

What if... the Kingdom of God is real?

Message for Sunday, June 28, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 13:44-46

John Ortberg tells of a man who was a member of a church he once served.

Let's call the man "Hank" (not his real name). Hank was a cranky guy. He rarely affirmed anyone. He operated on the assumption that if you compliment someone, it might lead to a swelled head, so worked to make sure everyone stayed humble.

A deacon in the church asked him one day, "Hank, are you happy?" Hank paused to reflect, then replied without smiling, "Yeah." "Well, tell your face," the deacon said. But so far as anybody knows, Hank's face never did find out about it.

Hank's children did not know him. His son had a wonderful story about how he met his wife at a dance, but he never told his father because Hank did not approve of dancing.

Hank could not effectively love his wife or his children, or people outside his family. He was easily irritated. He had little use for the poor, and a casual contempt for those whose accents or skin pigments differed from his own. Whatever capacity he once might have had for joy or wonder or gratitude atrophied. He critiqued and judged and complained, and his soul got a little smaller each year.

Hank was once a cranky young guy, and he grew up to be a cranky old man. But even more troubling than his lack of change was the fact that *nobody was surprised by it*. It was as if everyone simply expected that his soul would remain withered and sour year after year, decade after decade.

We expected that Hank would affirm certain religious beliefs. We expected that he would attend services, read the Bible, support the church financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here's what we didn't expect: *We didn't expect that he would progressively become the way Jesus would be if he were in Hank's place*. We didn't assume that each year would find him a more compassionate, joyful,

gracious, winsome personality. We didn't anticipate that he was on the way to becoming a source of delight and courtesy who overflowed with "rivers of living water."¹

When Jesus walked this earth, he had one main message.

Mark 1:14-15, New International Version:
Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Matthew's description of Jesus' ministry is similar:

Matthew 4:17, New International Version:
From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

[Technical note: Matthew normally uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God," but he's not talking about heaven as we think of it. He uses "heaven" just as a synonym for God.

Nowhere else in the Bible does any writer use the phrase "kingdom of heaven." It's found only in Matthew's gospel, and it's there about thirty times. Many times the exact same sentences occur in one or more of the other gospels, except they use "kingdom of God." Bible scholars tend to think it's because Matthew was writing primarily for a Jewish audience, and their custom was to avoid using the holy name of God.]

So this "kingdom of God" is good news. How good is it? Listen to one of Jesus' stories about the kingdom.

Matthew 13:44-46, New International Version:
"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

Two things we see in those verses

- The kingdom of God is precious. It is priceless, more important than anything else we have in life.
- The kingdom of God brings great joy.

¹ *The Life You've Always Wanted*, pp. 27-29.

So to summarize what we've read so far: the kingdom of God is the primary message of Jesus. He speaks about it wherever he goes. He says the kingdom has now come. He says it's good news. He says it's incredibly valuable, worth more than anything else in our lives. And being part of the kingdom of God brings great joy in our lives.

Q: But what *is* the kingdom of God?

Very simply, the kingdom of God is God reigning. It is present wherever what God wants is done.

Q: How do we become part of the kingdom of God? By committing our lives to Jesus Christ, to follow him as our Lord, and thus obey his teaching.

Q: How is it good news?

In many ways:

- We have confidence in God for every part of our lives. When God is in charge, we have nothing to worry about, nothing to be afraid of.

Matthew 6:31-33, New International Version:

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

- We have a relationship with God. Our sins are forgiven; the wall that divides us is removed. God is not some distant deity, but a living reality close to us.

John 14:23, Today's English Version:

Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and my Father and I will come to them and live with them.

- He gives us divine power to help us do what would otherwise be impossible for us.

1 Corinthians 4:20, Today's English Version:

For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of words but of power.

- Jesus is alive in us.

John 15:5, New International Version:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit.”

- How will we change? What will that fruit look like?

Galatians 5:22-23, New International Version:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

But now, let's go back to the story of Hank. Clearly this was not happening in his life. He was not experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised. He was not overflowing with love and joy and kindness. In fact, all these promises seemed to bounce off of him as if he were wearing a shield of armour.

This is the dilemma I want to explore over the next several weeks. The reason is that I don't think Hank is alone. I see large parts of him in myself. There are areas in my life which remain untouched by the power of Jesus, even though I long to be a better person in those areas.

Here's the question for us today: “What if the Kingdom of God is real?”

In other words: What if the teaching of Jesus isn't some wildly impractical, unattainable ideal, but he really meant it? What if the promises of the Bible are true and trustworthy? What if we lived as if we really believed all these things?

We are on the edge of an exciting adventure. Next week, we'll start looking deeper into some of the things I've just touched on today.

Let me end by asking you to help me. I need your help. I need to know where you struggle. How have you been disappointed with what has happened in your life since you have been following Jesus? I don't mean sickness and other problems. What I mean is where you don't experience the life change and the power which Jesus talks about.

Maybe you don't have any problems like that. Great! I'd love to hear that as well.

Will you please take a minute and write on a piece of paper your answer to that question. That's just so you don't forget.

Next, sometime today or tomorrow, phone the church and leave a message with your answer. I'm really not interested in who has what kind of difficulty; I'd just like to get an overall picture of where people are at. So you can disguise your voice on the phone: talk with a British accent and pretend you're the Queen!

Prayer:

Lord, did you inspire people to write the books of the Bible just so that we could read entertaining stories to children at bedtime? Or did you give us this book to show us the way of life, to help us know you better, to follow your ways? I believe the latter.

Help us, then, to take it seriously. Help us to take to heart your word, and to live by it. Amen.