

# Putting God's Kingdom First

1 Kings 10:1-10 & Matthew 6: 19-21, 24-33

*28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 9<sup>th</sup> October 2005*

Matthew 6: 19-21 was one of the first passages of scripture I memorized as child. It was in fourth grade and every week we had a verse to learn. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Each week we discussed the meaning of the verse; that classroom setting and discussion are seared into my memory. I can't recall every detail, but I can remember feeling that what we were talking about was really important, that knowing this verse meant more than gaining one more gold star beside my name, that somehow – in ways I didn't understand and still seek to fathom – contained herein is mysterious knowledge, a truth about the world given in love from the Lord of Life.

The problem, however, is that as a child I heard this verse purely in terms of rewards and punishments, from a purely moralistic or legalistic viewpoint, and could not hear it through the filter of God's grace. In other words, I heard this verse like so many other passages of the Sermon on the Mount, like so much of the Bible, from a purely moralistic or legalistic perspective – which is the way, unfortunately, far too many people read scripture, missing out on the message of grace. I heard Jesus saying that if you want to get to heaven, then *behave* in a certain way. I heard "treasures of heaven" as heaven itself and "storing up" meant doing the right things that assured my place there. And doing the right things meant having no regard for the treasures of this earth, because they were somehow all bad. Now, I don't remember anyone saying all of this to me, but it was how I heard it because that is how children hear things, as reward and punishment. It is how we assure a child's safety ("Touch fire and get burnt.") and spur achievement ("Make Daddy happy, finish your homework and I'll buy you ice cream."). A child learns, "If you are good, you will be rewarded." In such a world, everything is conditional.

The problem is we take these strategies and assumptions about the way of the world and then project them upon God and begin to read or hear scripture that way, which makes it difficult to believe and accept and experience God's grace, God's good news, God's love and forgiveness which have very little – *thank God!* – with reward and punishment, because grace is *unconditional*. So the challenge for us in hearing these well-known words from the Sermon on the Mount is how can we hear them *not* as part

of a long list of commandments that we need to do in order to be found acceptable to God, but as *good news*, as the opening up for us of God's grace?

Or to put it a different way – do you hear these words as only judgment instead of grace? Can you hear the grace? But before you answer, you need to know there is judgment here, strong judgment – and no one is excluded. Jesus is judging attitudes, behaviors, and outlooks that hinder and blind us to God's hope for our lives. There is no doubt about this. Worry and anxiety make us turn inward and think only about ourselves. Preoccupation with wealth and worldly treasures is like a bromide that over time slowly and surely eats away at our lives. And because Jesus as the Lord of Life is concerned with your life *he comes to judge in order to redeem. We must always remember that in scripture the intent of God's judgment is to redeem, a God who is Love judges in order heal not to destroy.* “God's judgment and forgiveness are deeply interwoven and always occur at the same time – we are the ones who separate them, not God...”<sup>1</sup> Judgment and grace happen together, but often we're the ones separating them. There is judgment here, but there is also at the same time extraordinary grace. Jesus judges in love the attitudes and behaviors and outlooks of the crowd because he sees the way they're living their lives is actually destroying and eating away the vitality and true purpose of their lives. In doing so they are at odds with God's vision for the world, they are supplanting God's kingdom.

And it's all about the God's kingdom – it's *all* about the kingdom! The Kingdom or Realm of God is the most significant idea in all of Jesus' preaching and parables. The realm or way of God is a world defined by mercy and peace, forgiveness and healing. The kingdom's goal is justice – understood *not* as punishment equal to the crime, because then who has any hope of being saved? – but justice as the wellness and wellbeing of all people, binding up the wounds of God's people, overturning the scales of injustice, redefining justice. In the kingdom the first will be last in order that the last can be first, where the world's values are turned upside down and inside out. Those who think they are in power will be brought down and those who are oppressed by such power will be raised up. In the kingdom, Jesus tells us, those who think they are on the inside close to God are really on the outside and those often considered on the outside realize they are closer to the kingdom than they had known. For the kingdom is liberation, freeing all those who are captive to themselves and enslaved by a society that enslaves and excludes and makes sick. The kingdom is God making all things right. The kingdom is the “pearl of great price (Matthew 13:46).” Jesus tells us that the kingdom is like a hidden treasure discovered in a field in which you sell with joy

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty: How Religious Conviction Betrays the Human Psyche* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), p. 26.

everything you have in order to buy that field (Matthew 13:44). Even resurrection is a kingdom idea, where death and all the destructive forces of death will be defeated to make room for life. As John Bright (1908-1991) put it, the renown biblical scholar and former pastor of this church, who wrote one of the classic texts on this subject, “The Kingdom of God is not only the goal of all history and the reward of all believes, not only the norm by which all human behavior is judged, it is the new order which even now bursts upon the present one and summons everyone to be its people...In the person and work of Jesus the Kingdom of God has intruded into the world.”<sup>2</sup> This is what Jesus announces in this sermon and this is the life into which Jesus calls us to follow. The kingdom of God is not “up there” or after we die, God is where Jesus is, and Jesus is here and beckons us to live in this kingdom and to seek it with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, because this is the goal of life, the purpose of life itself. Therefore, seek it, strive after it, put it first above everything else.

But do we? Jesus knows we don't – and it's killing us. What has ultimate value in your life? What receives most of your attention, time, and money? Your job, planning your career? Your spouse, your marriage? Maybe your children? Your portfolio? Maybe your hobbies, your car, your toys and your obsessions? Yourself? It's been said that if your answer to these questions is other than God, then that person or thing or obsession is your idol. And we all know what God thinks about idols. Now God has a thing against idols, *not* because God is trying to make our lives difficult. God is not setting the bar higher in order to judge us or because these idols are inherently bad, because they're not (“The earth and all it contains belong to the LORD.” Psalm 24:1), but because God knows that these idols are making our lives difficult, because they will never be able to give you what God alone can and longs to give you which is Godself. If these other things and people become gods in our lives, then it is difficult for us say we're worshipping *only* God. And then our lives become divided, our spirits become sick because we are not gaining our joy from the source of joy, who is God.

And this is where the judgment and grace come into clearer focus, because we cannot serve two masters, “for we will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other.” To put other things or people or goals before the kingdom is the source of all our problems. To say we love God but do not seek the goals of the kingdom, then something is seriously amiss. Whom do you serve? What do you treasure? *Whom* do you treasure? This is not a peripheral issue, its critical. In this context, “treasures in heaven” is another way of saying, Do you treasure the

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<sup>2</sup> John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 223.

kingdom of God? Or are you placing your trust in something else or someone else? Where's your heart?

Can you see how these questions from Jesus are both judgment and grace – *judgment* because they expose all the ways that we fail to put God first and so reap what we sow; *grace* because it gives us something better, it provides a way out of our enslavement, the chance to align our lives with God's visions for us. These are tough questions for all of us. *But, Jesus' command to seek the kingdom first and everything else second is really a gracious invitation to prioritize our lives, to consider what is really important.*

There are many who don't like to talk about and hear about sin, probably because of sin's power over us, for the "the essence of sin is to make yourself your own God, [and we don't like to be reminded that we regularly kick God out from the center and put other gods there.] To sin is put yourself or something other than God at the centre of your life, to give primary value to anything other than God. ...and the consequence of replacing God, who is truly the origin and centre of each person's life, with something else is to introduce disorder into a human personality, and this disorder is expressed in those actions which are destructive of self and others. The same applies to the church: when the truly loving God is displaced from being at the centre of the common life of a community, an imbalance in relationships results which is expressed in various forms of sin, such as narrow-mindedness, injustice, violence, oppression and exploitation, sometimes all in the name of God.<sup>3</sup> We pay a price in both our personal lives and in a church when we fail to put God and God's kingdom first.

Indeed, Jesus makes the remarkable and seemingly outlandish claim that when we put the kingdom first, everything will find its proper place in our lives – your career, your marriage, your children, your hobbies, your money, your life. Instead of thinking that joy is found in serving self, joy is found when the self strives for the kingdom; everything is redefined in relation to the kingdom.

For example, while you cannot serve both God and wealth, Jesus never says wealth is bad or that property is sinister. *They become such when they are placed on a par with God's kingdom or when they are withheld from being used to the glory of God's kingdom.* Then and now, this is a radical message. In fact, all things, including and maybe especially our wealth can be used for the sake of the kingdom, when it is pressed into serving the source of our joy, which is striving and yearning for God's kingdom. Putting God first is tough and we can't do it without lots of prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> Young, p. 24.

But when we strive to put God first something happens within us, we find that it positively changes how we relate to everything and everyone else. Everything is viewed through the filter of the kingdom's goals. The things we worried about and lost sleep over suddenly lose their power and fascination over us. When we strive after the kingdom and seek to put it first, Jesus says, we will discover that we have crossed the threshold into a new world and discover that that kingdom is not up there or at some point in the future, the kingdom is now. And it is God's good pleasure, Jesus tells us, to give us the kingdom (Luke 12:32) – now. Now.

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