and the “church” will be seen to be the deception whereby Satan sought to prevent and delay the wheat, the sons of the kingdom, from attaining to

their glorious inheritance. The choice of which kingdom we will now belong to – the kingdom of Christ’s light or the kingdom of Satan’s and this world’s darkness – is ours to make. Today is the day we need to make that choice. The kingdom of God *is* at hand now in spite of what the “church” has done to distort and conceal the good news of God’s kingdom.

Let he who has ears hear.

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