My Kingdom; God’s Kingdom

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 17:20-36

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Everybody has a kingdom—a place where you have a say over what happens there. It can be your home or a room within your home, your office or cell phone.

I have two kingdoms. My primary kingdom is 1881 Cold Creek Court in Vienna. I have some say over what happens there. I share this kingdom with my wife, Chris, my co-ruler. We had two relatively loyal subjects in our kingdom, our children Andrew and Emily who have now established kingdoms of their own.

My other kingdom is located at 124 Park Street, NE, in Vienna. I call it my kingdom since I have some say over what happens here. There are considerably more subjects in this kingdom. Sometimes, my subjects listen to me. Sometimes, they don’t.

Today, I want to talk about another kingdom—the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom is central to Jesus’ teaching. He makes over 40 references to this kingdom of God in Luke’s gospel alone. This kingdom is so massive that heaven serves as God’s throne and earth is his footstool (Isaiah 66:1).

This kingdom is not a political kingdom. It has no protected borders or standing army. This kingdom is spiritual in nature. It operates with a different set of rules. It is the kind of kingdom where the last go first and the first go last. It involves turning the other cheek and walking the second mile.

We are preaching and teaching our way through Luke’s gospel this year. We find ourselves in Luke 17, a section of Luke’s gospel called the travel narratives (9:51-19:47). Over the course of five days and ten chapters, Jesus teaches his followers on the nature of true discipleship. He also
confronts his nemesis, the Pharisees. Jesus and his disciples are on a road trip to Jerusalem.

The Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come (17:20). They imagine God’s kingdom as future and yet to come. Jesus answers emphatically, “The kingdom of God is in your midst” (17:21).

The Greek construction of Jesus’ words tell us something. Literally, the sentence reads, “The kingdom of God among you is.” Jesus deliberately positions the verb at the end of the sentence to accentuate the present.

When is the kingdom of God coming? It’s here, folks. You’re looking at it. God’s kingdom has come near.

There is a decided shift in our passage beginning at verse 22. Jesus’ audience is now his disciples. The Pharisees for the most part vaporize. Jesus shifts the attention from the kingdom of God as a present reality to its future dimensions. In theological terms, we call it the “already not yet” principle. God’s kingdom has already come in Jesus, but it has not yet come in glory at the end of time.

We call it the second coming of Jesus. Michelangelo labored for four years to paint this massive fresco on the wall
behind the altar in the Sistine chapel. There are over 300 figures in this climatic scene. In our passage, according to Jesus, there will be no mistaking his triumphal return. There will be no need for people to speculate, “Here he is” or “There he is” (17:23). His coming will be as clear as lightning flashing across the night sky (17:24).

At the end of this passage, the disciples ask Jesus where the kingdom of God will come (17:37). Jesus’ answer is rather cryptic: “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather” (17:37). Come again? It takes us back to Jesus’ words about the irrefutable nature of his coming kingdom. Just as circling vultures signal a dead body, so his return will clearly evidence the coming kingdom of God.

The suddenness of Christ’s return will prove calamitous for some. Two will be in bed. One will be taken; the other left. Two people will be grinding corn. One will be taken; the other left (17:34-35). Someday, people will wish they had all been ready.

The first section of the Bible I ever read was the book of Revelation. I was 19 at the time and it was instrumental to my conversion to Christ. This surprises some people, since Revelation is filled with apocalyptic visions and end times imagery. Revelation often scares people, which is unfortunate, since its purpose is to encourage believers and instill hope in its readers (Revelation 14:12).
When the smoke of the end times clears, Jesus will prevail over the forces of darkness. As I read this book, it became clear that Jesus is not only a figure of history, but he is alive and coming back to make things right again. Any delay with regard to his coming is seen as forbearance rather than negligence on God’s part.

Some people are big into pinpointing when and where Jesus will return. They have constructed a precise timetable to chronicle his return. Through the years, people have calculated Jesus’ return to coincide with the rise of communism, the formation of the European Union or the reestablishment of Israel as a nation-state. I no longer pay attention to end-times prognosticators. Our job is to be ready whenever he comes.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Four applications come to mind from this Luke 17 passage.

First application: You do not have to wait until you die to enter this kingdom. You can enter God’s kingdom now. Some people imagine God’s kingdom strictly as a place you go after you die. Yet, nearly every time Jesus speaks about this kingdom, he references its nearness. He teaches repeatedly in Luke’s gospel that the kingdom of God has come near (10:9, 11; 21:31).

Jesus extends his invitation to enter God’s kingdom to anyone. It’s an invitation to follow Jesus Christ as Savior
and Lord. A reporter asked the winning jockey at yesterday’s Kentucky Derby, Mike Smith, about his ride on the winning horse, Justify. Let me take you back to his initial comment: “First, I want to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” We are no longer lord over our lives. Jesus Christ is Lord!

Some of you recoil at the thought of relinquishing control of your kingdom to someone else, even if that someone is God. We want to run our own kingdoms. We may pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done” but what we really want is, “My kingdom come, my will be done.”

I have lived life both ways—with God in control and me in control. Life is so much better with God in control. God’s control over my life is benevolent and value-added.

Second application: You don’t have forever to decide whether or not to become God’s kingdom person. The time to enter Christ’s kingdom is now. Jesus said there would be no changing sides at the zero hour.

I recall something C. S. Lewis wrote in *Screwtape Letters*. Uncle Screwtape, a senior devil, instructs a junior devil named Wormwood on the fine art of temptation. “Tell people that God is real. Tell them that they should have faith in him. Tell them that the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ died to save them from their sins. But tell them there is no hurry.”
Third application: You must eliminate any obstacle that gets in the way. I challenge you to starve your distractions and feed your focus.

Jesus said, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling; planting and building on the day God destroyed Sodom” (17:27-28).

The days of Noah and Lot were not high water marks in human history, yet Jesus does not dwell on the deplorable things people did in those days. Instead, He focuses on the stuff of everyday life. In the days of Noah, it involved “eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage.” In the days of Lot, it was a comparable list of “eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.” There is nothing wrong with these everyday activities, yet even ordinary concerns can distract us from God’s kingdom.

We are a distracted people. It does not take much to divert us from the goal of living for God’s kingdom values. C.S. Lewis once said, “The safest road to hell is a gradual one.” He observed, “Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick.”

Allow me this paraphrase. Murder is no better than smart phones if smart phones can do the trick. The language of smart phones is a misnomer. I officiated at a wedding in
Georgetown yesterday. I swear—everybody on the sidewalk was glued to their smart phones. Smart phones are reducing brainpower and making us less productive. How could it be otherwise, given that we touch, tap and swipe our smartphones on average 2617 times each day?

What is keeping you from living for God’s kingdom? Starve your distractions. Feed your focus.

Fourth application: Your primary mission is to get ready for Christ’s coming. Jesus preached readiness for God’s coming kingdom. Back in Luke 12, Jesus said, “Be dressed and ready for service. Keep your lamps burning…You must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (12:35-40).

“Be Prepared” is not only the scout motto, it’s the directive Jesus gives his disciples. Vigilance, not calculation, is the order of the day.

On May 19, 1780, the sky over Hartford darkened ominously, so much so that members of the Connecticut House of Representatives feared the end was at hand. Colonel Abraham Davenport, who served as the House Speaker, rose from his seat to say, “The day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.” Never mind when Christ returns. Our job is to be ready!