

“Kingdom Come” (Luke 17:20–37)

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There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are really good at remembering things, and those who . . . wait a minute . . . I can’t remember who the other people are.

To be serious, when it comes to matters of faith, it does seem like there are two types of people in the world. There are people who want to know facts before they believe. They want to know what Scripture says. They want to think through good arguments for why they should believe. These want a faith that makes good intellectual sense. They want a religious faith that isn’t contradictory, one that makes sense of the basic facts of life. They don’t believe based on feelings, but on whether something is true.

Then, there are people who won’t believe it unless they see it or feel it themselves. We might say these people want evidence, but not evidence that can be read in a book. They want to see miracles personally or have certain positive feelings. If you’re familiar with the Bible, you know that one of Jesus’ disciples, Thomas, couldn’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead, though that is what the other disciples told him. No, Thomas had to see the risen Jesus for himself in order to believe. When Thomas finally did see Jesus, he fell down at his feet and famously said, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:28–29).¹

I’ve been thinking a bit about this recently, because some churches rely on producing feelings. Recently, I saw that another church baptized a large number of people, and they posted a testimony from someone who supposedly came to faith. Maybe this person really does believe. I don’t know. But the testimony was all about her feelings. She felt happy. She felt excited. She felt love. But nowhere in her words was there a mention of basic facts of the gospel message. There was no mention of sin, of who Jesus is, what he did to save her, and no mention of trusting Jesus and repentance. There was talk about being devoted to Jesus, but it was more about him helping her than her rather taking up her cross and following him.

I mention this because as we will see in today’s passage, Luke 17:20–37, Jesus makes a bold claim about the kingdom of God. He says it has come upon the Earth, but “in ways that can be observed.” Jesus’ own coming to Earth was rather quiet. Yes, it came through a miracle: the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Son of God took on human form. But most of his life was lived quietly. He was a carpenter's son. He didn't draw attention to himself. When the time was right, he did have a public ministry. And he did perform some amazing miracles. But he didn't produce what everyone was expecting. And Jesus never said that life in the kingdom of God, at least in this age, will always feel good. He never promised it would be easy. The word "fun" doesn't appear in the Bible, and generally what we often think of as "happiness" or "self-fulfillment" doesn't appear in the Bible either. That's not to say that God doesn't give us pleasures. He does, and I trust that he will do more of that in the future. It's to say that we follow Jesus because of truth, not feelings. And we need to know what Jesus himself taught in order to follow him.

So, with all that being said, we're going to start to read today's passage. I'll begin by reading Luke 17:20–21:

²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed,²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Jesus is once again being questioned by the Pharisees, one group of Jewish men who were influential religious leaders at this time.² They ask Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. The idea of the kingdom of God could mean many things, depending on the person. What they probably had in mind were prophecies in the Old Testament that a descendant of David would come and rule God's people. This anointed king, the Messiah, would crush the enemies of God's people, Israel, and establish a reign that would never end (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Isa. 9:2–7; 11:1–5). The Pharisees probably wanted to know when this king could come and defeat the Roman Empire, the occupying force in Palestine at that time. The Jewish people wanted the freedom, the power, and the land that was theirs during the time of King David and his son, Solomon.

Jesus knew they were expecting this display of power when the Messiah comes. But Jesus, who is the Messiah, the King of kings, says, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed." He means that it wouldn't come in the way they expected it, with huge demonstrations of national strength, with military victories. Then he says, more or less, "Don't

² The Pharisees often question Jesus or complain about him, usually to trap in saying something they think will get him in trouble. See Luke 5:21, 30; 6:2, 7; 7:39; 11:38, 45; 13:31; 14:15; 15:2; 16:14; 18:18.

listen to people when they say that it's here or there. The truth is that the kingdom of God is right in your midst.”

Now, Jesus does not mean something that I've heard from others. There are some translations, like the earlier version of the NIV, that says, “the kingdom of God is within you.” Some people take that to mean that God is already in you, or that you have some divine spark within you. I actually heard this from a man who claimed to be a Christian, yet who also believed in a lot of New Age or eastern religious concepts like reincarnation or the idea that we're all divine in some way. This man appealed to this verse, in that translation—“the kingdom of God is within you”—to prove that Jesus taught this.

In any of you watched the first two debates featuring the approximately 300 Democrats currently running for president, you might know who Marianne Williamson is. She has long been a kind of New Age spiritual teacher. In an interview, she said this about Jesus:

Jesus was a human being who while on earth completely self-actualized and fulfilled in all ways the potential glory that lies within us all. He became one with the Essence and Christ Spirit that is in all of us. In that sense, he is our evolutionary elder brother. He demonstrated our destiny. He displayed for all to see the destination of this journey that we are on. The only thing lacking in any situation is our own awareness of love, and Jesus realized and taught that.

Jesus is a personal symbol of the Holy Spirit. Having been totally healed by the Holy Spirit, Jesus became one with him. Every thought, action, and deed of Jesus was guided by the Holy Spirit instead of ego. He's not the only face the Holy Spirit takes on—he is a face. To think about Jesus is to think about and bring forth the perfect love inside us. Jesus actualized the Christ mind, and was then given the power to help the rest of us reach that place within ourselves.

He was sent down by God—as we all are. We are all extensions of the mind of God. We all contain nuggets of glory.³

If you have read the Gospels, you know that this is not what Jesus taught. If you've read any of Paul's letters in the New Testament, you can't believe this. Jesus would never say to the Pharisees, who thought they knew God but really didn't, “the kingdom of God is within you.” Jesus didn't say the kingdom of God is in us. He said that we must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Jesus was that the kingdom of God is right in front of you. It's here. The king is in your midst. If they only had the eyes of faith to see the truth, they would know that Jesus is the

³ William J. Elliott, *A Place at the Table: A Journey to Rediscover the Real Jesus with the Guidance of Various Teachers, from Billy Graham to Deepak Chopra* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 238.

Messiah. He didn't come the first time to overthrow the Roman Empire, to take political office, to make a lot of money. He came to teach people about God, to show that he is the Son of God, the true King, and to save people from their sins, which is their greatest problem.

Our greatest problem isn't that we don't have enough money, or enough political power. Our greatest problem isn't that we feel bad. We feel bad because we are bad. We are all affected by the power of sin, the power of rebellion against God that entered into the world when the first humans turned away from God. Because of this power of sin, we commit sins. We don't love God as we ought. We don't obey him. We don't love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus came to fix that problem, not to make us feel better.

In the rest of the chapter, Jesus turns to his disciples and warns them not to think like the Pharisees. The kingdom of God will come in its fullest in the future, but they won't see it. Before that time, Jesus will have to suffer. And I think he implies that they will suffer, too. But he encourages them, and us, to follow him. There will be a day when Jesus comes a second time. That time, he won't come quietly and humbly. He will come in glory and power. He will reign on Earth, but not before he judges everyone who has ever lived. Jesus wants us to be on the right side of that judgment.

Let's now read the rest of the passage. Here is Luke 17:22–37:

²² And he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them. ²⁴ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. ²⁵ But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. ²⁶ Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— ³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. ³² Remember Lot's wife. ³³ Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. ³⁴ I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left." ³⁷ And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

I want to explain what Jesus says here by highlighting four truths. The first truth of his message to his disciples is that they will not see the day when Jesus returns in glory. At least, they won't see it before they die. These disciples had the privilege of witnessing Jesus teach and perform miracles for two or three years. There will be a time when Jesus will leave them, and he will not return in their lives on Earth. There will be times in their lives when they will long for the days of the Son of Man—that's a reference to Jesus. They will wish Jesus is with them. They will wish it was already the time when the whole world would know who Jesus really is, when he comes to judge the living and the dead and to establish fully his kingdom. (Theologians say the kingdom is already here, but not fully consummated.) The Old Testament often spoke of "the days are coming" in terms of God's judgment upon his enemies (Isa. 39:6; Jer. 7:32; 16:14; Amos 4:2). The disciples will long to see that. If you're a Christian, you surely have days when you want to see that. So many people don't believe in the true Jesus. They don't live as if he is their King. We want to see everyone recognize who Jesus is. We want people to turn away from living for themselves, to turn away from their sin, and to turn to Jesus, seeking forgiveness and restoration.

The second promise of Jesus' message that I want us to see is this: Jesus says that before that time of judgment, before he overthrows all the powers that are hostile to God, he must suffer. Jesus has already predicted his death several times (Luke 9:22, 44; 12:50; 13:22–33). He alludes to it again here. He says he will be rejected by "this generation" and that he will suffer. The Jewish people expected a Messianic king who would conquer, not one who would suffer. They didn't connect promises of David's offspring who would reign forever to prophecies about a suffering servant who would die for the sins of his people (Isa. 52:13–53:12).

I think Jesus highlights his upcoming death to indicate that the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness can't happen without him first dying on the cross. He will die not because he did anything wrong. He is the only person who never sinned. No, he will die to pay the death penalty that all sinners deserve. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Our sin corrupts, distorts, and ruins God's creation. God, who is a righteous judge, can't have that. All crime must be punished. But God graciously sent his Son to die in our place. And Jesus volunteered to do that. It was his will just as much as it was the Father's. Jesus wants his disciples to know that what he is about to do is a key part of establishing God's kingdom on Earth.

I also think that Jesus is teaching us that before glory comes suffering. That's certainly true of his ministry. Before he died on the cross, Jesus lived a humble life. His miracles got the attention of many, but he had no money, no political office. At the end of his life he was betrayed, abandoned, rejected, tortured, and killed. He died naked, in shame, nailed to a cross and hung there until he could no longer breathe. In the world's eyes, that's not glory. But Jesus rose from the grave, showing that he paid the penalty for sin and that he has power over sin and death. He is now exalted in heaven, and he will return in glory.

Jesus probably wanted his disciples to know that the pattern of suffering now and being raised to glory later is the pattern that Christians will experience. Jesus never promised us we would feel a lot of positive feelings. He did promise great things for those who turn to him in faith: forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Holy Spirit, a new family of Christians, a place in God's kingdom, peace with God. But those benefits are not something we always feel. We must trust that they are true. And Jesus also promised his followers that they would experience persecution and hate. They would suffer. The apostle Paul said the same thing. In Romans 8:16–17, he writes,

¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
¹⁷and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Christians suffer because there are times when the world hates them. So, Christians suffer because of what others do. Christians also suffer because they still live in a world that is stained by sin. All that bad things we experience, such as fighting, diseases, and death, are a result of sin in the world. Christians also suffer because they must wrestle with their own sin. They must put their old patterns of sin to death, and this doesn't come quickly or easily. It can be painful. Yet Jesus promises, as we see in verse 33, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it."

The third truth that Jesus teaches in this passage is that his second coming will be obvious, public, universal, and unmistakable. He knows there will be people who claim that Jesus has secretly returned. People will say, "Look here" or "Look there." Jesus tells us not to bother with people who make those false claims. When Jesus returns, everyone will know. There will be flashes of lightning, which are often associated with an appearance of God (Exod. 19:16;

Ps. 77:18; Rev. 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Somehow, everyone on Earth will know that Jesus has returned. It will be as clear as lightning in the sky.

Some people have taught that there is a secret return of Jesus, a secret “rapture.” I have tried in the past to teach against this in subtle ways, but I won’t do that this morning. Let me be clear. The Bible does not teach that Jesus will come quietly or secretly. Every passage dealing with his return talks about either visual signs or a great noise. Now, the Bible has one passage that teaches a rapture. First Thessalonians 4:17 says that when Jesus returns, Christians will be “caught up” with Christ in the air. But that passage says nothing about what happens next. The most popular end-times theology taught today isn’t what the church has believed for almost two thousand years. It was developed around 1830 by a man named John Nelson Darby, who believed that the church was a failure. Of course, he established his own church, which he believed was the only true church. But he also devised a very fanciful end times theology that teaches things that the Bible really doesn’t teach. We see in this passage that Jesus combines his public glorious return with salvation and judgment and the consummation of his kingdom on Earth. Most passages in the New Testament that talk about his return describe those events as happening at the same time.

And that leads me to something else that is very clear in this passage. The fourth truth is that when Jesus returns, there will be a division among all people. Some will be spared God’s condemnation. They will be saved. Others will be condemned. Jesus gives us two examples from the book of Genesis. In the days of Noah, people were wicked. God sent a flood upon the Earth to judge everyone. The only people who were spared were Noah and his family. Noah was instructed to build a large ship, an ark, to save his family and various species of animals. Now, Noah was prepared for the flood. But everyone outside his family wasn’t. They went on living as if their lives would never end. But when the flooding started, it was too late. Noah and his family were safe on the ark, and everyone else would perish. (See Genesis 6–9 for the story about Noah and the flood.)

The other example is of Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and what happened to the city of Sodom. We are told that Lot and daughters were spared a judgment that came upon Sodom for their sexual immorality and their pride (Gen. 19:1–29; Ezek. 16:49; Jude 7). Lot, like Noah, responded to God’s word about a coming judgement. Noah found safety in the ark, while Lot was told to flee the city. Everyone else went on living in the city as if nothing was going to

happen. Even Lot's sons-in-law didn't believe that judgment would come. But then judgment came, and it was too late for them to repent.

Those two events in Genesis foreshadow a final judgment, when Jesus returns. All who have failed to trust in Jesus will be condemned. Those who don't believe that he is the Son of God, those who don't repent, those who don't live as if he is King, those who don't trust that he has done everything to make us right with God—those people will face something worse than death. They will experience eternity apart from God and from any scrap of goodness. And that is just, because they didn't want God in this life.

Jesus says the division of all people will occur within families. He says there will be two people in a bed. One will be taken, the other left behind. In Matthew's Gospel, it seems that the one taken is taken in judgment, just as the people in Noah's day were swept away by the flood (see Matt. 24:37–41). Here, it seems that the one taken is brought to safety, and the one left behind is judged. I don't think the details matter. What matters is that the division will cut right through families. Families in those days all lived in close quarters. The people in bed could be a husband and wife, or a father and his son. Families often worked together. The who women grinding grain at the mill could be a mother and her daughter, or two sisters. Just because one person in a family is a Christian doesn't mean the others are. Each person must personally trust Jesus to be spared condemnation.

I also think those examples—people sleeping in bed, people at work—show us that we don't know when Jesus will return. It could be at night or it could be in the day. It could be while we're sleeping or it could be while we're working. We don't know when Jesus will return. The way to be ready is to put your faith in him now, to admit your sins, confess them to God, repent of your sin, and actively follow Jesus. That is the only way to be prepared.

How do we apply the great truths of this passage to our lives? One way is to know that God's kingdom is already here. Yes, many people don't live as if God is King. They don't live as if Jesus is *their* King. But he is. God's kingdom is wherever God's people are living under his rule and experiencing his blessings. God's kingdom right now doesn't always look very impressive. It looks a lot like what you see right now: some very ordinary people gathering to hear God's word, to sing together, to pray together, to encourage one another and correct each other if necessary. God's kingdom may look like a married couple faithfully loving each other. It may look like a single person living a quiet life of devotion to his or her true spouse, Jesus. It

may be parents teaching their children, or someone at work working hard as if they are working directly for Jesus. It may look like someone quietly and humbly loving other people by doing something kind. It may look like someone having the courage to speak the truth to people who don't want to hear it but who really need to hear it.

The kingdom of God is here now. It's not announced with signs and wonders. It doesn't look impressive. Entering into it may not always feel dramatic. But Jesus and his followers urged people to enter the kingdom. And that is still true today. I urge anyone here who is not truly a Christian to turn to Jesus, to bow before him, to confess all sins, to seek the forgiveness that only he provides. You may not feel like doing this. If you do it, I can't guarantee what you'll feel. The only reason to be a Christian is that this message is true. And it takes the eyes of faith to see that. Jesus promises us a return that we haven't seen. He warns of a coming judgment that many people think will never happen. None of us have seen Jesus in the flesh. But we have his words. We have testimony about him that has been given to us by people who saw him, who knew him. And we believe this testimony comes ultimately from God himself. I encourage anyone who may have doubts about Jesus to learn more about him. Understand what the Bible teaches. If you have doubts, I would love to talk personally with you. I can give you many reasons why this message is true, why it makes sense of all of life. But know that the only reason to believe is because it's true and it's right to live for Jesus.

If you went to your doctor and were told you have cancer, and if you believed your doctor, and if you didn't want to die an early death, you would begin treatment. If you're here and you believe this message that you have the wound of sin, a wound that we cannot cure, if you believe that Jesus can alone cure that wound, and if you believe that unless that wound is cured, you will be condemned, you will turn to Jesus now. Do so before it's too late.

For those of us who have turned to Jesus, I want to point out what Jesus has said here. Don't believe people who say they know when Jesus is returning. Don't listen to the end-times madness that is out there. Follow Jesus now and you don't have to worry about when he comes. What does following Jesus look like? Jesus tells us. He says, "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it." In the story of Lot, when he and his family left Sodom, they were told not to look back. But his wife looked back at the city. She probably wanted to go back. Perhaps she didn't want to leave her old way of life. Whatever she was thinking, she didn't trust God's message. So, she was turned into a pillar of

salt. She was made into a statue. She is a warning that when we follow Jesus, we cannot turn back. We must make a commitment to him.

Our old lives can seem very alluring. When we were living for ourselves, we might have had a lot of fun, a lot of pleasure. It's tempting to go back and do the things that we used to do. It's tempting to do what other people in the world are doing now. But we can't. There are certain actions and attitudes that simply are not compatible with Christianity. We are told to flee these things. We must lose our old lives in order to be saved. Those who refuse to do so, those who seek to preserve their old lives, will lose their lives in the end.

This doesn't mean that there is no joy in following Jesus. There are joys in following him. God has given us many good things that we can experience by living according to his design. Christians can have fun. They can be happy. But we must learn to find our joy in Christ, to make him our greatest treasure. When we do that, we are willing to follow him, no matter what. When we see that Jesus is a greater treasure than anything in the world, we can endure suffering for his sake. When we see that eternity hangs in the balance, that this life is brief, but that where we spend eternity will last forever, we will do what Jesus asks us to do. Whatever suffering we experience now will be brief, but eternity with Jesus will be more pleasurable than anything we can imagine. As David once wrote, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Glory will come to all who enter into God's kingdom, but not after some measure of suffering.

Jesus' kingdom is here, right now. Let us live like he is our King. When the King returns in glory, it will be too late to turn to him in faith.