

New Kingdom

Sent: Ambassadors for Christ on Mission for God Sermon 4

John 18:33-38 | October 29, 2023

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See page 10 for small group discussion questions

During the 18th century, the culture in England was in a tailspin. Clergy were corrupt. Working conditions—as the Industrial Revolution spread—were abysmal. The gap between rich and poor widened. The country had wrung from France and Spain a monopoly over the slave trade. In London, between 1730 and 1750, 3 out of 4 children died before their 5th birthday—those that survived had little access to education. Eighteenth-century England was called the “Gin Age,” and even the time of the Highwayman, or robber. Statesmen Horace Walpole—who was shot walking through Hyde Park—wrote in 1751, “One is forced to travel, even at noon, as if ... going to battle.”

Into this quagmire was born the Evangelical Revival, which saw not only incredible spiritual change across the country but remarkable social change as well. Under the ministry of George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley, people were learning about the new birth—about conversion and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. New converts soon formed clubs—holy clubs—that met regularly for prayer, Bible study, and spiritual encouragement. People were being spiritually transformed—and this had an inevitable effect on society. William Wilberforce was converted—a man who spent decades in parliament working to end the slave trade. Filled by the Spirit, others worked for reform in the industrial system and prison system. Hannah Moore founded Sunday Schools, providing opportunities for education for children of the poor. There was even an explosion of literary output from poets and writers—it’s said that Charles Wesley wrote two hymns a week, every week, for fifty years.¹

Of this period, one historian writes,

England, after Wesley, saw many of his Century's evils eradicated, because hundreds of thousands became Christians; their hearts were changed, as were their minds and attitudes, and so the society, the public realm, was affected.... Wesley's purpose under God has been achieved: to attack the root cause of spiritual atrophy and moral decay and purge the nation's soul.²

This is not to say that the Evangelical Revival turned England into the Kingdom of God. One needs only to look at its spiritual state today to know that's not the case.

This revival is, however, a powerful illustration of how the mission of God can work: new life in Christ, fosters a new type of people, who have an inevitable impact on the culture around them.

This fall we've been probing Jesus' missional statement: "As the Father sent me into the world, just so, I am sending you" (John 17:18; 20:21). We've said that Jesus' mission involved bringing three new realities into our midst: New life, a new people, and a new kingdom. We've considered new life—that it comes by the new birth (John 3:3, 5-8). We've considered new people, that they live and are empowered by abiding in Jesus—abiding in the vine (John 15:1-17). Today, with the example of England's evangelical revival on our minds—when new spiritual life leads to real societal change—we consider what it means that Jesus' mission includes inaugurating a new kingdom.

John 18 and Kingship

Jesus' kingship and kingdom become the subject of Pilate's interrogation of him in John 18:33-38: "Are you the king of the Jews" (v33), Pilate asks. Jesus doesn't deny that he's a king: "You say that I am a king. For this purpose, I was born and came into the world" (v37). But in the middle of this back and forth, Jesus defines his kingdom in strange terms,

My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world (18:36).

Jesus came "into the world" as a king (v37), but his "kingdom is not of this world" (v36). This reminds the reader of Jesus' language of "being in the world but not of it," how he describes himself and his disciples (17:14-16).

Jesus is a king. Jesus was sent on a mission into this world to inaugurate his kingdom. And Jesus' kingdom is not here, or at least not of this world.

We who are sent by Jesus to further his mission, must now ask: *what does it mean to represent, to bear witness to, a kingdom that is in this world but not of it?* We'll consider this question by asking how Jesus' kingdom relates to three things: (1) Other Kingdoms; (2) The Church; (3) Our Callings.

I. Jesus' Kingdom and The Kingdoms of This World

The force of Jesus' interaction with Pilate is that it brings Jesus' kingship into direct confrontation with Rome. What does his kingship mean in relation to the kingdoms of this world? Jesus' answer: "My kingdom is *not of this world.*" What, then, does Jesus mean by this?

First, Jesus means his kingdom doesn't *originate* here—it's not from here nor founded by the powers of this world.

Second, he means his kingdom doesn't *operate* like the kingdoms of this world. This he stresses in verse 36, "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would be fighting that I might not be delivered over" (18:36). Meaning, his won't advance by the same power or tactics as the kingdoms of this world.

If it neither originates from here nor operates like kingdoms do here, then what is it like?

Spiritual in nature

First, Jesus' kingdom does not begin as a geo-political territory—but as a spiritual reality. Recall how one enters it:

Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.... Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:3, 5-6).

When we turn to Paul—who typically speaks of the kingdom of God in its future consummation³—he says the following about entering the kingdom in the present:

[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14).

Neither Jesus nor Paul picture the kingdom *geographically* or *politically*, but rather *spiritually* and *relationally*: to enter the kingdom is to be born again, and brought into a new relationship with God marked by redemption and forgiveness.

Experienced as Christ's reign over my heart

Secondly, the experience of being in the kingdom is not first felt from the outside—as though it were new laws and a new territory to live in. Rather, it is experienced internally, as the dynamic reign of Jesus over our hearts and our lives. Jesus is enthroned in my soul. Of course, this will lead to a type of impact on the world around me—but the kingdom begins from the inside and moves out.

What does this spiritual and internal nature of Jesus' kingdom mean when it comes to how it relates to other kingdoms? Consider two things:

First, it tells us that Jesus' kingdom is not—in the present—a replacement or rejection of temporal and earthly forms of governance. Imperfect they may be, these serve a good and God-ordained purpose: Paul says to Christians in Rome,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1).⁴

Civil governments are not the kingdom of God. But they are for our welfare: keeping evil at bay, exercising justice, ensuring citizens can live peaceable lives. Jesus' people can and should seek roles in civil government to be a faithful presence and godly influence upon the ways their country or kingdom is run.

Second, it tells us that Christians should not see civil government as a tool for building the kingdom of God. Civil government can create freedoms and space for people to express their faith in Christ. But when we understand the spiritual nature of the kingdom, we see that it cannot be built by any

man-made or external force. The kingdom grows by the power of the Spirit and word, not by the threat of the sword.

When Jesus tells Pilate, “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting” (18:36), he foreshadows that his kingdom will be built by *his blood*, not by the blood of his enemies.⁵

This does not deny the role of government in wielding the sword to protect and preserve; it does, however, mean that no earthly kingdom ever becomes the full bearer of God’s kingdom.

How does Jesus’ kingdom relate to the kingdoms of this world? Its throne is in the human heart; its power comes from above; its future reaches farther ahead. Those who are its citizens should become sacrificial and godly citizens who have a positive influence on the kingdoms of this world—wherever and however they can.

II. Jesus’ Kingdom and the Church

Though Jesus is not establishing a geo-political kingdom at this time, he is forming a kingdom people, a nation:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Jesus has founded a new nation—“a holy nation.” If his kingdom is not geo-political, where do these new people show up today?

Jesus connects his kingdom with his church when, after telling Peter that “on this rock I will build my church,” he says in the next breath, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (see Matt 16:18-19). The church functions on earth as an instrument, a representative, of the kingdom of God.

When Christians gather on Sunday morning, it is as if we are part of another nation with another king. We say in the Nicene Creed that Jesus has “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father”: an image of enthronement. We say “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and **his kingdom will have no end.**”

Embassy and ambassadors

An image I have found helpful for thinking about the relationship of the church to the kingdom is that of an Embassy. Washington DC is full of embassies. What are they? An embassy is an outpost of a kingdom, showing up in another kingdom. An embassy and its ambassador *represent* their home kingdom while in a foreign land.

The church represents the kingdom of Jesus in the midst of earthly kingdoms. And the church has a degree of *authority* given to it by its home kingdom, to mark out that kingdom's citizens and care for them.

An earthly embassy might ensure its people are marked as citizens by working with passports and paperwork. The embassy of Jesus' kingdom marks people out as citizens of God's kingdom through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper—by these, God marks out his people while they live in a foreign kingdom.

Consider that your elected state officials—congressmen, senators, governors—are authorized to do things such as legislate and govern. However, they are not authorized to baptize or celebrate the Lord's Supper. Why? Because in their office they are not agents of God's kingdom, but the world's.

Consider that your elected church officials—pastors, bishops—are not elected and authorized to legislate and govern in terms of state affairs. Rather, they are authorized to baptize, preach the Gospel, administer the Lord's Supper. Why? Because they are agents of the embassy of the Kingdom of God.

Remember, then, that you did not elect your pastors to govern in areas of state or national politics, or matters of public policy. Our job is to set before you ways of the Kingdom of God. And in such a degree that the Spirit shapes your conscience so that you follow God's personal leading in exercising your duty as citizens of kingdoms of this world. But let us not conflate the officers of the kingdoms of this world with the officers of our local churches—their authority and expertise lie in different places.

The church-as-embassy also sends out *ambassadors*, members of that kingdom who will represent its interest out in the kingdoms of this world. Paul speaks of his role in serving Christ, saying:

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

In our third point, I want to consider the implications of being sent out from the embassy to represent Christ in the world, and what this means for our personal callings.

III. Jesus' Kingdom and Our Callings

Jesus does not deny, before Pilate, that he is a king: "You say that I am a king. For that purpose, I was born and for that purpose I came into this world" (18:37). And it is clear from Jesus' teaching that with his coming into the world, his kingdom has been inaugurated: "Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Matthew 4:17); Jesus teaches us to pray: "Father ... Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

What does the current reign of Christ over our personal lives mean? How does Jesus' kingdom show up in our individual lives? Christians often think of this under the category of "calling," or "vocation"—the two words really mean the same thing.

General and personal calling

William Perkins was a Cambridge scholar and Anglican pastor in the late 1500s and early 1600s. He was a prolific writer and one of his works is titled, *A Treatise of the Vocations, or Callings or men, with the sorts and kinds of them, and the right use of them*. It was first published in 1605.

Perkins draws from Scripture the insight that,

God ... binds all [people] ... to be confirmed with some certain state and condition of life, in the family, in the commonwealth, or in the Church. [And] that man should use the place and office assigned to him by God, in a holy manner....⁶

Perkins notes that all Christians share a general calling, but also have a personal calling.

By **general**, he means are shared duty to be faithful to Christ, to a life of prayer and gratitude and stewardship, to a commitment to building up Christ's body, the church.

By **personal**, he means a specific, particular calling unique to each of us—assigned, if you will, by the King.

Your personal calling includes the family God's given you, the sex—whether he's called you to be a man or woman—the epoch you live in, and so forth. Christ has also given you gifts, talents, and opportunities, that express themselves in your job or career.

Our personal callings are not the same. At the close of John's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter by what type of death Peter will glorify him. To which Peter responds by looking over his shoulder at another disciple, John, asking,

“Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me” (John 21:21-22).

Part of our individual mission is to represent the reign of Christ by how we accept and live our personal callings. This means reflecting the character and ways of Jesus' kingdom even as we work among the kingdoms of this world—whether this involves our personal calling to be a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a brother or sister, a doctor or coach, as a parent or as a teacher—wherever.

Jay Kim, the pastor of Westgate church in Silicon Valley, writes in his essay “Vocation as Exiles,”

Vocation is the calling to serve others by creating a heart-felt work of beauty. An artist's painting, an engineer's code, a teacher's lesson, a baker's cake, a stay-at-home parent's myriad of responsibilities—these and so much more are vocation, the gift of invitation to offer our best effort, to God's glory and for the good of others, in the various places and spaces we occupy.⁷

More could be said about personal callings—how we discern them and navigate the tensions that come from serving Jesus even as we serve earthly employers and earthly economies. But I will stress only one thing here: inasmuch as your present state finds you within the call of God on your life,

“whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:23-33). By bringing your heart into your workplace, bring the Holy of Holies—the very presence of God. Do all you can in your labors—in your attitude and actions—to harmonize with the symphony that is playing above, in heaven.

I’ll close with another vignette from history. Roughly three hundred years after Pilate asked Jesus if he was a king, the Emperor of Rome acknowledged Jesus as king—this was Constantine the Great (converted in 312). But by the early 5th century (410), Rome was tottering under foreign invasions. Refugees who poured into Northern Africa found themselves under the preaching of a bishop named Augustine.

As Augustine reflected on the fall of Rome, he took to writing his great work, *City of God*, where he compared the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of our Lord. And being the doctor of the heart that he was, Augustine saw that the tension between Babylon and Jerusalem—between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of Christ—was a battle of loves:

The two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by love of God carried as far as contempt of self.... The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, ‘I will love you, my Lord, my strength (Psalm 18:1).⁸

There is no kingdom of Christ where there is not the love of Christ. We all would do well, therefore, when it comes to the mission and the new kingdom, to ask ourselves as we relate to all the things we are building—our families, our careers, our cities—the question Jesus puts thrice to Peter: “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21).

For where Christ is loved, there he reigns, and there his kingdom comes.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading John 18: 33-38. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom “is not of this world,” but admits that for kingship he was “born and for this purpose he came into the world” (John 18:36-37). How would you describe Jesus’ kingdom today, in our present world?
2. Paul sometimes speaks of Christians as “citizens of heaven” (Phil 3:18-21). How does someone become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven (=kingdom of God) (hint, read John 3:3-8)?
3. Peter sometimes refers to Christians as exiles and sojourners (see 1 Peter 2:9-12). How does this impact how you think about living for Jesus’ kingdom here and now?
4. We often speak of “building the kingdom” or “ushering in the kingdom.” But biblical scholar George Ladd—who wrote much on this topic—noted that the language around the kingdom in the Bible is a bit different. Quoting Ladd:

“The Kingdom can draw near to men (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15; etc.); it can come (Matt. 6:10; Luke 17:20; etc.), arrive (Matt. 12:28), appear (Luke 19:11), be active (Matt. 11:12). God can give the Kingdom to men (Matt. 21:43; Luke 12:32), but men do not give the Kingdom to one another. Further, God can take the Kingdom away from men (Matt. 21:43), but men do not take it away from one another, although they can prevent others from entering it. Men can enter the Kingdom (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; Mark 9:47; 10:23; etc.), but they are never said to erect it or to build it. Men can receive the Kingdom (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17), inherit it (Matt. 25:34), and possess it (Matt. 5:4), but they are never said to establish it. Men can reject the Kingdom, i.e., refuse to receive it (Luke 10:11) or enter it (Matt. 23:13), but they cannot destroy it. They can look for it (Luke 23:51), pray for its coming (Matt. 6:10), and seek it (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31), but they cannot bring it. Men may be in the

Kingdom (Matt. 5:19; 8:11; Luke 13:29; etc.), but we are not told that the Kingdom grows. Men can do things for the sake of the Kingdom (Matt. 19:12; Luke 18:29), but they are not said to act upon the Kingdom itself. Men can preach the Kingdom (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9), but only God can give it to men (Luke 12:32)” (George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 193).

What does this tell us about our posture to doing kingdom work? At the very least, it seems to suggest a humility, and a desperate need to rely on God, not our own power.

5. What’s one area of your city where you’d like to see the kingdom of God come into power?

Endnotes

1. On Charles Wesley’s prolific writing, see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/poets/charles-wesley.html>
2. The above points and this quote come from an unpublished lecture by Dr. Donald Drew, “England Before and After Wesley.” Access online here: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://disciplenations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/England-Before-and-After-Wesley_Drew.pdf., who is summarizing the monumental volume by J. W. Bready, *England Before and After Wesley*, which was published in 1939.
3. Here are some examples of Paul speaking of the “Kingdom of God” when it refers to the future, fully consummated kingdom. These remind us that the fullness of the kingdom awaits a time in the future when Christ returns: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9); “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the

imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50). “... envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5). “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering....” (2 Th. 1:5).

4. Writing to his pastoral mentee, Timothy, Paul says, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:1-2). Consider also the words of Peter, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:13-14).
5. It is said of the people of God in the book of Revelation, “And they have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:10-11).
6. William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations, or Callings of men, with the sorts and kinds of them, and the right use of them*, (Cambridge, 1605). Access online here:
<https://www.monergism.com/treatise-vocations-ebook>
7. Jay Kim, “Vocation as Exiles,” Pages 129-140 in *Faithful Exiles: Finding Hope in a Hostile World*, edited by Ivan Mesa and Elliot Clark (The Gospel Coalition, Austin, TX: 2023)
8. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIV, Chapter 28; page 593. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, (University of California Press), pg. 322, add this phrase from one of Augustine’s sermons, “the dividing line between the two ‘cities’ is invisible, because it involves each man’s capacity to love what he loves.”