

“Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done”

Introduction: Some of Christianity’s harshest critics have suggested that what is wrong with our faith is that it encourages happy people to become unhappy so that it can minister to their unhappiness. We focus too much, the charge is made, on suffering and death and the life to come such that we won’t let anyone enjoy this one! While there may be some truth to that, no philosophy of life, and no amount of denial, can prevent us from grappling with the timeless and haunting questions of suffering and death. That’s why Ash Wednesday is so significant as it turns us to squarely face the reality of our mortality.

But the season of Lent then reminds us that we don’t need to stay there. For, what is true of Christianity, and what we hold in mind as we make our way toward Good Friday and Easter, is that within suffering and death is contained the mystery of transformation. As Jesus put it, when facing his own death: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (Jn. 12:24).

What we seek to live out during Lent, as we give things up or take on new habits, is the reality that there can be no new life without first experiencing a death, no feasting without some kind of fasting, no resurrection without crucifixion. Lent calls us to intentionally make space for God to come alongside us in new ways to search us, know us, and then lead us into new life. During Lent we practice the art of dying so that we might truly live, eternally, beginning now.

I begin here because in many ways, this is the sense of the next couple of phrases that Jesus directs us to pray in the outline for prayer that he has given us: the Lord’s Prayer. For God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done, in our world and in our individual lives, a kind of dying needs to take place, a dying to the many alternative kingdoms we pursue, so that we can begin to experience more and more of God’s kingdom life.

Remember that Jesus has instructed us to pray by beginning with recognizing who God is and who it is we are praying with. Then, he moves us on to pray for what should be our three greatest desires. I’d like to link the last two together in this way: God’s kingdom comes, it is present, when and where God’s will is done.

I. The Presence of God’s Kingdom

A. Let’s begin with the declaration with which Jesus began his public ministry: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” [Mk. 1:15] I think that the way a former teacher of mine, Dallas Willard, interprets this is helpful. He puts it like this: “All the preliminaries have been taken care of, and the rule of God is now accessible to everyone. Review your plans for living and base your life on this remarkable opportunity” (*Divine Conspiracy*, 15). The kingdom of God, in other words, has not burst on the scene as something new but as something that is now available as never before. It’s like Comcast finally running all of its lines into your community. But, to then enjoy what it has to offer, you need to have someone come and connect the service to your house. Jesus has come to connect us to all that God is doing. He connects us as we repent and believe, as we stop from going our own way, pursuing our own will, and turn around to go his way, pursuing his will and trusting in his goodness.

B. But, well might we ask: what kind of rule comes with this kingdom of God? Our experience with kings, and many other kinds of leaders, actually, hasn't always been great over the centuries. Their rule can be severe, authoritarian, and self-serving, and fill us with anxiety and apprehension. That same alarm I'm sure was churning in at least some of those who first heard Jesus, because the centuries of Israelite kings before he came on the scene were largely filled with a bunch of scoundrels (cf. 1 Sa. 8:11-18). But God's now-arriving rule doesn't follow the worldly pattern. His reign spells liberation and deliverance, not slavery and domination. Here, for instance, is a telltale sign Jesus gives of God's kingdom: "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk. 11:20). When people are delivered from oppression, *there* you see God's reign in action. Where you see restoration of what sin has caused to be broken, *there* you see God's kingdom displayed. Where justice breaks into situations that have been unjust and evil, *there* you see God's kingdom at work. And where situations that cause death and mourning and crying and pain (none of which will be present in God's new creation, cf. Rev. 21:1-4) are eliminated, *there* you see God's kingdom come.

C. Now, we of course need to recognize that one reason Jesus teaches us to pray thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven is because God's rule is not yet visible in a way we long for it to be. The virus of sin (as well as many others) is still alive and active in our midst. The kingdom of God is present in Jesus, but not yet in all its fullness. It's kind of like yeast, Jesus taught in a parable, that is still working its way through a batch of dough. And it's like a tiny mustard seed which hasn't yet grown into a large tree where birds can rest in its branches (Ma. 13:31-33). We get glimpses of it but don't yet experience it in the way that we will when Jesus returns.

Illustration: One way this already-not-yet nature of the presence of the kingdom of God is described is the distinction between "D-Day" and "V-E Day." D-Day was the operation by which the Allied forces in WWII invaded the beaches of Normandy, securing their foothold in France and effectively winning the war. Yet it took eleven more months before Nazi Germany offered its unconditional surrender on what came to be known as Victory in Europe Day. Between those two days, the death camps kept running and many more lives were lost. In some ways, we live between two similarly momentous days. We look back to the D-Day when God invaded the earth in Jesus and secured a foothold in it through his death and resurrection. And we look forward to a V-E Day when all the forces of sin and evil and death will totally surrender. In the meantime, we weep, and we wait, and we work to reveal God's will in all that we do and say, for wherever God's will is done, the kingdom has come.

D. What does such kingdom work look like? Over the centuries the church has struggled with this. Is it spiritual or physical? Is it evangelism or social justice? Just how broad is "salvation?" To highlight the differences in a modern kind of way, writer Scot McKnight talks about a "skinny jeans kingdom" and a "pleated pants kingdom." Broadly speaking, in a skinny jeans kingdom, we mostly see a younger generation pursuing social justice and working for good in the world. They care for the poor, offer AIDS education, build fresh-water wells, and establish medical facilities. However, many of these ends they largely pursue outside of the church, due, at least in part, to some frustration they have with the church. Salvation for them means improving life in the here and now. At the other end of the spectrum are the pleated pants folks. This is a mostly older generation. For them, personal salvation is the focus of the kingdom. They pursue such through evangelism and various deliverance ministries. The kingdom of God in this understanding is in our heart. Our physical lives are not as important. Salvation equals forgiveness of sin and going to heaven when we die.

E. What I'd like to do is suggest a third option, call it a "sweat-pants kingdom." I'm thinking here of those sweats I have from my coaching days that have this name imprinted on them: GCXC. It stands for Gordon College Cross Country. It reminds everyone who wears them of the name of the team of which they are a part, the name of the one they represent as they train and compete. So, when we put on our "kingdom pants," we will work for salvation on a broad scale, from forgiveness to healing to social justice. We will seek to bring the water of the Spirit as well as the water of a fresh well to those in need. And, importantly, we will do it all in the name of Jesus so that it is he, and not we, who get the glory because, as we learned last week in our look at "hallowed be thy name," his glory is what matters most.

## II. The Pull of Alternative Kingdoms

A. While we do this, while we pray and work toward God's kingdom "taking over" the world, we also need to pray that we would allow more of God's kingdom to take over our individual lives. In that vein, we need to be aware of the strong pull of the many alternative kingdoms in the world that vie for our affection. Our second text from Mark helps bring this into focus. There we see that right after Jesus has taught that entering the kingdom of God is like a little child excitedly and trustingly receiving an incredible gift, we meet a man who is struggling with such receiving. He wants to enter into eternal life. He wants to become part of all that God doing. Perhaps overhearing Jesus' conversation with his disciples about the children and watching him take the little ones into his arms, the man runs after Jesus and falls on his knees before him. But the man is ultimately unable to surrender what Jesus sees has become his god, that thing in which he trusts, that which he looks to for satisfaction – his great wealth. And so, the man went away sad, unable and unwilling to receive the opportunity Jesus held out.

B. Importantly, wealth is not the only alternative kingdom that can pull on our hearts. Jesus is not telling everyone to go and sell all they have and give to the poor. Everyone is different. Worth noting in the parable Jesus tells about the sower and the soils, he says that not only the deceitfulness of wealth but also the worries of life and the desires for other things can choke out what God wants to do in us. The worries of life can be seen in a religious leader named Nicodemus (John 3). He wanted to know more about Jesus, but came to Jesus at night, seemingly worried about his reputation, what others would think of him. What people think of us – that's a huge idol that we may need to surrender, to die to, if we want to be blessed by the kingdom life God holds out. Or how about the woman Jesus met drawing water at a well (John 4)? It turns out she had a desire for other things, specifically, she had been looking to relationships with men to satisfy her thirst. She needed to die to that desire so that she could enjoy the thirst-quenching life that Jesus was offering her. "Sell all and follow me." "You must be born again." "Whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst." Each approach by Jesus was different. But each targeted a different alternative kingdom which needed to go in order for the kingdom of God to come more fully in their lives.

C. So, as we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," especially in this season of Lent, where might you need to die in order to live? What might you need to surrender? Where might you think you'd be sad if you did? Where could Jesus be asking you to trust him, that if you do surrender, you just might, actually, be glad?!